

Gender Identity of the Iranian Women after the Islamic Revolution and Its Impact on Iranian National Identity

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Abstract: The present study aims to examine the impact(s) of the shifting gender identity of the Iranian women on formation of Iranian national identity after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Initially, the Gender Schema Theory is introduced as the conceptual framework of this research. After examination of various aspects of Iranian women's shifting identity and its impact on Iranian national identity, the author concludes that due to their critical role in nurturing children, management of household affairs and preservation of national culture, customs and traditions, the Iranian women profoundly influence the national identity. Nonetheless, gender discrimination, the Iranian society's transition from tradition to modernism and lack of functional cultural management, alongside international phenomena such as globalization of culture and rapid growth of information and communication technology (ICT) have attracted Iranian women and young girls towards luxury, ostentation and imitation of Western women, a trend which could undermine Iranian national identity.

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Statement of the Problem

In short, identity can be defined as how individuals perceive and introduce themselves to others based on certain principles. The concept of identity has been closely examined and discussed in different fields of knowledge such as psychology, sociology and political science. A complex constituent of human identity is gender identity. There is a need to reiterate the oft-quoted distinction between the terms *gender* and *sex*. While the latter denotes biological differences between the male and female, the former refers to behaviors, roles, activities, attitudes and responsibilities attributed to the male and female in each society.

Most scholars believe that the sociocultural structure of all human societies is deeply influenced by gender differences which are often portrayed as 'scientifically-based' or 'normal'. Nonetheless, such differences are actually socially constructed and shaped by stereotypical perceptions and gender-based ideologies (Jenkins, 2002, p. 274). Therefore, inside the structure of social institutions, in particular family, career and education, the distribution of roles and statuses is based on hierarchies and gender role distribution. That is, every social unit has its specific socially-shared definition of roles, behaviors and even system of thought for either of the genders. As a result, men and women are restricted to thought and action inside the boundaries of the assigned roles. Data collected from various communities reveal significant differences between societies in terms of

gender-specific roles and capabilities. Internal and external bonds and historical, religious and cultural implications, society -and not 'nature'- assigns certain roles to each gender. There is relative consensus among scholars that gender-related behaviors are historically-constructed, not natural (Collier & Rosaldo, 1981).

The situation of women in the Islamic Republic is no exception. During the past two decades, the question of identity has occupied the minds of scholars interested in socio-psychological, sociological and cultural studies' scholars. Cultural and structural developments of the recent decades have resulted in diversification of identity-constructing sources which occasionally stand in contradiction to one another. Mounting influence of modernism and modernization at the global scene has exacerbated 'identity crisis' among youth and women. Besides cultural developments, transforming economic state, increasing educational opportunities for women alongside their participation in business, has diversified social groups, social relations and group dependence for women and variegated their identity-constructing sources. The deepening impact of this process on social institutions and women's consciousness will undermine the legitimacy of roles ascribed to women in patriarchal households. Development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the rising level of education and consciousness among women will result in acquisition of new values, approaches and point of

views. On the other hand, transformation of identity will carry fundamental implications for national identity regarding the key role of women in family and society.

Unfortunately, few historically-oriented researches on gender and gender identity have been carried out in Iran to date. Furthermore, these studies have hardly focused on roots of and challenges to formation and institutionalization of gender identity among the Iranian women and its impact on national identity. The majority of existing resources only provide a brief historical overview of the Iranian women's movements.

With regard to the necessity of conducting further research in this area, the present study examines the process of gender identity formation, its shaping factors and its impact on the national identity in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, the basic research question is as follows:

- How have changes in gender identity of the Iranian women in the post-Revolution era influenced Iranian national identity?

An analytical-explanatory method is employed to examine the data. A library-based method has been adopted for data gathering, using sources such as books, magazines, Internet etc.

