Iranian Women According to the American Media: An Analysis of the 1979 Iranian Revolution

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Iranian Women According to the American Media:
An Analysis of the 1979 Iranian Revolution

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April, 2014

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Abstract

This study seeks to answer the questions of how American print media portrayed Iranian women prior to and during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and how the issue of women in Iran shifted as political relations between the United States and Iranian governments changed. The topics covered include the media’s influence on foreign policy and public opinion, its approach to women, Islam, and the Middle East, the historical context of the Revolution, and the roles Iranian women played both in the traditional society as well as during the uprising. An analysis of newspaper media, produced in the United States and published between 1975-1979, considers the various themes in coverage, particularly as they pertain to women. The results were that the U.S. media presented a flawed, one-sided view of what was taking place in Iran due to the American government’s steadfast support of the Shah’s regime (due to its economic and strategic interests in the region), the effects of Orientalist attitudes, belief in a single modernity, and the absence of many Iranian female voices in forming their own representation. Women’s rights became a defining issue of why the United States supported the Shah’s regime as opposed to the Ayatollah Khomeini’s. These findings provide an explanation for why the media’s attention to women and women’s issues transformed so drastically in such a short period of time, while the position of Iranian women in reality did not change.
Introduction

“Mass media necessarily plays a significant role in determining public attention to foreign affairs. Foreign affairs events most often take place beyond the realm of personal experience – if we learn about these events, it is almost surely the product of media coverage,” writes professor of political science and communication, Stuart Soroka. That is, the media is an important factor in studying how one nation views and interacts with another. Populations engage each other with increasing frequency on many different levels – culturally, economically, and politically – and so it is becoming more pertinent to analyze what dictates how people of these nations interact. One case study, observing how the media has shaped international relations, deals with the United States and Iran, the two of which have experienced a complex relationship since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. That event drastically transformed the way in which the United States viewed and treated the Iranian nation. American policymakers prior to the Revolution proclaimed Iran to be a staunch ally, of vital economic and strategic interest to the U.S., and were willing to maintain their close relationship with the Shah, despite various criticisms about his tyranny, corruption, and brutality. After the Iranian people revolted, however, overthrowing the Shah and establishing an Islamic Republic, it was clear that the United States was no longer on the side of Iran. Through all of this turmoil, the media conveyed these proceedings to the American public, and with this role, it controlled what information was relayed across the Atlantic.

How the media has traditionally portrayed certain subjects in the news – both domestically as well as internationally – has received a certain amount of criticism. This is especially true in the case of Iran. A section of scholarly criticism has become devoted to how the media depicts Iranian women specifically, and whether this representation accurately

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reflects reality. The resounding answer to this question is no; the response is derived from
both published academic literature and the research objective of this thesis. A significant gap
exists between truth and what the media produces. But the relationship between the media
and Iranian women is more than simply a misunderstanding. Academic criticisms of the
media on this subject have generally focused on cultural perceptions and the endless labeling
of societies as either modern – in the image of the West – or “backwards.” These terms,
frequently used by the media during the Iranian Revolution in discussing the Shah versus the
Islamic republic, are also closely associated with the societal role of women. Women’s rights
are used as an illustrator of a country or a regime’s position on the road to modernity, and
their discussion, in the case of Iran, can reflect the politics of the time. I will explore how the
politics of U.S.-Iranian relations may relate to media coverage, especially media bias, and
how international politics have been played out on the field of women’s rights.

Communications scholar Elli Roushanzamir describes the media’s treatment of this
topic as being a case in which Iranian women have become “Iran’s logo.” She argues that
through the use of consistent and iconic images of Iranian women, “a specific
commodified… vision of Iran” has been created. Furthermore, the ambiguity with which
these images are used means they can lend support to any agenda. In the media, the issue of
women’s rights in Iran came to illustrate a broader struggle – one between the Shah and the
religious conservatives, or between the forces of modernity and those who wished to push
Iran “backwards.” Another scholar, Irmgard Pinn, wrote that “the female body and female
sexuality have become a political arena in which [this] struggle… takes place.”

The purpose of my study is to look at how exactly women were represented in the media before, during,

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3 Ibid., 1.
4 Irmgard Pinn, “From Exotic Harem Beauty to Islamic Fundamentalist: Women in Islam,” in *The Islamic
World and the West: An Introduction to Political Cultures and International Relations*, trans. Mary Anne
and after the Iranian Revolution, testing Pinn’s assertion. If the media is such an important player in foreign relations, either by influencing public opinion or foreign policy, that connection should be analyzed for its application to U.S. relations with Iran. As will be seen, the problem with the U.S. media coverage of Iran was that it presented a static, one-sided view of a complex issue, reporting the events from a perspective concerned primarily with how they affected the United States rather than analyzing them in context with the Iranian reality. The absence of Iranians’ – specifically women’s – voices from the media’s discussion only exacerbated this unbalanced view. The unrestricted ability to interpret events which this detachment afforded the media meant that American journalists were free to define the importance of certain issues (such as women’s rights) while ignoring others (like poverty and corruption). The consequence of this is that the American public never understood the true character of the Revolution nor its significance in a global and historical context. The significance of the roles women and women’s rights played for the media serve as a distinct illustration of the American agenda.

The foundation of this paper begins with the analysis of the exact importance of the media on such points as public opinion and policy decisions. With that argument in mind, I explore how the media has traditionally treated this region and culture, compared with the main findings of my own media analysis. In this same section, I also provide a summary of the place women in general fill within the press, as the way Iranian women are portrayed may also be part of a larger trend. From there, I attempt to lay out the historical context for this study as it pertains to Iranian women specifically, both in how this group has been viewed traditionally by Westerners, alongside their reality. This line of thought leads into a brief discussion of what it means to be modern and who has the power to dictate this definition. This theory argues that, contrary to the belief common in the West, there could be significant variation in what modernity entails based on the culture that shapes it; it also discusses how
some cultures may react when having an outside definition imposed upon them. After analyzing where the scholarly literature stands on this topic, I will delve into my own research. My findings are divided into three periods of time: prior to the Iranian Revolution, during, and immediately after. My discussion of them is separated into these same categories. Following this, I will summarize the main trends that arose from this media analysis as they pertain to Iranian women and, most importantly, what implications these findings may have.

**Background**

**The Importance of the Media**

Soroka argues that “mass media content is the most likely source of over-time changes in individuals' foreign policy preferences... The mass media are the primary conduit between the public and policymakers.”

Not only is the media likely to have an effect on public opinion, but other scholars also cite the media’s importance in influencing policy. For example, Eytan Gilboa analyzes the debated CNN effect, which argues that the media forces policymakers to take actions which they may not have pursued if the public were not watching. Many scholars disagree on the predictability and conditionality of this theory; even so, Gilboa contends that the media does indeed play a role in policymaking, diplomacy, and international relations, even outside of the CNN effect. Other scholars argue that rather than the media controlling policymakers, political and military elite can control the media, and through the media influence public opinion.

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For these reasons, the importance of paying attention to what the media produces, and what effects it may have, cannot be overstated. Many studies have been conducted to measure to what degree the media affects either public opinion or foreign policy. The results are mixed, although again most cite that some influence exists. One study presented a group of readers with two different stories about the same country; one framed the foreign country as competition to the United States while the other described it as sharing national interests. Those who read the latter story viewed the subject country more favorably. This comparison found that framing effects – the way in which the media presents certain subjects – does influence public opinion, at least in the short term.\(^8\) At the same time, several studies illustrate the significance of other factors in influencing how the public thinks, such as conversation, education, social and geographic background etc., which may shift direct media effects in the long term.\(^9\) For example, one article found that “the more educated people came to the news with their own preconceptions… and these preconceptions are difficult to change. On the other hand, the analysis showed that the less-educated people are affected by attention to the media in shaping their issue-specific media images.”\(^10\) Another study examined how “enemy framing” influenced public opinion, concluding that when it focused on personal traits of the defined enemy, the effect was stronger. In my own research, I found that focusing on the personal life and activities of Iranian elites was precisely characteristic of the media. That is, one trend in the U.S. media’s handling of Iran was to focus on individual personalities more than broader issues, such as favoring Shah Pahlavi or decrying Ayatollah Khomeini.

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\(^8\) Brewer, “National Interest Frames and Public Opinion about World Affairs.”
Another influence of media framing that has particular significance to my study is its encouragement of tolerance or intolerance. One study focused on how a sample group, either after reading an article that took a freedom of speech stance compared with one arguing that the conflict was just generating violence, felt about a civil liberties conflict. As would be expected, the readers were notably less tolerant of the encounter after reading the less supportive article.\textsuperscript{11} This same phenomenon occurs in how American media portrayed events in Iran that favored the Shah versus those that opposed him.

One final point made by previous scholars, also verified by my findings, is that the “American public's attention to world affairs is sporadic at best,” something which the media’s coverage of Iranian events and issues seems to illustrate.\textsuperscript{12} Interestingly, an article in \textit{TIME} magazine, published in January 1979, discusses how one of the major problems with American news coverage of Iran involved its reliance on “parachute journalists,” people sent to Iran when the Revolution began unfolding but who did not have extensive background in the region and therefore could only provide shallow analyses. According to \textit{TIME}, “parachute journalism happens because too many editors assume Americans aren’t much interested in world news and have cut back coverage.”\textsuperscript{13} Some academics would argue that this declaration holds substantial truth.

Scholars disagree about how much the media does have an impact on public opinion or foreign policy – if at all – and whether its impact is short- or long-term. One scholar wrote that “the media shapes the political agenda, but does not directly influence what people think, due to pre-existing beliefs and values.”\textsuperscript{14} Another discusses how “the media have little direct effect on shaping Americans’ attitudes about the rest of the world,” and yet, “because the

\textsuperscript{12} Brewer, “National Interest Frames and Public Opinion about World Affairs.”
\textsuperscript{14} C.J. Tolbert and R.S. McNeal, “Mass Media, the Internet and Public Opinion (Iraq War),” (paper presentation, annual meeting of \textit{The Midwest Political Science Association}, Chicago, Illinois, Apr. 15, 2004).
media are one of the most important sources of information about foreign affairs,” long-term exposure could possibly influence pre-conceived feelings about foreign nations (just not with short-term, immediate effects). All seem to agree that some media influence exists, and thus should not be ignored.