Theoretical Foundations of the Research

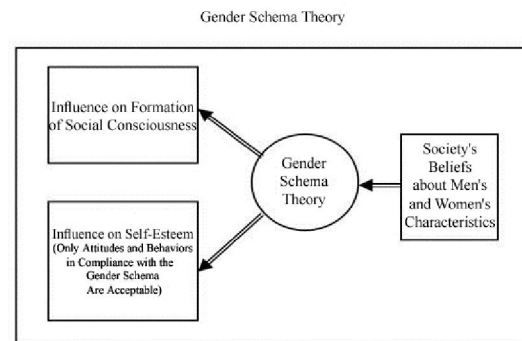
Among the theories introduced for study of gender identity, the Cognitive Development Theory and the Gender Schema Theory are the most prominent. Lawrence Kohlberg, one of the best-known scholars who have conducted numerous studies on gender identity believes that children's perception of the concept of gender can shift in a similar fashion to their perception of the material world. According to Kohlberg, an individual's understanding of 'gender' follows Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory. That is, before the age of seven, children have no clear perception of the concept and acquire the related understanding afterwards.

The other major theory, namely the Gender Schema Theory, developed by Sandra Bem, is based on data processing (جستجوی گوگل اسکالر چنین ادعایی رو) (تأیید نمی‌کنه) concepts (Bem, 1989, pp. 354-364). The quality of gender-related data processing and the organization of this data is the key focus of Bem's theory. Gender differentiation among children is instilled through norms, behavioral and social stereotypes introduced as 'appropriate' to children by the society (Levy & Carter, 1989, pp. 125-146).

In the present paper, the Gender Schema Theory is the preferred framework adopted to study factors which influence formation of gender identity. A gender schema is the general framework of understanding for an individual to perceive the

concept of gender. This schema processes and organizes gender-related data according to connections and commonalities (Shibley Hyde, 1384/2005, p. 551). Based on this theory, individuals learn the notions of masculinity and femininity from their surrounding culture. Further elaborated, one modulates her/his behavior in compliance with gender norms and expectations. The theory holds that during their growth, children internalize gender views which exist in the social processes and discourses of every culture and construct their identity with reliance on these views. The gender schema formed at the early stages of childhood functions as a decisive factor in adoption of a specific gender role. In their effort to understand the world around them, children form mental concepts and schemata including gender schemata.

At the age of one, children can differentiate between the male and female voice. After the age of two, 'language' functions as a pressure force which compels children to construct a gender-based world. Gradually, gender-driven differences appear in children's activities and priorities. The child exposes her/his gender behavior against the approval of the other and by discarding those which are deemed inappropriate for her/his sex or traditional 'gender rules', comes to a gender consistency with the others. For instance, during the pre-school years, young boys spend most of their time outdoors, participating in physical activities while younger girls mostly stay at home and occupy themselves with sedentary activities such as playing with dolls. Social learning through language, attire, toys and songs form the child's gender schema. At the next stage, children compare and adapt themselves with the prescribed gender schema (Myers, 2007, pp. 132-133).



Adopted from: (Myers, 2007, pp. 132-133).

According to Martin *et al.* (1990), gender is an observable quality in the children's world. Thus, in its early stages, this schema is formed by observation. Children normally use the gender schema to evaluate the appropriateness of a behavior (Example: Is playing soccer appropriate for a boy?) Following an

affirmative response, they collect further information about the behavior. Based on this theory, social norms and schemata considered appropriate for each individual prepare the grounds for acquisition of gender identity. From this point of view, a set of schemata shape the gender identity of an individual (Martin, Wood, & Little, 1990).

One. Gender Identity of the Iranian Women and Its Transformation after the Islamic Revolution

Every culture, in any temporal or geographical situation, has developed 'identity-constructing elements' which have come to the foreground at the occasion of encounter with the 'other' (Hashemi, 1383/2004, pp. 90-99). These elements are central to this paper which maintains that identity is not a phenomenon capable of definition in a clear-cut fashion; rather, it can be outlined by its constituent elements that define one's gender, cultural, social, national etc. identity. Thus, in this section we will overview the Iranian women's identity-constructing elements from the purview of Sandra Bem's theory.

Sources and Formation Process of the Iranian Women's Gender Identity Based on the Gender Schema Theory

Many psychologists believe that formation of gender identity begins from the ages of two or three and reaches its peak at the age of puberty, based on biological and social factors. Once formed, it remains unaffected for the entire life (Archer & Lloyd, 2002). American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, who first differentiated between the biological and sociological aspects of gender, believes in three primary factors which affect the formation of gender identity: 1) hormones (biological factors) 2) physical traits at birth 3) environmental and psychological factors influential on role-assumption. Unlike many other scholars such as (Freud, 1925, pp. 241-258), Stoller believes that both the male and female adopt a feminine identity at the early stages after birth as they grew up in the bosom of their mother. Their consequent identity shift is the result of education and learning (Stoller, 1968).

Nonetheless, to examine the influential factors affecting formation of the Iranian women's gender identity, the present research draws on the Gender Schema Theory which takes into consideration social factors and the role of learning within the process of identity formation. Thus, the study focuses on factors family, school and the social environment of the individual, social and religious institutions and mass media, i.e. elements which affect the formation of one's gender identity. Origins of the Iranian women's existing gender schemata and the impact of these schemata on their attitudes, actions and distribution of values and sources in the society are also studied.

Family: Family is one of the decisive factors in shaping the gender schema of 'gender stereotypes' that are instilled through various institutions and media in the society. Gender stereotypes are roles, expectations, beliefs and interpretations ascribed to sexes. By construction of 'gender stereotypes', gender roles are generalized, ascribed and designated to sex differences.

Although several factors influence teaching gender stereotypes to children, family's position remains outstanding. Family is the primary source for instillation of gender stereotypes as teaching gender roles starts from early childhood: girls are taught how to act like a 'woman' and boys are trained to act like 'men'. In other words, gender traits are ascribed based on sex. Modesty, subordination and fertility are some key 'feminine' traits, while 'masculine' particulars include competitiveness and aggressiveness. Women, due to their feminine characteristics, are expected to be competent housewives and 'nurturers' in the family. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be the breadwinners and sustain family's solidarity and unity.

In mothers' and grandmothers' bedtime tales and in the stories published in course books and story books there are always a set of archetypes which try to picture the socially-constructed patriarchal mindset: the fairy and the princess (symbol of girls) are weak and incompetent. To be rescued from monsters (symbol of the evil of the society) they need their gallant prince charmings (symbol of men). The weaker the princess, the more femininely beautiful she appears, and the rougher and more powerful the prince, the more successful he is in perpetuating the society's patriarchal mindset.

The stronger the patriarchal values inside the family, the stricter the demarcation of gender roles. Therefore, in their adulthood, boys have a higher self-confidence to engage in social relations, while girls are restrained from progress in social scenes due to their gender (Mozaffari, 2008).

School and Other Educational Institutions: school is another influential institution in socialization of individuals, especially girls. The quality and scale of women's participation in social activities and the society's utilization of their capabilities largely depends on how the educational structure provides facilities for and positions women. Moreover, the educational system is one of the primary launch pads to create opportunities in order to change the society's attitude towards women's participation in outdoor and indoor activities (Baba Oghli, 1387/2008).

Unfair gender-based distribution of educational chances is conspicuous in Iran's educational system. For instance, in textbooks, men's and male-related

activities heavily overshadow women's and female-related activities. Men's personality takes the lion's share of focus and their social roles are more powerful and diverse. At the elementary and middle levels of education, course books portray women fulfilling roles that belong to the pre-industrial and industrial age. Women's roles are mainly limited to indoor activities (E'zazi, 1370/1991 در بخش مأخذ نیامده است).