**Media’s Treatment of this Region and Women Generally**

Before delving into how the U.S. media treated Iranian women before and during the 1979 Revolution specifically, this thesis will address the trends found in frequent coverage of this region and of women, in general. First and foremost, the media is known to sensationalize and overemphasize negativity, highlighting conflict or instability; this sentiment becomes amplified in foreign reporting on developing countries and oftentimes results in a lack of positive news coverage of regions seen as “less developed.” Thus, it could be safely assumed that the negativity with which the events in Iran are covered (and which Iranian women illustrate) is not unique and instead represents part of a wider trend. Nevertheless, since this region has such political and economic interest to the United States, yet simultaneously remains such a point of conflict, the importance of the media’s treatment of Iran in particular needs to be recognized. Especially because even within this region, the relationship between Iran and the United States is unique, particularly along the lines that Iran might still be thought of as enemy number one.

Kai Hafez discusses how the style of negative reporting on non-Western countries, along with certain other trends in foreign news coverage, evolves into what he describes as “particularism.” He argues that it has political and social implications which cannot be overstated. For example, Hafez contends that such media attitudes reinforce international

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political and economic conflicts, as well as sustaining cultural friction.\textsuperscript{17} The situation of U.S. relations with Iran, both in 1979 and today, may very well be an illustration of this concept.

Of course, not only does the media show bias in its treatment of developing countries, but it has also been extensively critiqued for its attitude towards Islam. Edward Said’s \textit{Covering Islam} is an excellent example of this scholarly critique and still plays a large role in academic debate of the subject. He documents how the notion of Islam has formed over time as a counter to the West, problematizes the simple definition which has arisen for such a complex and multifaceted subject, and discusses the politicization of its use.\textsuperscript{18} The stereotypes printed by the media in regard to Islam and their implications have received attention by both Western scholars and those of the Islamic community. It was even addressed by the European Parliament in 1991, which recognized that “past developments have demonstrated that lasting changes in attitude are not brought about when dialogue is conducted exclusively by an elite – be it political, religious, or academic” and demanded “that the mass media revise their negative image of Islam in order that Islam’s contribution to the history of culture and ideas in Europe might be given proper recognition.”\textsuperscript{19} For the media, Islam’s position on women stands out as a primary interest, yet, as many scholars contend, remains heavily skewed; this is no less true in the case of Iran.

Another criticism of Western media’s coverage of Islam, highlighted by scholar Lawrence Pintak, is its “tendency to use generic photographs of Muslims praying, mosques, or women in chadors to illustrate stories about extremism or terror.”\textsuperscript{20} The last point is one which Elli Roushanzamir particularly focuses on. She describes an example of an \textit{Economist}...

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Kai Hafez, \textit{The Islamic World and the West: An Introduction to Political Cultures and International Relations}, trans. Mary Ann Kenny (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 15.
article which poses the question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible; the illustration for this piece is an image of a veiled woman, yet in the article, no mention is made of Muslim women generally, nor is the specific woman in the photograph ever identified. This example, along with many others like it, leads to her conclusion that “findings suggest that almost without exception, stories, whatever their actual content, are anchored by the graphic illustrations of Iranian women, veiled in the apparently impenetrable black chador.”

In this textual analysis, I further contend that not only does the media perpetuate these visions through stock photographs, but also reproduces them through language. As will be seen in my analysis of media during the 1979 Revolution, stories of the riots and demonstrations that propelled the uprising are frequently illustrated by descriptions of “women in full-length black veils.” The significance of such familiar pictures is that they simplify a complex reality and reproduce the same story; for as events and times change, the images do not.

Finally, in the specific case of Iran, one point in particular should be noted. Massoumeh Ebtekar, a vice president of Iran and head of the country’s environmental protection organization from 1997-2005, reelected in 2013, and a woman who has been a prominent political actor in the country for years, expressed her frustration with Western media, saying: “We [Iran] lost dialogue with a major portion of the world after our revolution due to the fact that media was generally controlled by particular groups who did not welcome the revolution.” She argues that the situation in Iran both during the Shah’s reign and after the Revolution was not portrayed truthfully by the media, in part because of political reasons. According to this idea, because the controllers of the media saw the Shah as an important ally, they were eager to favor him in their publications, whereas the Ayatollah did not align with American ideals or interests and so was consistently treated unfavorably by the press.

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The next subject relevant to this study and one which has already been given a significant amount of attention is on how the media treats women in general, whether Western or not. The media is a traditionally male dominated sphere which in turn reflects the traditional patriarchy on which much of Western society is structured – something to keep in mind when the media accuses Islam of being so heavily patriarchal. Sue Thornham argues that this patriarchy prevails worldwide and that the very category of women is still defined in relation to men. Yet because the category of “woman” or “women” is fractured “by structuring inequalities (of nation, race, and class)” she argues that speaking for women in general, particularly as one culture discussing another, “can seem to be an act of cultural imperialism.” 23 The idea of speaking for all women, as a category, seems particularly important in discussing how the U.S. media portrays Iranian women. As scholar Minoo Derayeh points out, much of what is written on Iranian women or Muslim women has been written by men. 24 Yet, it is not only Western men who create interpretations of Iranian women, failing to give much room for their subjects’ voices, but also certain Western feminists. The interference of American feminists in women’s affairs in Iran was not appreciated by certain Iranian women as the Western women assumed; the Iranians expressed feelings closely reflecting Thornham’s suggestion that speaking for others may come off with a certain level of cultural imperialism. The combination of both the U.S. media’s tendency to omit Iranian women’s voices, and the (perhaps consequent) presumption of Western feminists that they must then be spoken for, can only lead to a certain degree of misrepresentation.

Thornham documents several specific trends which the media follows in its treatment of women, a couple being very relevant to this study. The first is the media’s “packaging” of

women as images. As discussed earlier, and argued by Pintak, the use of generic images, especially of women clad in chadors, prevails in American media. If an article covering the Iranian Revolution mentions women, all too frequently were their appearances a point of focus. This was not the case in which men are generally concerned. Additionally, as other scholars have discussed, the generic photos of women in long, black chadors often accompany any number of topics about Iran, the Middle East, or Islam, thereby simplifying and generalizing a very multi-faceted issue. Examples of this trend came up frequently in my media analysis; one in particular arose in an article covering the installation of Mehdi Bazargan as prime minister post-Revolution, describing how “the streets around overflowed with the rippling torrent of black-robed women singing political songs, chanting hymns, brandishing their clenched fists.”

Second, Thornham claims that in most of the media world, men control media production, while women are assumed to be primarily consumers. This trend is evident in my research; the overwhelming majority of foreign news reports are written by men and, although the stories may not be aimed directly at a female audience, women clearly are not seen as producers of news. This extends not only to women as regular journalists but also to women as actors in newsworthy stories. This probably plays a large role in the limited female voice I have found – particularly the Iranian female voice – in American media, even on subjects relating to women’s rights.

**Historical Context**

The events leading up to and taking place during the Revolution must be clearly situated in their historical context so as to illuminate the role of women, and American

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perceptions of them, in the U.S.-Iranian relationship. In particular, Iran’s history over the past century or so was dictated by the meddling of foreign powers in its internal affairs. This was true early in the 20th century by Britain and Russia. The Americans came into play in 1953, when U.S. and British intelligence services orchestrated a coup that overthrew the democratically-elected Mohammad Mossadegh – who had nationalized Iran’s oil industry and thereby threatened Western companies – and reinstated the Shah’s regime. Many scholars cite such interferences, particularly the 1953 coup, as critical background for a general Iranian distrust of foreign powers.

Following the coup, the United States became heavily involved in Iran, economically and militarily, as it continued to actively support the Shah for the next quarter of a century, through the Revolution of 1979. Part of this support was founded on the Shah’s modernization program. He attempted to switch the agricultural-based economy to industry and used his newfound oil wealth to invest in the technology and knowledge needed to achieve his lofty aspirations. He also implemented a number of policies intent to revolutionize society into one of a modern state, the most discussed being a series of reforms in 1963 focused on land reallocation and women’s rights. Additionally, he encouraged the adoption of Western customs and welcomed the flood of American businessmen, military personnel, and citizens to the country. Social reform lay at the heart of his modernization schemes, part of which compelled women to unveil. The reasoning behind this policy relates to Leila Ahmed’s discussion, in that some Muslims (the upper-class in Iran’s case), sought to distance themselves from the Western narrative describing the practice of veiling as “uncivilized” and “backward,” desiring to be more modern – despite whether the masses
agreed.\textsuperscript{28} The Shah continued with this goal, proclaiming his desire to turn Iran into a modern, global power within two decades.

Throughout this period, many Iranians became increasingly agitated against the Shah, and their unhappiness culminated in the Revolution. Protesters chafed at his autocratic rule, the corruption in the government, and rule through cycles of repression and liberalization; SAVAK, his secret police force was world renowned, as was its brutality. Finally, perhaps the Shah’s dreams were not fully realized for many Iranians, especially economically, as income inequality only grew during his reign; at the same time, others argue that he pushed changes through too quickly in asking his country to adopt the practices of another culture.

All these frustrations eventually overflowed in January 1978. The spark for the Revolution originated in a government-run newspaper which published derogatory comments about the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, leading to religious protests that were in turn brutally repressed. This began a cycle of religiously-organized protests that took place throughout 1978, drawing more and more Iranians, many of whom were in fact not primarily motivated by religion but instead saw the demonstrations as a way to vent their other issues with the Pahlavi government. Major players of what eventually turned into the Islamic Revolution were women, who actively took part in the demonstrations. Many donned the veil as a sign of solidarity with the revolutionary movement, attempting to establish a national and cultural identity while simultaneously rejecting what was seen as American imperialism.

As mentioned above, American support continued throughout the Revolution, which eventually meant that many Iranians linked the American government with the tyrant they were trying to depose. Even as late as December 1978, the American administration still

expressed the hope that the Shah would find a way to stay in power.\textsuperscript{29} The rationale for this unwavering support was the perceived economic and strategic advantages the Shah’s pro-Western government gave to the United States. Much of Cold War strategic thinking still influenced politics; the Shah frequently labeled the revolutionaries as being communists, thereby evoking U.S. sympathies.