Gender inequality is noticeable even in high school course books such as *Herfe-o-Fan*¹ and vocational schools' textbooks. In fact, male and female students' *Herfe-o-Fan* books are significantly different in terms of content. In vocational schools, some majors are designated as male- or female-specific. Thus, apparently the Ministry of Education is employing gender stereotypes in its course books and majors. Findings of related studies show that in Iranian schools, moving towards higher levels of education women's portrayal in course books gradually fades away to zero. Moreover, discrimination, inadequate facilities and economic, social and cultural poverty lead to leave of school or educational centers by some female students (Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, 1373/1994).

In fact, schools and educational centers train women to embrace their ultimate goal, i.e. marriage and bringing up a family (King, 1376/1997, p. 182 در بخش مأخذ نیامده است). Within this paradigm, emotionality is a basic constituent of motherhood while the existence of mother, reproductive relationship between man and woman and gender-specific functions are prerequisites for survival of the human generation (Ghotb, 1963, pp. 112-115 در بخش مأخذ نیامده است). Thus, it should come as no surprise if in the Iranian culture an ideal woman should be a competent, good-tempered housewife. In fact, a woman's essence and identity relies on such characteristics (Assadi & Vidale, 1975).

Environmental and Social Factors: Descriptive studies on gender gap in social relations have habitually described such inequalities in terms of motives, social role, social base and individual and collective subjectivities. For instance, it is demonstrated that since women are expected to work indoors, prepare food, take care of children and serve as a regular housewife (Stoetzel, 1372/1993) while men are supposed to bring home the bacon and carry out technical, complicated tasks which require advanced training and skills (French, 1377/1998), in

comparison with boys, girls are less motivated to advance (Tyler, 1965, p. 56). Thus, they have always occupied a lower social status (Flora, 1971, p. 33).

Moreover, it has been demonstrated that through designation of attributes such as competitiveness, independence and interest in intellectual activities to men, society reinforces women's stagnation in academic activities and infuses fear of academic progress. Therefore, in most dissident movements, gender is more of a political, rather than social, issue. In other words, gender and its related problems are examined in the light of politics (Ghafournia, 1379/2000, p. 124).

Everyday Language: Language as a cultural entity has performed a key role in reinforcement of/contestation to social relations. Everyday language affects individuals' mentality and behavior in a specific temporal and spatial situation and influences formation of subjectivities and consequently culture. It serves to differentiate between members of the society based on gender, ethnicity etc. Since birth, difference in treatment of boys and girls leads to formation of two different character types, hence, use of different styles of language for each sex. Girls are addressed with '*my beautiful daughter*' while boys are called '*my clever son*'. In other words, different 'language packages' are used based on the sex of children. Such linguistic clichés are more than few in the Iranian culture, widely applied in everyday conversation and trying to persuade us that such differences are natural, not cultural and socially-constructed. Some derogatory terms used against women are *kaniz* (female slave), *kolfat* (servant) or *za'eefeh* (weak creature) and a bad-tempered female is called *zan-baba* (stepmother). Other labels and expressions used against women are *naghes-ol-aql* (feeble-minded), *khaleh-zanak* (lit. 'little aunt-woman', meaning 'gossipy'), 'less than a woman' (incapable), 'a word from the bride's mother' (a remark by an unimportant person), 'what is the fate of a girl? Washing nappies!' On the opposite, many positive expressions are used to refer to men such as 'Be a man!', 'Make a manly promise!' or *javanmard* (lit. 'young-man', meaning 'chivalrous'). In this way, the sex difference between men and women is extended to social difference. Women must take on a set of traits (beauty, emotionality, gentility, tranquility and reticence) while men are expected to have different attributes (Mokhtari, 1387/2008).

Mass Media: One of the most influential vectors of socialization with an increasing role is the mass media, particularly the television. In a patriarchal society, mass media turns into an ideological tool for instillation and reinforcement of the patriarchal culture. Gender roles in these media attest to discrimination and difference.

¹ Literally *Profession and Technique*, a course run to train students in a number of basic skills such as carpentry, gardening, cooking etc.

The results of an empirical study carried out on post-Revolution Iranian movies demonstrate that in TV series, men and women are portrayed differently. In these TV series, the social stature of women is 12.6 percent lower than men. The study also reveals discrepancy between domination and subordination tendencies of men and women. Women's subordination tendency is 42 percent higher than men, while men take a 60% advance in domination tendency. Moreover, in these media products, rational behavior of men is 46.12% more than women (Mohseni & Salehnezhad, 1387/2008).

Nevertheless, it should be reminded that on account of gender clichés, while the movies directed in the earlier years after the Revolution promote a patriarchal regime, those produced in the recent years are relatively dominated by egalitarian feminist doctrines. That is, during the recent years, the Iranian cinema has moved from patriarchal relations towards feminism and egalitarianism (Rahmati & Soltani, 1387/2008).

Two. Women's Social Participation and the Attitude of Policy-Makers towards Women in the Post-Revolution Era

The Revolution-driven transformations in the already transitional society of Iran left clear imprints on the lives of the Iranian women. In terms of women's position and rights, two relatively different periods can be discerned:

From the Early Years after the Revolution to the Late 1980s: During this period of gender inequality, when a historical patriarchal spirit dominated social relations, severance agreement or part-time careers were advertised among women. In-organization nursery schools were shut down and men were prioritized for employment (Shekarbeigi, 1377/1998). The legal age of marriage was lowered, birth control plans were abandoned and "Family Protection" courts were abolished. Religious laws were enforced by gender segregation in public spaces. According to (Kaar, 1378/1999), the Islamic Republic mustered strength to abolish any kind of intermingling between the two sexes. Full realization of gender segregation was sought in educational environments, particularly in the non-profit Islamic Azad University branches across the country, where there were separate male and female classes (p. 220). In this accord, based on Article 20 of a bill approved on 24th of July 1992 by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, responsibilities such as motherhood, nurturing the next generation and managing household affairs were designated to women. Moreover, based on articles 4 and 5 of the same bill, occupations such as judgeship and firefighting were deemed as inappropriate for women due to contradiction with religious, cultural and social values.

Figures of the first post-Revolution demographical survey showed that despite the two-fold increase of literate women after the Revolution (9.8 million or 52.1 percent), only an insignificant 1.3% of the government's civil servants and 4.4% of its executives were women. Moreover, of the total number of 550 magazines published, only 10 specifically focused on women's issues. Additionally, only 3% of the news relates to women's issues. Despite the fact that 70, 25, 37 and 80 women were nominated at the first four parliamentary elections, only four in the first three terms and six in the fourth entered the legislature. Nonetheless, even the female MPs rarely focused on gender rights in their speeches (Mohammadi Asl, 1382/2003).

In cultural environments, only 900 women held a career in the film industry up to 1995, while 1800 women worked for the bulky state-run TV. Female correspondents formed 13% of Iranian journalists, of which 22 percent were reporters (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2005).

Since the Early 1990s: Increasing population and emerging demands, plus the improving situation of women worldwide affected the Iranian women's economic, political and cultural situation inside Iran and new demands convinced leaders of the Islamic Republic to modify some policies. It was particularly during the presidency of the reformist Seyyed Mohammad Khatami that women's right came into focus. A significant development during those years was a surge in the number of girls admitted in universities and other higher education institutes. From a 37% in 1997, this number jumped to 53% in 2004. Although boys still dominate technical and engineering majors, girls 60 percent share of graduates indicates transformations in women-related educational policies.

The budget allocated for women's affairs in 2001 had become sixty-fold in comparison with five years earlier; while in the 1997 governmental budget there was no independent line-item for women (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2005). Women's participation in sociopolitical affairs also shows remarkable progress. The number of women nominated for the sixth parliamentary election was 351 which experienced a 43% leap in the seventh parliamentary election to set a record 504. In 1997, there were only 67 NGOs for women in Iran. With a 616% increase, in 2005 these were a startling number of 480 (Bani Ya'ghoub, 2005).