Revolutionaries eventually forced the Shah to step down and leave the country in mid-January 1979, and Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile on February 1, 1979. Shortly thereafter, the designing and establishment of an Islamic Republic began. Two major events occurred shortly after the Revolution concluded. The first were the marches that took place surrounding International Women’s Day on March 8, 1979, largely in response to a number of statements made by the Khomeini administration which were seen as threatening to women’s rights. This issue was covered extensively by U.S. media, as will be discussed later. The second was the beginning of the Iranian Hostage Crisis in November of 1979, with significant implications in terms of U.S.-Iran relations.

\textbf{Traditional Views of Iranian Women}

Much has been written about how many Americans perceive Iranian women, and how the media has only fed this skewed vision. Mehri Honarbin-Holldiday argues that profound ignorance exists in the U.S. about Iranian women, including their everyday life, education, cultural awareness, etc. and that the common thought is that religion prevents advancement in these areas. She takes this persistent lack of understanding to be an illustration of the fact that U.S. policy has never sought to understand the truth, but that its agenda has rather been to sustain its political power, exceptionalist beliefs, and “cultural dominance which nurtures

at its very core unforgotten colonial values.” The consistent gap between what the U.S. media produces about Iranian women and their reality only underlines a broader misunderstanding about Iran in general and may reinforce the perceived rift between these two nations. The implications for this are, as Hafez said earlier, the perhaps needless continuation of cultural, economic, and political conflict.

Much of this so-described ignorance stems from the simplistic views of Iranian women perpetuated by the media. Derayeh discusses how a dichotomy exists in how these women are portrayed, as they are examined from an either-or angle, preventing the complex reality of their society from being fully understood. Roushanzamir expresses a similar argument when she claims that Iranian women are either portrayed as meekly house- or chador-bound, with only great piety to distinguish them, or as militantly Islamic. Her media analysis focused on the period of 1995-1998, examining representations of Iranian women in print media, finding similar results to my own study of twenty years earlier. As previously mentioned, she discusses how the ambiguous images of Iranian (or Muslim) women allows them to become tools in support of more concrete reports and descriptions. According to this scholar, “after the Islamic Revolution, there was a need for instantly recognizable images,” and since both foreign policy imperatives and marketing strategies are in essence media products, they rely on “easily assimilated, familiar information” to propagate their message, which Iranian women supply.

The simplistic view critiqued by these scholars recalls anthropologist Edward Said’s criticism of scholarship’s differential treatment of the Orient (in contrast to the Occident). Part of his philosophy comes from a concept of “othering” the Orient – seeing it differently

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31 Derayeh, Gender Equality in Iranian History.
and thus in a more negative light than the West. This concept is evoked by Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey in describing how the West perceives Iranian women – that its simplistic view of the woman’s place in Iran results from a belief in Iran’s inferiority and Otherness. Roushanzamir echoes this perspective, maintaining that the Orientalist discourse which Said denounced is still present in the 21st century, especially in the media.

In no way are Orientalist attitudes more prevalent than in Western views of Islam. Since the Iranian Revolution was so closely tied to religion, as the religious leaders were seen to be the primary instigators and organizers – and fundamentalist beliefs the main motivation – it is important to examine the West’s idea of Islam. As mentioned earlier, U.S. media is known for its slanted portrayals of the religion. Many scholars have long debated this topic as it has much to do with how the West sees, and thus feels it must deal with, Muslims. Irmgard Pinn discusses how “‘classical’ Oriental stereotypes, which include the misogyny of Islam… continue to shape images of the Islamic world today.” These stereotypes recur frequently in the media, especially in discussion of women. In particular, the practice of veiling serves as a visual symbol which the media uses to illustrate Islam’s perceived misogyny, oppression, and “backwardsness.” Naghmeh Sohrabi analyzes the media in depth, finding that “it is rare to read a news report about the social and cultural situation in Iran without a mention of veiled women.” This is a result which my own research reflects; even stories that have nothing to do with women’s rights, if they discuss individual demonstrations, the Revolution itself, or anything associated with an Islamic republic, they will almost always have some mention of “chador clad” women. These static images of

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34 Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey, eds, Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).
35 Roushanzamir, “Chimera Veil of ‘Iranian Women.’”
36 Pinn, “From Exotic Harem Beauty.”
37 Naghmeh Sohrabi, “Moving Coverage Beyond a Woman’s Veil,” Nieman Reports, 55, no. 4: 110.
Iranian women obscure the complex and ever-evolving reality of Iranian society as well as the religion of Islam.

Two scholars, Sohrabi and Sylvia Chan-Malik, attempt to explain the prevalence of these images, particularly after the Iranian Revolution. Sohrabi argues that “the changes that occurred in the status of women [post Revolution] – particularly compulsory veiling and stricter marriage and family laws – [became] the main line of differentiation between Iran and more ‘modern’ countries.” 38 This is reminiscent of Leila Ahmed’s work in “The Discourse of the Veil,” in which she argues that the position of women in Muslim societies serves to explain why Islam is different from the West, and traces the roots of this argument back to the nineteenth century and the advent of colonization. According to Ahmed, “the peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam.” 39 She illustrates how Western scholars and politicians have historically viewed such practices as proof of Islam’s degradation of women, used to legitimize the white Christian’s “attack on native cultures.” Furthermore, such rhetoric was employed regardless of the speakers’ stance on women’s rights in their own country. Ahmed presents an example from the turn of the century involving the British Consul-General to Egypt, Lord Cromer. He wrote that Islam’s “failure” was in its treatment of women, and thus proved Britain’s legitimacy in intervening in Egypt. At the same time, however, Cromer himself was a founding member of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage back in Great Britain. 40

Author Sylvia Chan-Malik builds on this argument, pointing out that rhetoric describing any form of an Islamic government as taking a step “backwards” in time is frequent and, as Sohrabi hints at, it becomes especially prevalent when the subject of women

38 Sohrabi, “Moving Coverage Beyond a Woman’s Veil,” 111.
40 Ibid.
and women’s rights is approached. Chan-Malik completes a media analysis comparing American reportage on Iranian women’s protests of 1979 with the activities of the Green Movement in 2009. She argues that Islam is intrinsically linked with being “backwards,” anti-democratic, and inherently oppressive, consistently held in contrast to America’s “freedoms.” In this context, women’s rights are used not only to illustrate broader human rights violations, but are also often linked to the perception of the relative “backwardness” of an Islamic country and regime. Nothing is more iconic in this debate than the practice of veiling and, as Chan-Malik echoes Sohrabi, the issue of the veil came to be used during the Iranian Revolution as “a firm dividing line between Khomeini’s ‘Islam’ and ‘modernity.’”

She also contends that the Iranian women’s protests, which took place at the end of the Revolution just as Khomeini was taking power, became the United States’ “explanation of why Khomeini was a tyrant, why Iran was in turmoil, and why Islam was the enemy.” She continues on this subject:

From that moment on, ‘women’s rights’ became a rallying call that could be employed by the United States to explain the ills of the Middle East and the ‘terror’ of Islam. Eight months before the saga of the Iranian hostage crisis, and more than two decades before the events of 9/11, media coverage of the women's movement in Iran ushered in an orientalized conception of Islam as a symbol of an irrevocably foreign and oppressive religion, culture, and political ideology that endures until this day.

Chan-Malik’s work provides a definitive example of why women’s rights were key politically in the past, and also why this subject continues to be an important topic of study today. Her argument, and one which inspires my research, is that the events of the Iranian Revolution, particularly those related to women, still shape how the media approaches issues in connection with Islam which in turn “reveal[s] the contours of the types of

41 Chan-Malik, “Chadors, Feminists, Terror,” 120.
42 Ibid., 116.
43 Ibid., 116.
misunderstanding and appropriation that continue to characterize our understandings of the
Middle East, and in particular Iran, to this day.”

**Reality of Iranian Women**

Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues that dire predictions were made about the fate of women
after the Islamic Revolution, many of which did not actually come to pass. It is true that a
very prominent feature in the media’s discourse during the Iranian Revolution had to do with
what an Islamic republic would mean for women, and generally, the forecast was negative. It
is important to contextualize the roles that women have held in Iranian society, culturally and
historically. These roles have changed over time, but the positions women fill today are
rooted in Iran’s past. Failing to take this history into account would risk a shallow analysis
of the media’s influence on the image of women in Iran.

To analyze the points most highlighted by the media regarding women’s rights in
Iran, we must understand Iran’s ancient culture. Guity Nashat and Lois Beck document the
history of women in Iran dating back to the rise of Islam. They argue that “many features
associated with women in Iranian society and other Islamic countries, such as seclusion, the
veil, and the division of society along gender lines, predate Islam by many centuries.”
Thus, many traditions that are associated with Islam are not necessarily derived from the
Quran – contrary to common assumptions – but instead from the societies which the Arabs
conquered. Regardless of whether these practices originated prior to the advent of Islam,
today they are taken to prove its oppression and inequality. This assumption – that Islam must
be at the root of any repression in Muslim majority countries – has been described as an

44 Ibid., 113.
illustration of the West’s incomprehension of another culture, which also perhaps stems from
the fact that much of what was traditionally written on Islam in the West has its roots in
Orientalist scholarship. On the subject of gender equality in Islam, several scholars have
pointed out that, in the actual words of the Qur’an, the religion teaches that men and women
are of equal value, made at the same time of the same matter, and must share in sin
together.47 Also, as previously mentioned, practices such as veiling were never explicitly
decreed in the Qur’an but instead originated outside of the religion. Finally, Christianity and
Judaism are equally structured on patriarchies, constantly needing to be reinterpreted as
societies change, and so Islam is not unique among religions in its struggle over gender
equality; for it to be treated as such further exacerbates the misrepresentation of women. As
one article in the Economist succinctly phrased it, “Westerners, who have had a great many
years to reach their present state of imperfection should refrain from delivering slick
judgment.”48

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the practices previously mentioned are widely and
inextricably associated with the religion of Islam and that, in reality, the media both relies on
and reproduces these assumptions. For this reason, the argument that these practices stem
from the culture and not the religion itself cannot be applied to this analysis of media
treatments of Iran in the past, and so will be set aside for the purpose of this paper. It is the
institutionalization of Islam and its practices that the West so opposed after the Iranian
Revolution, and that is more relevant to this study. The West’s opposition to an Islamic
republic, as I will argue, was in part rationalized by the association of gender roles and the
religion.

47 Ebtekar, “Muslim Women after the Iranian Revolution;” Pinn, “From Exotic Harem Beauty.”
Second, besides their close association with Islam, the belief that such practices as seclusion and the veil are inherently oppressive also needs to be addressed in a cultural context. Irmgard Pinn discusses some of the key cultural differences between much of the West and many Islamic societies that shape how one views the other. For the West, the ideal person is an autonomous individual, whereas in Islam, it is “a union of the person with society.”

So in Islam, the liberty of an individual to act as he or she wishes is appropriated a different value than a person acting in a way compliant with the needs for societal harmony. An example of this world view is the hijab’s initial adoption by Islam and then enforcement in post-revolutionary Iran; the segregation of the sexes represents an important component to a smoothly functioning society, and is not an oppressive practice in and of itself. While many media sources use the veil to illustrate Islam’s oppression of women, other scholars have pointed out that the enforcement of the hijab, at least in Iran’s case, actually “allowed more women to participate publicly and freely because the public space became viewed as safe, ‘sanitized’ for all women, and no longer corrupt.”

This point is echoed by Mir-Hosseini, who writes that “the enforcement of hijab became a catalyst here: by making public space morally correct in the eyes of traditionalist families, it legitimized women’s public presence.” Although there was a significant population of women in Iran who were against veiling, there was another, perhaps equally large, segment that supported it. This is a dynamic which the media tends to leave out; of all the articles covering the actions taken by women to protest veiling rules, only one or two point out that the women protested for the right to wear what they chose, not advocating an abolishment of the veil altogether.

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49 Pinn, “From Exotic Harem Beauty,” 60.
51 Mir-Hosseini, Islam and Gender, 7.
The period immediately following the Iranian Revolution can be characterized by increased repression in all areas of civil society; the press portrayed this erroneous and negative view widely. According to Elaheh Rostami-Povey, Iran underwent a period of “Islamisation,” which was manifested in strengthened patriarchal relations, gender segregation, and such laws as the lowering of the marriage age, women banned from certain degree courses, and the imposition of the Islamic dress code. On the other hand, Rostami-Povey also takes care to point out that religious and working classes benefited materially from Islamisation, as well as echoing Rezai-Rashti in arguing that this new dress code gave women more freedom in public.\textsuperscript{52} A drastic improvement in education was a hallmark of the Islamic government post-1979, especially for women. Education in turn can be linked to life expectancy for women and birthrates, which rose and fell respectively, further reflecting this social advancement.\textsuperscript{53} Again, this is an illustration of the complexity surrounding the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic republic.

It is important to remember that the very women which the U.S. media so focused on as active players in the Revolution were also the first to resist the Islamic government’s attempt to restore patriarchy at the establishment of the Islamic regime.\textsuperscript{54} Despite various accounts illustrating the activity and drive many Iranian women have historically displayed in terms of furthering their interests, this image does not appear frequently in Western media. The lack of agency that these women are given has consequences on how their position is conveyed.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
As Soroka discussed in his piece on media and public opinion, there is always a gap between media content and real-world events. This is particularly true in regards to women’s rights. The specific trends that might play a role in the continuation of this gap will be discussed later. The alternate views that these scholars express, in attempting to provide a more complete picture of what an Islamic Republic would – and did – look like, are important to keep in mind, because the media lacks these perspectives. Overall, as Derayeh comments, the “women’s question” inevitably exists, because in every society women remain worse off than men. This is no less true in Iran.

**Universalism versus Relativism**

Hafez remarks that “cultural conflict between Islam and the West is often based more on flawed intercultural communication than on factual differences.” Yet the problem is also more complex, and not solely confined to a lack of information. Instead, it involves the idea that the West sees itself on one end of the development ladder and the rest of the world at various points along the same path. This is especially true in how the West approaches Islam, and part of the media’s discussion of Iran focuses on the Shah’s efforts to propel his nation along this development scale. Reinhard Schulze discusses how the common view – in the West – is that people in the Islamic world, including Iran, live half in modernity, half in tradition. Schulze’s argument is that, since modernity exists in the West and tradition in non-Western countries, “the modernization of state and society could only exist in non-European countries if it was prompted by Europe and adopted by the local elite”. The influence of the West in acting as the herald of modernity creates a dilemma for many

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55 Soroka, “Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy.”
56 Derayeh, *Gender Equality in Iranian History*.
57 Hafez, *The Islamic World and the West*.
59 Ibid., 22.
countries. They are forced to balance the accommodation of a changing world and outside pressures with preserving or honoring traditions and cultural uniqueness. The push to adopt Western ideologies and practices is one discussed by many Iranians in reflecting on the era prior to 1979, under the Shah’s regime. In fact, some of the events leading up to and during the Revolution were in ways a reaction to this cultural domination.60

At the same time, the media cited many of the developments taking place across the Muslim world as repercussions to the “overhasty attempt to absorb the ideas of a different civilization.”61 In other words, because Islam was believed by many journalists to be “a religion still in early middle age… the reaction [to modernization] has been a violent flinching back to the habits… of the past.” This same article takes care to differentiate between “flinching back” and Muslims “turning their back on” modernization, arguing that while many may dislike some of the ways in which modernity is achieved, they do not dislike the benefits of modernization itself.62

Either way, the question of what modernity involves, how it is achieved, and whether different interpretations of it exist (depending on cultural and historical backgrounds) is something to keep in mind. An overwhelming amount of the rhetoric used by the media in regard to Iran involves such terms as “modern” versus “backwards,” “Western” in contrast to “traditional.” As a deeper analysis of Iran’s story may show, a single definition may not be practical, but rather an acceptance of the multiplicity that exists in individual nations’ evolution.

**Applying Theory**

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60 Ebtekar, “Muslim Women after the Iranian Revolution.”
62 Ibid., 13.
Much of how the U.S. media understands Iran comes back to the idea of differing worldviews and reflects the theory of multiple modernities. As discussed by S.N. Eisenstadt, patterns of modernization are greatly influenced by “cultural premises, traditions, and historical experiences,” frequently not following the “‘classical’ theories of modernization and of the convergence of industrial societies,” once believed to be the natural progression.\(^{63}\) This theory can help unravel the question of why the West viewed Iran in the way it did and how the Iranians participating in the revolutionary movement saw themselves.

Secondly, if a group has little voice, then it is the assumption that others must speak for them, interpreting their issues and actions as they see fit. The theoretical basis for this argument comes from the work of Said in drawing attention to what it means for scholars to take on the task of representing an entire population.\(^{64}\) Just as research can represent the people being studied, clearly so does the media in representing its subjects, another subject he examines at great length. There may not be as a great difference between the media and academia as some might think. Both deal in what is taken for knowledge but which, as Said asserts, is inevitably based on interpretation and the situation, thus lending great power to the interpreter.\(^{65}\)

Iranian women lack agency or voice in the media publications that cover them. This results in a misrepresentation of Iranian women – either intentional or not. To some degree, it may also play into the lack of information on the actual state of affairs that seemed to characterize much of the media’s reporting on Iran, which in turn could have had implications for how the American public and policymakers reacted as the Iranian Revolution unfolded. Another consequence of the media’s coverage is that when certain events unfolded

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\(^{64}\) Said, *Orientalism*.

\(^{65}\) Said, *Covering Islam*. 
which forced Iranian women onto the front page, it was sensationalized, rather than being a matter easily predicted if the media had understood Iranian women better.

I am interested in how the media depicted women’s rights around the Iranian Revolution and what its significance might have been in regards to politics at the time. If the media does play a role in influencing policymakers and public opinion, as the scholars cited laid out above, perhaps it can be used as a tool to legitimize and garner support for certain policies. Several scholars contend that the rights of women became a stark dividing line between the West and the newly established Islamic republic; following this logic, the interests of women may not have been highlighted so much due to their value in themselves but because they served as a powerful tool to sway the sentiment of international observers. At the same time, if there was indeed a gap between the reality and what the media portrays, the public’s opinion and policy makers’ decisions would have reflected the one-sided – and flawed – story. The implications of this error are difficult to predict, but, returning again to Hafez’s argument, they probably include a continuation of political and cultural conflict.  

Methodology

Newspapers have been an important part of American culture for more than two hundred years, and it is their accessibility and continuous importance in the transmission of news that led them to be the core of my study. I focused my analysis of print media to that being solely from newspapers and news magazines with the most extensive circulation in the U.S., including *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, TIME, Newsweek, and The Economist*. My reasoning for this was that these are arguably the most far-reaching sources of hard news, and were written and produced within the United States (with the exception of *The Economist*), for an

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66 Hafez, *Islam and the West in the Mass Media*.  

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American audience. I focused my time frame around the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979, one of the most politically charged moments in Iran’s contemporary history and a time when women’s rights and actions were at the forefront of the media’s attention, both within Iran and within the United States itself. This was also a point in time when international relations between the United States and Iran took a drastic turn, still influencing their relationship today. The study of the media was split into three parts. The first focuses on the time period of 1975-1977, in order to get a sense of how Iranian women appeared in the media prior to the advent of the Revolution. The second encompasses the single year of 1978, and the escalation of events which eventually culminated in the Revolution itself and the overthrow of the Shah. The third and final period is the year of 1979, most of which documents the aftermath of the Revolution, after the Shah fled the country, through the formation of the Islamic Republic, and into the beginning of the Iranian hostage crisis.

Certain themes arise in the media’s documentation of these events (compared with what past scholars have said to be the reality), which guided the vast majority of the articles published, so much so that any statement diverging from these trends was marked as an anomaly. Such persistent themes reflect the political climate at the time. In particular, I will focus on what subjects emerged relating to Iranian women, or what topics frequently brought Iranian women and women’s rights into the discussion. Do these trends in the media change as the Revolution progresses? More importantly, does the role that the media gives Iranian women shift over time, and what could this say about the changing politics between Iran and the United States?