In the first national rural and urban council elections held in 1998, 3.7% of the candidates were women who managed to secure one-third of the main seats. In all province centers except for Ilam, Sanandaj and Yasouj, women were elected as representatives. In 109 cities, 114 women were the

leading or runner-up candidate. In 176 cities at least one woman was elected, in 48 cities this number was two, in 8 cities three and in one city four. A village near the small city of Kahnouj in southern Iran had elected all its representatives (including the alternative members) from women.

Of course not all facts and figures of the eight years of 'Reform Government' are this rosy. A non-promising indicator of women's situation is their employment rate which shows a two-percent decrease in 2004 compared with 1997. In other words, women's unemployment rate has increased along with their sociopolitical participation! (*ibid*)

Although Khatami assigned a woman (Ma'soume Ebtekar) as the head of one his government's most important organizations, the Environment Protection Organization, for two successive terms, he appointed no woman as a minister during his eight years of presidency, a move that disappointed many of his female supporters. When asked by a journalist about the reason, Khatami answered: "I did not want to take a risk by appointing a woman as a minister." (*ibid*)

With the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to presidency in 2005, it seemed that his administration is not supportive of women's sociopolitical activities. At his first term, like his predecessor Mohammad Khatami, Ahmadinejad refused to choose a female minister. Changing the title of "Center for Women's Participation" to "Center for Women and Family Affairs" was another action which indicated his administration's attitude towards women's basic responsibility (managing household affairs and bringing up children). In his second administration, Ahmadinejad demonstrated a different approach however. He introduced three candidates for ministries of education, welfare and health, of which only the latter managed to gain the parliament's vote of confidence.

Three. Identity Change of the Iranian Women after the Revolution

Within the recent decades, women's embracement of higher education and their involvement in economic activities, especially in larger cities, has introduced new values into families, leading to transformation of marital and family relations, improvement of women's social and economic status and development of new identities (Howards, 2000, pp. 367-393). On the other hand, existing barriers against reconciliation of traditional and modern roles have led to emergence of social identity crisis for women, particularly in those social strata which have been more exposed to institutional and cultural transformation.

Today, a large number of women have become aware of the inferior status of most traditional roles

and identities. All in all, global and national developments have brought vast changes to the institution of family and career environments. The life world of the Iranian women is not the traditional world it used to be. Legal and social inequalities are no more regarded as natural and inherent (Shadi Talab, 1379/2000, p. 15) and Iranian women are gradually rethinking their traditional social identity and position. Various factors have propelled this wave including:

The Transitional Iranian society: The Iranian society is moving towards modernization which inevitably begets social developments. Emergence of a 'generation gap' is a key influential factor in social and cultural developments of the contemporary era. In sociology, the notion 'gap' refers to those sustained differences that emerge during sociopolitical confrontations, mainly the modernity-tradition duality (Azad Armaki, 2007). In the present study, this gap is believed to be one between a modern social force, namely the educated women and social force of the traditional world, that is the older traditionalist generation.

Inside the transitional Iranian society, the vacuum created due to declining values and norms, or their replacement by habits and norms which are not rooted in the social fabric of the Iranian society or happen to be mal-defined, has caused many educated women to face various cultural contradictions. Today, the Iranian women, especially the young and educated, are confronting contradiction between what they have learnt at family and school, and the reality of society, a contradiction which has led to their discontent (Hazeri, 1386/2007). This phenomenon can explain the rise of women rights' movements aimed to alter the assumed unfair laws against the women, especially the laws regarding marital and family affairs. Revision of laws of custody, right for divorce and legal age of marriage is the fruit of the Iranian women's demands and pressures (Gheyrat, 2007).