**Findings**

**Before the Revolution**
In foreign reporting on Iran prior to the Revolution, several main points of focus seem to recur most frequently. These include: Carter’s praise of the Shah, the Shah’s great strides towards modernization, especially concerning women’s rights, the conditions of living in Iran (for Americans there on business or military duties), the personalities and activities of the Shah and his royal family, demonstrations of Iranians taking place within the United States, and reports on the abuses and cruelty perpetrated by the SAVAK – the Shah’s secret police force. Nevertheless, the amount of news coverage devoted to Iran and events effecting Iran prior to the Revolution was noticeably limited, and only increased once the events of the Revolution itself began to unfold. Regardless, the topics that the media did cover, along with those it omitted, warrant attention. This is especially true in analyzing women’s roles, or lack thereof.

The Carter administration’s unwavering and outspoken support of the Shah was of great importance to how events later unfolded. Critics argued that his endorsement of the Shah’s regime until the bitter end ultimately alienated the Iranian public and worked against U.S. interests. How this continued support was legitimizened in the media will be discussed below, but much of it had to do with economic and strategic interests, along with the strides the Shah and his government supposedly made towards modernizing Iran, including improving human rights, liberating women, encouraging education, etc. The degree to which these goals were accomplished may be disputed, but the presence of women’s rights in the discussion of the Shah’s modernization efforts should be noted.

A second point common in media publications involved the demonstrations taking place within the U.S. throughout 1977 leading up to 1978, particularly in response to publicity visits by the Shah and the Empress. None of the stories covering these demonstrations, however, much focused on the reasons behind the unrest – most of the
coverage was instead fixated on the royal visits themselves.\textsuperscript{67} The detailed attention paid to the Shah, Empress Farah, Princess Ashraf (the Shah’s sister), and Iranian Ambassador to the United States, Ardeshir Zahedi, vastly overshadowed any focus on actual Iranian issues. The way in which their personalities, activities, and even looks, were discussed elevated them to a level of Hollywood glamour.\textsuperscript{68} Only on occasion was a remark made in the media prior to the Revolution that referred to the irony of the Shah’s gilded lifestyle in comparison with the poverty in which the majority of his subjects lived.

One factor as to why such criticism was noticeably lacking – which might well have arisen within Iran and suppressed – is that it probably was categorized as socialist and, in this Cold War era, consequently rejected. In fact, the Iranian government regularly responded to any inside criticism of its regime by labelling the dissenters as Communists, thereby evoking U.S. sympathies and discrediting the opposition. One article reported how the Empress of Iran said that “Communists and Socialists will always attack her husband’s regime because the Shah of Iran brought about reforms that left-wing governments promise but do not deliver in their countries,” referring to the Shah’s land, health, education, economic, and women’s rights reforms.\textsuperscript{69} The Iranian government’s inclination to attribute every anti-Shah protest to the work of a Communist movement continued through the Revolution and, even though this claim was occasionally discredited by American journalists due to the large role religion also played in the demonstrations, it nevertheless had some impact on U.S. policy and Western treatment of the subject.

Prior to the Revolution, the international community expressed unanimous admiration for the efforts the Shah had made to rocket his country into modernity and his dream of


\textsuperscript{69} Sue Robinson, Associated Press, Jul. 8, 1977.
making it one of the great and powerful nations of the world. His use of Iran’s new-found oil wealth to shift the Iranian economy from being agriculturally based to one of industry, investing in the technology and experts needed and importing much of them from the United States, made him very popular with many Americans. He reformed land usage, the health system, initiated a program to improve education, and most importantly for this study, focused on women’s rights. The fact that these efforts were made by the Shah, in particular his “emancipation” of women, was much used by American journalists to validate the United States’ continued support of his regime, even in the face of the Revolution.

On the other hand, the steps he made in an effort to modernize his country were also tainted by reports of living conditions of Americans in Iran and SAVAK abuses. The primary criticisms that emerged of Iran during this time period were directed toward the activities of the Shah’s SAVAK forces. Rumors of SAVAK abuses and torture were in circulation, but not openly condemned, at least for a while. In fact, one article remarked how the SAVAK “inspire a mixture of fear and respect that would have pleased Darius himself” and that “Western spy chiefs give them exceptionally high marks for their intelligence-gathering operations.” The journalist did mention abuse accusations, but also discussed the Iranian government’s denial of such claims. It was not until Iranian poet Reza Baraheni wrote a book on his experiences in a SAVAK-run prison were rumors actually confirmed (at least in Western eyes). His claim initiated a study by the New York Bar Association’s Human Rights Commission, which verified that torture was still extensively practiced in Iran, regardless of government claims. Media criticism followed this revelation, directed both at the Shah himself as well as the U.S. government for its continued support of such a regime. One article cited that “behind all the glitter… the Shah rules by torture and terror which are

the antithesis of the U.S. principles he pretends to honor.”71 Despite such stated outrage, this flaw seemed to be balanced by strides the Shah had made in other areas (such as women’s rights), and so the United States continued to back him. This same report produced by the New York Bar Association also verified “improvements in Iran’s women’s rights, health, education, and the economy.”72

The second way in which the U.S. media portrayed Iran as wanting was in its coverage of living conditions for Americans who relocated there – primarily for business motives. These articles documented the culture shock many underwent, discussing how simply finding “modern housing” with “Western toilets” was challenging, movie theaters and bowling alleys were “few and overcrowded, dry cleaners and Laundromats almost non-existent.”73 One American woman was quoted as commenting on how life in this region seemed particularly challenging for women, saying that because of one’s female sex, “you don’t exist. You’re a nonperson… the gulf is male chauvinism’s last stand.”74 These conflicting reports were common, and they mixed a message of hope for Iran’s future with a view shaded by a traditional Orientalist attitude of Iran’s inescapable “backwardsness.”

Interestingly, a couple of articles emerged late in the Revolution that critiqued how most Americans living in Iran isolated themselves from the average Iranians, creating a “mini-America,” where “they [had] their barbecues, softball leagues, American schools and American suburban homes.”75 Most did not attempt to learn Farsi or the Iranian culture, and the presence of so many foreigners, on average paid much higher salaries than most Iranians,

72 Ibid, 5A.
74 Ibid, 15.
served to remind many of the vast poverty and income equality present in their country.\textsuperscript{76} These critics turned out to be the only voices arguing that the anti-American attitude many complained of and feared during the Iranian Revolution was not wholly unwarranted and was in part these Americans’ fault in isolating themselves from the people.\textsuperscript{77} This isolation from the actual Iranian public may have also played a large part in how misinformed the U.S. seems to have been about the reality of many Iranians, and thus was caught so completely by surprise when the demonstrations that sparked in January of 1978 continued to escalate and the Shah’s power simultaneously evaporated. Although these dissonant voices are interesting to note, they are rare, as much of the media fails to perform such analyses.

The United States’ misinformation was also in part due to how the Iranian government tightly controlled what information did come out about Iran, a point Massoumeh Ebtekar made earlier.\textsuperscript{78} In fact, there was a marked silence of voices from within Iran, at least from those who were not in some way connected to the government. Thus, the media likely had difficulty in obtaining reports on what the political climate actually was within Iran and what criticisms of the government the majority of the population held.

This lack of representation proved especially true for average Iranian women. As discussed earlier, the media focused on individuals, almost exclusively elites, and this trend is magnified when considering stories about Iranian women. The few women who had any voice in Iran were those closest to the Shah, including the Empress, his sister, and the occasional wife of an Iranian minister, all of whom painted an undoubtedly rosy picture of the women’s situation. On article quoted the Empress as saying how the Shah had “given her great support for her social work,” particularly in the area of women’s rights, and casually

\textsuperscript{78} Ebtekar, “Muslim Women after the Iranian Revolution.”
dismissed “an account of some derogatory statements the Shah made about women in an interview a few years ago,” citing the fact that Iran was an old, traditional Islamic country. At the same time, she implied how the nation had undergone a break from ancient customs, a main theme of Shah Pahlavi’s reign; the progress made for women’s rights served as a highlight of this development.  

The main characteristic of the way in which Iranian women appeared in the media prior to the Revolution was, simply, that they did not – at least not beyond the royal women. Little was discussed about women in Iran besides the occasional comment on the Shah’s modernization efforts and his reforms of women’s rights were seen as an illustration of this progress. The media’s attention to Iran may have only been marginal before the Revolution, but its interest in Iranian women was absolutely nonexistent.  

**During the Revolution**

As events of the Revolution began to unfold, the media’s tone slowly shifted and the points of focus inevitably began to change. First and foremost, in January 1978, protests occurred with increasing frequency. For much of 1978, these demonstrations were widely accepted by the U.S. media as a backlash against the reforms the Shah initiated ten years prior, namely in regards to land allocation and women’s emancipation. This same refrain was repeated over and over for months without an alternate view cited.  