More importantly, society's move towards modernity has prompted the Iranian women to cast doubt on the existing laws and traditions, seek a redefinition of their status and identity and search for new sources of identity and new models. This demands the attention of the country's cultural policy-makers in order to channel the rising demands in a path that reinforces the Islamo-Iranian culture.

Globalization of Information and Communication: Scholars have dubbed the phenomenal progress of the recent decades in the area of information and communication technology the "Information Age". Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are no more an element beside the others, but *the* axis, the driving

force, of globalization. In the third millennium, globalization of communication will affect cultural, economic, political and social aspects of humankind's life. The face of the globe has already changed and ICTs have been the leading factor in this transformative process. The new media order floods its audience with a cornucopia of images, mottos and contradictory ideas (Toffler, 1371/1992, p. 68).

By rendering borders permeable and increasing cultural encounters, the globalization phenomenon has made people conscious about cultural elements of the 'other', such as norms, values, rituals and religious beliefs. This awareness informs one about the relativity and diversity of socio-cultural worlds. As a consequence, believing in supremacy of a certain world and defending its integrity vis-à-vis other cultures becomes a difficult task (Riandis, 1976, p. 78). With the primary sources of traditional identity becoming increasingly undermined and relative, those relying on them will be inflicted by the crisis of identity and meaning. Doubt and insecurity are the outcomes of this crisis. In particular, information diversity leads identity crisis in closed political orders which try to disseminate homogeneous information in alignment with their preferred values (Taheri, 1383/2004).

Western culture, particularly the American culture, now the dominant global culture, is spread through new electronic vectors. Satellite networks help citizens across the world to access tens of channels broadcasted mostly in English language, using a simple satellite dish. American movies and video-clips, fashion shows, Miss World contests (whose criteria are beauty, fitness etc.) represent a world quite different from our Islamo-Iranian world, if not to say totally at odds with.

Internet is only slightly different. Free access to information plus Internet's three features, i.e. high volume, high speed and high diversity creates some sort of identity crisis, especially for the Third World countries (Gol Mohammadi, 1381/2002, pp. 12-15). Internet and satellite have such infiltrated into the Iranian society that their cultural impact on Iranian citizens, especially women, is conspicuous looking at how they copy Western athletes' and Hollywood celebrities' appearance. New electronic media have created a new identity status: nowadays, their female users in Iran act and dress like Western citizens, listen to their favorite music and of course demand their rights and freedom (Bahrapour, 2003).

Lack of Efficient Cultural Management in Iran: in the current situation, with globalization in process, culture-construction and presentation of appealing, acceptable models to direct the demands of the modern women is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, however, what has been carried out in

the post-Revolution Iran to stand against the overwhelming wave of Western culture has been unremarkable and inefficient.

In the first ten years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran followed a 'greenhouse' cultural policy. Radio and television remained in the hands of the state; media, books, music, cinema and art in general were kept away from competition with other cultures. The eight-year war with Iraq and its ramifications had extended their shadow on all social and cultural aspects of Iranians' lives and in distribution of sources, war fronts were prioritized. During the *Reconstruction Era*, i.e. the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), repairing the war damage turned economic concerns into the top priority. Globalization was inevitably viewed from an economic angle (Azghandi, 1384/2005, p. 15).

The presidency of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) was however a turning point in reorientation towards cultural concerns and revival of the great Islamo-Iranian civilization. Democratic values' currency, promotion of an 'Islamic civil society' (which Khatami deemed as rooted in the civil society during the governance of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) in Medina) and advocacy of social, cultural and economic liberties which were different from their Western equals were some steps taken by Khatami's administration in order to develop the cultural and political aspects of the Iranian society and introduce the Islamo-Iranian culture to the world (Ramezani, 1381/2002, p. 115). Nevertheless, even such efforts were not adequate to counter the powerful wave of Western influence.