It was at this time when women’s rights in Iran began to receive more of the media’s attention. The main forces behind the protests were reportedly that of “religious-cultural conservatism and Moslem anger over the emancipation of women,” despite the fact that the central government cited

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“Islamic Marxism” as the cause.\textsuperscript{81} One article noted how the protestors demanded “an end to sex integration in universities and a restoration of the traditional requirement for women to wear veils in public,” while another discussed how “the Shah has been attempting to introduce Western-style culture to Iran but conservative Moslems have chafed at reforms that have given more political rights to women and removed restrictions from the press.”\textsuperscript{82} A final example of this trend, which also chalked up the protests to being in response to the Shah’s reforms, particularly in regards to women, and orchestrated by irritated religious conservatives, was as follows:

The turbulence sweeping Iran dates back to 1963, when Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi began an ambitious program of reforms. They were designed to put social development in the oil-rich country on an equal footing with industrial production. The cornerstone of the program, which was described as a ‘white revolution,’ was land reform, but it also promoted \textit{women's suffrage, a revolutionary step in a predominantly Moslem country}. Hard-core conservatives denounced the program as an affront to orthodox Islamic precepts.\textsuperscript{83}

As these quotations show, the Shah’s white revolution, which included many reforms with ‘women’s emancipation’ the most publicized, was cited for a long time as being the root of his problems in 1978. It was also one of the major steps he made in modernizing his country that received so much acclamation from the West; his achievement made all the greater by the resistance he did face “in a predominantly Moslem country.”\textsuperscript{84} The belief of the media, and the picture it endeavored to illustrate, was that the crowds demonstrating in the streets of Iranian cities consisted of conservatives opposing the Shah’s efforts to modernize his country. Therefore, the Shah’s initial response to protests was seen in some ways justifiable, as his “attempts to compromise failed to placate the Muslims and… [so] he was left with little


\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., B5.
choice but to fall back on the army.” The mob wished, as some articles expressed more explicitly later, to stop or even reverse the direction in which the Shah had taken Iran. The presence of women’s rights in the issue, at least as how the media portrayed it, was a key source of the friction between the Pahlavi regime and the revolutionaries, and between Khomeini’s movement and Americans. First, the initial protests were attributed to the Shah’s “emancipation” of women, then the Americans realized the probability of the Revolution succeeding and began trying to make sense of how events reached this point, and finally after the Revolution had run its course and the Islamic government emerged, observers in the United States started making their predictions about what this would mean for Iran; prominent in the coverage of this progression were women’s rights.

A couple of other points regarding the press’ coverage of events in Iran are secondary to this study but important to acknowledge. First is that much of the media did recognize that a difference likely existed between what the government reported as happening and the reality. The government’s control of information leaving Iran is a point briefly mentioned earlier and this fact was especially true when it came to the reported numbers of people killed in protests, something the media consistently acknowledged.

The second theme is that of communist activities. The Iranian government repeatedly accused Islamic Marxists for organizing protests, an argument some Western scholars and analysts did not see as plausible but which others seemed ready to accept. One article contended that “Islam, here and in other Moslem countries, generally stresses its hostility to atheism, a basic tenet of communism,” and so expressed its doubt that the religious movement responsible for organizing many of the demonstrations was also getting its backing from Communist parties. Conversely, many journalists repeated the strategic

86 Hofmann, “Behind Iranian Riots, a Web of Discontent.”
importance the Shah and his regime held for the United States, particularly as a buffer state against Communist influence. Others claimed that the Soviets were playing a large role in the rising unrest – and even had a hand in stirring the anti-American sentiment prevalent in the Revolution.

The final major topic covered by U.S. media involves the anti-American attitude that began to characterize the Iranian Revolution, particularly later in 1978 and into 1979. Most journalists were convinced that some of the demonstrators’ motives were fueled by a virulent hatred of Americans and America, describing in detail the anti-American and anti-Shah chants filling the streets, or threatening notes and phone calls the Americans living in Iran received. One or two unique stories expressed a different opinion, documenting that, although many Americans living in Iran had received threats, most found more solicitude than hostility from the everyday Iranian. The overwhelming majority of articles, however, published the view of anti-American sentiment being prevalent and also expressed a certain degree of bafflement at this fact.

Although these are the mainstream trends in the coverage of Iran, again, alternative views of events did surface occasionally as well, some of which have already been touched on. The analytical articles in which these perspectives were found began to appear later on in the Revolution, perhaps as a response to the fact that previous explanations had not yet satisfactorily predicted what would happen, or even fully explained why the Revolution was happening in the first place. One of the first counters to the dominant interpretation that the early protests were a reaction to the Shah’s reforms involved an interview with Ayatollah Sayed Ghassem Shariatmadari, who gave the protestors’ side of the story. According to

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him, the demonstrations were in response to a negative article published in a government-run newspaper about Ayatollah Khomeini, in fact having nothing to do with the emancipation of women.\textsuperscript{90} Several months later this story was once again repeated, claiming that the immediate cause of riots was the government’s decision to push back against Khomeini in an insulting and public way, and then pursuing tough repression of the protests. Additionally, this same article argued how, being “caught off balance by the religious backlash, the shah and his government have painted the leadership as retrograde men intent on abolishing land reform, education for girls, and forcing all Iranian women into wearing the full-length veil known as the chador.” The government thereby was attempting to deflect blame and rally international support behind such issues as protecting women’s rights.\textsuperscript{91}

As previously mentioned, several journalists did acknowledge the difficulty of obtaining information about the reality in Iran, along with what most Iranians, outside a select intellectual and political elite, were thinking. Yet as more information came out, a handful of articles began to cite a different story, being that large numbers of protesting Iranians “were not primarily motivated by religion,” but joined in the protests “to vent their hostility to the Shah.”\textsuperscript{92} This hostility could well be traced back to the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup, an argument that does not come up in the U.S. media until October of 1978, ten months after the first major protests began.\textsuperscript{93} It took the better part of a year before some started looking at what other frustrations might be behind the ongoing riots and started questioning the stories the Iranian government provided and which the U.S. media reproduced.\textsuperscript{94} One article pointed out how “the [Iranian] government claims that the opposition mainly stems from conservative Moslem clergy who oppose the shah’s emancipation of women and seizure of church-owned

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property. The real reasons, however, appear to go much deeper and are familiar in the West: unfulfilled economic expectations and lack of political freedom. 95 Another contended: “Masking the real issues, the shah falsely accuses the religious leadership of reactionary conservatism for opposing his land reforms, his efforts on behalf of women’s rights and his modernization programs… It is a revolution, by and for the people against a monarch… it is a struggle for freedom, equality, and above all, human rights.” 96 Although these articles presented a different look at what was taking place in Iran, and this type of perspective became more common as the Revolution unfolded, it by no means made up the majority viewpoint. Still, it is noteworthy that the status of women appeared prominently in these critiques.

Despite the occasional media criticism of the Iranian regime, the United States government continued to back the Shah and this support was reflected in the press. The Shah’s proclaimed willingness to begin the process of liberating his regime, such as shifting his power away from the monarchy as stipulated by the long-ignored 1906 constitution and removing controls from press attempted to validate American support. Whether he did enough in this direction, or too much too quickly, is a discussion that took place after his ousting in 1979. Nevertheless, at the time, the Shah and his pro-Western government staying in power was seen as a “key interest of the U.S.,” and it posed a clear economic and strategic benefit to America on many levels. 97 One article perfectly expressed the relationship between the media and Iran in that “Americans and Europeans don’t criticize the Shah; they are too aware of how important he is to the West, regardless of how he runs his country.” 98 This unwavering patronage lasted to the end of his rule, with one article even reporting how the

98 Lewis, “Iran: Future Shock.”
U.S. was holding off on allowing military families to leave Iran as the Revolution escalated, allegedly for fear of how this would look in light of America’s continued support for the Shah.\footnote{Steven V. Roberts, “U.S. Said to Bar Kin of Military from Leaving Iran,” \textit{New York Times}, Dec. 7, 1978, A9.}

The support which the United States adhered to in regards to the Shah was rationalized in part by his improvements in women’s rights. Conversely, America’s opposition to Iran’s new Islamic regime may have been based off beliefs of what such a system would entail. As Mir-Hosseini was quoted earlier, many made dire predictions about the fate of women under an Islamic regime, much of which, she argues, were not realized. It is true that the media held a very negative outlook for the future of women if the Shah was overthrown and used the veil as a visual symbol for the foreseen oppression that would follow. Sohrabi’s argument, discussed earlier, that any article covering a social or cultural event in Iran almost always mentions a veiled woman was also a trend seen in the media’s coverage of the Iranian Revolution, with a disproportionate amount of attention focused on the issue of veiling.\footnote{Sohrabi, “Moving Coverage Beyond a Woman’s Veil.”} Although American journalists wrote that “many women in the opposition feel they can hold their own in a new government even if it is controlled by religious leaders,” one pointed out that “others [in Iran] are not as confident.”\footnote{Nicholas Gage, “Young People of Iran, Rejecting Modernism, Revive Islamic Values,” \textit{New York Times}, Dec. 17, 1978, 1.} Indeed, the journalists themselves were not convinced and did not hesitate to express their doubts. One conducted an interview with an Iranian woman, “garbed,” and quoted her as saying, at the moment, no one was free, but the Iranian women aided the Revolution so that the men could obtain their freedom and then the women would follow; the journalist found this to be a “questionable bet.”\footnote{Georgie Anne Geyer, “A Reporter Visits the Ayatollah and Gets Unexpected Coverage,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, Dec. 15, 1978, E11.}
Certainly, when the current situation of women was viewed in such a way as the media portrayed it, particularly in association with Islam, it is no wonder that the future of Iranian women seemed to be a doomed one. A *New York Times* article described the women’s situation as thus:

In recent years, Iranian women have made important strides… in spite of this progress, their position remains in many ways medieval. For instance, most brides are expected to produce a blood-soaked handkerchief after the wedding night to prove virginity. A husband can take a second wife if the first one consents, and in rural areas the first wife is often forced to acquiesce. An Iranian woman cannot travel without the consent of her husband. A daughter inherits only half of what a son does from the family estate. A wife inherits only one-eighth of her husband's estate… these laws are based on Islamic traditions and are likely to be stiffened if the mullah-dominated opposition takes power.  

Another from the *Los Angeles Times* drew upon Saudi Arabia to depict what the future of Iranian women might look like under a heavily Islamic regime:

Perhaps the best example is Saudi Arabia, a kingdom where the Koran is the only constitution. There are no civil courts, only religious ones, and women are subjugated in much the same way that the Koran dictates. The Koran tells men that 'women are your tillage,' permits husbands to beat their wives and describes marriage's sole purpose as to beget children. 'Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other,' the holy book says at one point. The article did concede that “Khomeini doesn't go that far. He recognizes that women have the right to work, vote, and be educated. His only dictates are that women should dress modestly and behave modestly and should be separated from men insofar as this is possible.”

Suddenly, women and women’s issues were thrust to the front of media’s attention, but as discussed previously, Iranian women themselves had very little voice. Almost all of the quoted articles were written by Western men, and many of them had arguments they were trying to make that really did not involve women’s rights. The role of women was simply to support another point: the inferiority of Khomeini’s Islam, the

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undesirability of an Islamic republic, and the reasonableness of the United States’ support of the Shah.

After the Revolution

The media repeated several main trends after the Revolution, as it had before it. Stories on the anti-American attitude present in Iran continued to prevail. Another early theme was the discussion of “who lost Iran,” and who was to blame for its loss. The initial target was the CIA, through accusations that the U.S.’s intelligence gathering force somehow dropped the ball in anticipating the direction of events. Soon after, though, a counterargument arose that the U.S. government “blindfolded” its own spies, by telling them not to dig too deeply in Iran for fear of insulting its ally and giving the impression that it lacked trust.\(^\text{106}\)

These charges dwindled, however, as the Shah and his policies attracted more attention. In particular, the two primarily cited failings involved his political repression and economic shortcomings. It was fairly widely accepted by this point that his downfall was in part due to a self-created threat from within. One article described his rule as characterized by “cycles of repression and liberalization,” contending that his economic reforms and push for modernization created a middle class that was taught to look to the West for social and economic advancements but simultaneously was denied the deeper, fundamental freedoms also associated with Western countries.\(^\text{107}\) Additionally, more journalists began to note how the economic boom, so characteristic of the Shah’s regime, mainly helped the elite, leaving the majority of Iranians behind.\(^\text{108}\) Regardless, even with these two points, the media showed a degree of confusion about exactly in which direction the Shah went wrong, and in all of this


\(^{108}\) Coates, “The ‘CIA Flop’ in Iran: Did the U.S. Blindfold its own Spies?”
discussion, the status of women held much attention. One article wrote that “for some
Iranians, the shah didn’t move fast enough; rising expectations sometimes ended up in
unemployment. For others, he moved too far; modernization infuriated dominant and
intensely traditional Shiite Moslems who wanted to keep women in cloaks and veils instead
of blue jeans.” Overall, the primary attitude being conveyed by the media about the Shah
was that, although his intentions were good, he did not necessarily go about things the right
way. Whether his failings warranted an entire revolution was up for debate; likewise, how
much blame American policy deserved for the post-revolution climate was also a point of
contention.

What Iran would be like without the Shah and how an Islamic republic would work
were important topics in the media at the beginning of 1979. One journalist quoted a
Western diplomat in his forecast: “The Shah tried to wrench Iran into a West European
orbit… What Iran is passionately trying to do is get back in its own orbit. It will become
much more a Third World country, more a part of the Middle East. It will be Islamic, slower
paced, more turbulent.” The author’s next phrases sum up many of the points previously
discussed, including Americans’ confusion over where the Revolution originated, and the
fear of Communist threat: “That Iran could slip into the Soviet orbit is the great worry in
Western capitals… If a Sovietized Iran seems unlikely today, so did the collapse of the shah’s
power a few months ago. Although his regime was dictatorial and repressive, he was
modernizing Iran and raising its standard of living. He seemed to have no serious
opposition.” By this point, any regular news reader would understand the modernization
program which the Shah implemented, and that the opposition to the Shah’s rule which did

surface was consistently characterized by its large religious component. Connected to this modernization scheme and its opposition were the issues of women’s rights.

At this time, more journalists began to acknowledge the fact that, although religion had served as a rallying point during the Revolution, it may not have been the primary motivator for many Iranians. Several articles contended that a percentage of the Iranian population were not as enthusiastic about the prospect of an Islamic republic as some might think. “Some are ‘dead scared’ of a republic, and are part of the ‘silent party,’ sitting at home and worrying,” one article wrote.111 Another journalist interviewed Iranians, asking the question, “were their deaths worth it?” in regards to those who had given their lives in the push for revolution; he ultimately documented mixed responses.112 Many described the situation in Iran as simply having shifted from one dictatorship to another – something the interviewed Iranians were reportedly realizing. One article harshly stated that “now that the shah is gone, the Iranians’ idea of law is still a firing squad and their idea of government is still an ugly monomaniac – but with a turban instead of tiara.”113

On this note, the media’s coverage of Ayatollah Khomeini should also be discussed. Khomeini was widely accepted to be the spiritual leader of the revolutionary movement. But, as some journalists began to document other reasons motivating the protestors – such as lack of political freedom, economic inequality, etc. – so did others begin to characterize Khomeini more as “the symbol and rallying point for opposition groups that do not necessarily share his vision of an Islamic republic,” instead of the sole reason behind the Revolution. Nevertheless, his importance in providing a catalyst for the Revolution was not forgotten, and neither was the mass following he had, despite those who questioned what proportion of actual Iranians this included. One article, titled “Joy explodes in Teheran streets as millions

welcome Ayatollah,” documented the importance of his return from exile to many who played a part in the Revolution; but it also went on to say that “beneath the jubilation, anxiety exists.” The coverage of Khomeini, personal traits and actions alike, proved almost entirely unfavorable. To illustrate, journalists repeatedly described him as having a basic hatred of Americans and Jews, a description which, of course, was not designed to generate any level of sympathy in the United States. One journalist even went so far as to ask the question of whether the Ayatollah was an Iranian Jim Jones. A key theme, however, in the discourse on Khomeini, centered around his conservative moral policies and what their enforcement would mean for the everyday Iranian, particularly for women. Additionally, Iranian women’s opposition to some of his decrees became a hot topic for media, as will be discussed.

One report explained that the Shah and his allies were condemned by Khomeini for the very act of urging women to enter (certain) government offices, quoting the Ayatollah as saying that “[women] being there is both self-evidently useless and morally wrong.” The Western assumption that Khomeini and his supporters intended for women to be on a level below men was one which they themselves denied, as Khomeini declared that women were equal under Islam. But this was an assertion that many journalists openly doubted. One journalist, in an article titled “Return from exile: Will Khomeini turn Iran’s clock back 1,300 years?,” described the post-revolution atmosphere in Iran as thus:

Women wearing neither the chador, or floor-length veil, nor a close-fitting head scarf, are subjected to stares and often to verbal abuse by militant Khomeini partisans. It may be… that women would be free to participate fully in the economic

and social life of an Islamic republic, but business and professional women here do not believe it. The rights of women, in fact, have become a central issue in discussions of a khomeinist state. Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, in a recent interview, dwelt at length on what a woman would be able to accomplish under Islamic rule. She could own property, she could work, she could even be granted a divorce under some circumstances. But he conceded that there would be 'certain constraints' on political activity.\(^{119}\) Other articles argued that Khomeini’s presence “has altered individual lives and changed national values,” saying his influence had affected all Iranians’ everyday lives, and was the reason that “families no longer vacation together on the beach because swimming areas are sexually segregated… female singers are no longer heard on the radio because women’s voices have been deemed sexually provocative… husbands and wives can no longer pray together at home because it is considered immoral for a woman to bend in front of a man.”\(^{120}\)

As can be seen in the title of the *New York Times* article just quoted, an ever-present theme in the discussion of an Islamic republic was the idea that such a government would only be moving Iran back into “the 12\(^\text{th}\) century,” and this mindset was especially prevalent in the subject of women’s rights under such a regime.\(^{121}\) Not only did Western observers believe that the new Islamic republic would only seek to move the country backwards, but also Iranians themselves were reported to foresee such an event. As one article noted, “several Iranians interviewed yesterday expressed fear that the Islamic republic would mean turning back the clock in Iran and limiting the freedom of women - notions that Khomeini has tried to dispel with only mixed success.”\(^{122}\) Another offered that “the basic question” of what lies in Iran’s future “is whether an Islamic revolution means a step backward in time.”\(^{123}\) In fact, when an article brought up the discussion of what an Islamic government would entail


(generally some degree of oppression, moving away from Western modernity, etc.), the topic of women and women’s rights was almost guaranteed to appear.

Yet overwhelmingly, the issue of the veil received the media’s spotlight. Most journalists simplified this dispute and gave it singular attention, perhaps because they saw it as illustrative of the deeper points at issue, which were more difficult to express. Many articles published during and after the main women demonstrations in March of 1979 seemed to forget, however, that the point the protesting women were attempting to convey concerned more than just what they could wear. As one article put it, ”it is a struggle which too often has been expressed in terms of whether women are seen in the streets with or without veils - an issue that may divide Moslems but is less than transcendental importance. The struggle will come more over the way in which political decisions are made in a society that is both heavily rural and highly modern.”

Nevertheless, the issue of the veil occupied much of American reportage, and the U.S. media in general had a clouded view of it. One article provided an extreme example, illustrating an Orientalist perspective that was not concerned with understanding cultural and historical significance. Instead, it pondered how ”even [the chador's] most practiced wearers seem to be thrashing about in a bed sheet...To the bewildered outsider the question seems not so much why women should want to wear the chador as why in the world they can't sew a button on it.”

The reason for why the so-called veil existed in the first place was one which seemed to be a foreign concept for many Americans. As to why its re-adoption became characteristic of the Revolution, several journalists noted how it could be seen as a direct rejection of American influences, one remarking how “for the left, it was a battle

dress... more a symbol of national identity than religion,”126 while another cited that “many of the educated women who recently put on the chador have done so to symbolize their political discontent, not their commitment to traditionalism.”127 Yet others found it hard to believe that women as “modern” as many Iranians would voluntarily don the veil, either as a gesture of solidarity with the Revolution or part of a religious revival.

In Western eyes, the overthrow of the Shah only sparked a new revolution, one in which Iranian women were fighting for their rights – in other words, that of feminism.128 The “battle of the veil,” as one journalist phrased it, became a centerpiece in American media, for many believed that, in this same author’s words, “the outcome of the battle [would] say much about the place of women in Iranian society in years to come.”129 The women’s protests that generated this comment began on International Women’s Day, March 8, 1979, and were in response to a declaration made by Ayatollah Khomeini the night before that women working at the ministries must dress modestly, interpreted to mean the hijab. He continued that “there is nothing wrong with women’s employment, but they must be clothed according to religious standards.”130 A Newsweek article described Khomeini as “storming that ‘sin may not be committed in Islamic ministries, women should not be naked’… [and] demanded that women government workers wear traditional Islamic head covering.”131 The normal events that were already scheduled in honor of the day quickly became massive demonstrations of “modern-minded women,” which pressured the Ayatollah into clarifying his comment.132 He said that it was a duty for all Muslim women to dress modestly (not necessarily in the chador), but that

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126 Ibid, P5.
131 Fay Willey and Elaine Sciolino, “Iran: Who’s in Charge?,” Newsweek, Mar. 19, 1979, 47.
his view was not an order. After this concession was made, the protests ceased, but U.S. media’s debate of the topic did not.

In setting the scene, one journalist wrote how, “in recent days, at Khomeini’s instigation, the government had ordered suspension of a law against bigamy and arbitrary divorce, banned abortion, ended co-education, and ordered women civil servants to wear a head scarf or the full-length cloak known as the chador in government ministries. The bareheaded demonstrators were heckled by men and a counterdemonstration of chador-clad women.” The media described the marchers as being “in a demanding mood: they said they wanted equal wages for equal work with men, a greater voice in the government, the right to wear what they chose and a reversal of the ayatollah’s abolition of the family protection law, which had provided them with equality in matters of divorce and family property.” Another said that “the women wore makeup and smoked in defiant protest against return to the Moslem law that hides women behind the veil.” Still another depicted the situation as that in which “thousands of Iranian women braved gunfire, beatings and insults today in new street demonstrations protesting against fundamentalist Islamic efforts that they fear will reduce them to the status of second-class citizens.” For the first time, the media placed women in the role of actors and described them in such a way that could only promote support for them. In doing so, the men who these women were fighting (whose “gunfire, beatings and insults,” they were braving) were made to appear as the villains,

further creating American opposition to Khomeini’s influence and highlighting “uncivilized” Islam.\textsuperscript{137}

At the same time, American feminists began getting involved, with one, author Kate Millet, even flying to Iran to help organize demonstrations. Others orchestrated their own protests in various Western cities. Betty Frieden, author of “The Feminine Mystique,” told a crowd gathered in New York City that “too many people in the West misunderstood the significance of the resistance to the veil,” its importance going “far beyond the question of modesty in dress, extending into every aspect of human rights.” Frieden argued that the veil symbolized the traditional status of women under Islam which “denied them rights to their children in the event of divorce, made them vulnerable to easy divorce and to the possibility of a polygamous marriage.”\textsuperscript{138} This same theme was repeated in an article published by The New York Times: “It is not just the chador they reject. They resent the subjugation that it has always represented and the dominance of men that was assumed in the Ayatollah’s presuming to tell them how to dress. Predictably, the request was accompanied by an effort to deprive women of some of their legal rights in cases of divorce and polygamy.”\textsuperscript{139}

Perhaps significant in how the media covers women’s issues in Iran, just as it was before the Revolution, is the fact that there were markedly few Iranian women’s voices present to tell their own story. An exception to this rule arose in an article that interviewed four women (all friends) who explained how they protested for the right of women to wear what they wanted, whether that involved the veil or not. All agreed that now they had won the fight – because a concession had been made by the Ayatollah – the protests should stop, as any additional demonstrations might mean a step backwards. They also expressed

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, A23.
displeasure that foreign feminists were getting involved, one woman speaking of Kate Millett in particular in saying “I think she has no right to talk for Persian women… We have our own tongues, our own demands. We can talk for us.”

The last major event that occurred in 1979 and which arguably had the most significant effect on U.S.-Iranian relations was that of the Iranian Hostage Crisis; for its continuation, it became the sole point of focus for the media’s reporting on Iran, to the exclusion of all other issues. On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students ambushed the U.S. embassy in Iran and held those inside hostage. The crisis lasted for 444 days and played a large role in subsequent American attitudes towards Iran, and in ways was shaped by gender. First, the Ayatollah chose to release the women and black hostages early in the crisis; his explanation was that “Islam grants to women a special status… [and blacks] have spent ages under American pressure and tyranny.” It is likely that Khomeini was attempting to make a political point – a fact few in the United States missed – but the American public’s reception of the news was striking. Feminist Gloria Steinem was quoted as saying: “I think it just confirms his inability to treat people democratically as individuals… Women are rising up internally in Iran [and] perhaps he thinks that the offer of a child-like status of being protected will buy off the demands for adulthood.” Additionally, a member of the national executive board of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, expressed a slight variation of this view, showing a sense of mystification by the Ayatollah’s actions: “That regime is so prejudiced against women that it’s interesting that he gave women their freedom.”

Given how the media had portrayed the Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Khomeini’s stance on women’s rights, the American reaction to this new development could be understandable.

141 Ibid, Covering Islam.
143 Ibid, A15.
The media, though discussing how oppressed women are by an Islamic regime, which reportedly attempts to push them out of public society, also hardly paid any attention to the student group’s spokeswoman. Massoumeh Ebtekar, the woman quoted several times earlier and the current Vice President of Iran was the representative and translator of the student group occupying the embassy. The fact that an Iranian woman was in a very public position of influence is one which the American press did not immediately remark on, perhaps because it countered their beliefs of Islam and gender.

Finally, throughout the era there was always the issue of poverty, which was prevalent in Iran and a major point which the Shah never fully addressed. One journalist placed this problem in the context of women’s rights. He wrote about a specific woman, detailing how she was doing laundry in the street gutter and pointing out how “she could not care less about the heavily publicized struggle for women’s rights in this country, and in that regard she is an overwhelming majority. Her highest hopes are for more food, more income and more than a single room in which to live out her life. These are common goals of the same majority.”

Maybe because the U.S. media largely did not permit Iranians to speak for themselves, issues such as poverty, which likely had an impact on much of the Iranian population (more so perhaps than other matters) were never at the forefront of the media’s attention. Or, as Said asserts, those events which could not easily be characterized as instances of “the Islamic mentality” or of “anti-Americanism” went unnoticed.

Conclusion

Media treatments always returned to the Shah and what he meant for Iran, and for America. The Shah had many flaws, but Westerners gave him some allowances, openly

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145 Said, Covering Islam.
considering that his roots lay in a long history of Persian cruelty. The media showed him as a liberalizing leader who was attempting to re-create Iran into something of which Americans could approve. He fit the U.S. world view. He might have been excessive, but many Iranians, wrote a journalist, “defend his monarchy and insist that their country is not yet ready for a democratic-style government. Few objective observers would doubt that the shah wants what is best for Iran. His government has initiated many progressive reforms, among them land redistribution, the defense of women's rights, a mobile literacy corps and even a sort of consumer-protection agency.” In describing the situation in such a way, this journalist, like many others, argued that the Shah was most importantly a force for modernizing his state in a non-Western society, and given what he had to work with, he did the best he could.

Yet few allowed for such challenges on behalf of the Ayatollah and the Islamic Republic post-revolution. Women’s rights became one of the main points of issue, and in particular, the veil. Yet the veil was only a symbol – a symbol which the West associated with inherent oppression of women and the like – but it did not in any way capture the reality of what Iranian women faced. In fact, for the majority of the Iranian population, even women, the “battle of the veil” was only of marginal importance. The real issues in Iran, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, impossibly high food and housing prices, etc., were almost never covered in the media – perhaps because these are the issues which the Shah failed to address and which the religious movement focused on. Americans became so distracted by the veil that few saw past it; if they had, perhaps the leeway granted to the Shah may have also been given to the Ayatollah. The West’s, particularly the media’s, approach to the Orient and Islam shaped what information was published about the Iranian Revolution.

148 Ibid, 22.
just as Said outlined; his argument that the notion of “Islam” ends up being “more of a hindrance than a help in understanding what moves people and societies” was exhibited by this media analysis.  

In a way, the media presented a defense, an apologia, of the Shah that transcended U.S.-Iranian relations and was partly based on the issue of women’s rights in Iran. The U.S. media stressed the strides taken by the Shah to improve women’s status within Iranian society – both socially and legally – as a way to balance out his other failings. It was not only the U.S. media that did this, but also the Shah’s own propaganda. Whether the media just reproduced the stories that the Shah generated, or consciously followed a similar agenda, is impossible to say. A TIME article deliberates on this very issue of how much journalists were unconsciously guided by natural interest and quotes Dick Fischer, NBC’s executive vice president, as conceding that “early on we reported rather softly on the Shah; we thought he was our man.” What can be said, however, is that women’s rights were a defining trait in why the United States categorized Iran under the Shah as being generally a force for good, and under Khomeini as generally a bad country.

The lack of a female voice in much of the media, even when speaking on topics that directly concern women, is something much discussed in academic literature. This is true for both Western women and Muslim women (whether Western or not). The fact that such a large and diverse group is effectively without voice in the media means that their issues, opinions, and even very identities are open for interpretation by outsiders. As the results of this study may show, this effective silence makes it easy for women to become tools for certain agendas, because voiceless objects cannot speak out and contradict the argument. In order for the media, and indeed other parts of society, to get a full view of what is really

149 Said, Covering Islam, xix.
going on in the world, both domestically and across borders, it is crucial that all voices be heard.

At the same time, more work needs to be done in this area before conclusions about the specific role of Iranian women can be made with certainty. This study explored only a small portion of what can be classified as “media.” It would be interesting to look at other forms of media to see if the same themes described here hold true. Furthermore, for the full significance of this topic to be addressed, the next step would be to analyze the media of today, to gauge whether and how the portrayal of Iran and Iranian women has changed. An important component of analyzing contemporary media would be the inclusion of the internet, which adds another dimension entirely to this study. While scholars cite how broadcast and news media has become increasingly monopolized, the internet has worked to add fragmentation to media sources, allowing a greater variety of voices to be heard.\textsuperscript{151} It may also have key implications for how Iranian women are represented in today’s media (due to its fragmentation and diversity).

Overall, Iranian women struggle with much of the same problems women in general face. As mentioned earlier, most of the world is constructed based on a patriarchal society, and the consequences of this are illustrated by the media. Regardless, due to other perceived disadvantages as well – including living in what the West has historically viewed as a “third world country” and generally being associated with Islam – the issues Iranian women must surmount in achieving not only their rights but also honest representations in international media are only amplified.

\textsuperscript{151} Tolbert and McNeal, “Mass Media, the Internet, and Public Opinion.”
References


The print media used in this study was gathered from 45 databases including PAIS International, Periodicals Archive, ProQuest Historical Newspapers (various publications), Academic Search Premier, LexisNexis, The Economist, and New York Times.