Khatami's cultural policies were of course criticized by many *Principlist* groups that adhered to orthodox political and cultural beliefs and accused the reformist president of promoting Western culture and *bad-hejabi* (mal-veiledness) of women by introducing concepts such as freedom and pluralism. Nevertheless, Khatami and his companions believed that by freedom, they meant social, political and fundamental liberties, not moral laxity and libertarianism (Khatami, 2007). He said that the *Reform Discourse* originated from Islam. He also responded that imposing restriction and censoring books and press would not help erecting a wall around Iran and its younger generation and forcing them to obey traditions and religious beliefs since "there is no compulsion in religion" (Holy Qur'an, 2 : 256) . The then Iranian president also believed that women's tendency towards Western models was rooted in Iran's cultural and social problems, not in freedom –that is the natural right of humankind-given to women (Khatami, Zanan Hamelan-e Asli-ye

Demokrasi Hastand [Women Are the Primary Bearers of Democracy], 2007).

With Ahmadinejad's presidency, priority was once again shifted, this time towards economy and justice (in economic terms). In this period, which has started since 2005, culture-construction and presentation of suitable models in the age of globalization of information and communication to Iranian women (who are detached from their traditional identity and seek new models to become modern) has been ignored. Instead, use of force to sustain the Islamo-Iranian identity through campaigns such as "Improvement of Social Security" and obligating women to observe Islamic dress codes have been adopted as the solution.

Four. Gender Identity of Iranian Women and the National Identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran

In this section, we will study the impact of transformation of sources and the identity formation process of women on the national identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Impact of the Shifting Identity of Iranian Women on National Identity

In the recent decades, with the influx of women into the job market and their increasing education and awareness, the traditional patriarchal structure of the family whose key trait is institutionalized authority of men has undergone transformation. Phenomena such as promotion of education, development of mass media and its increasing influence on individual and social life, urbanization and increasing population of large cities, women education, widening social gaps etc. have paved the way for emergence of diverse identities (Ahadi & Hatefnia, 2008).

With women's increasing participation in economic, political and social domains, advances in biology, pharmacology and medicine, facilitation of birth control and feminist movements (which have gained currency in the global culture), the voice of women and their effort to realize their rights and stature have come into focus more than before (Castells, 1380/2001). By promoting literacy, the Islamic Revolution of Iran instilled women's education as a value, even inside the deepest layers of the society. The increasing number of women studying at elementary and secondary levels, and subsequently in the higher education, is the result of this strategy. In fact, education increasingly turned into a value, an exchangeable cultural capital, which highly encouraged higher education (Fakouhi, 2008). Due to these developments, especially the shift in the structure of family and women's role, the situation was prepared for transformation of values, ideals and ultimately individual and social identities.

Studies show that among diverse variables including education, career, income etc. education,

which equips women to a cultural source for identity-construction, has the highest impact on their increasing resistance against gender stereotypes and traditional identities (Brown, 1996, p. 790). A large number of educated women (especially in larger cities which further exposes individuals to modernity) now see themselves through a non-gender-oriented point of view and seek social and financial independence. Instead of obedience, they are seeking cooperation with their husbands. They also care for their appearance, socialize, read and exercise. Most of these women follow a modern or quasi-modern lifestyle and do not believe that staying at home to take care of household chores and children is necessary. From their point of view, a part-time job is the best option for married women with children, as it reduces mental and physical pressure on them. Of course, for many of these women, such an attitude contradicts the teachings they've been brought up with inside their family, hence contradiction and incoherence in the lives of many educated women (Saroukhani & Rafatjah, 1383/2004, p. 5). Family problems, social conflicts and career challenges are an outcome of these contradictions.

Currently, women guised in Western appearance and fashion's strong presence in social spheres for purposes of education and entertainment has turned into a source of worry for Iranian officials and even the cultural elite, who believe that the genuine Islamo-Iranian culture and traditions are jeopardized. In the age of communication globalization, when regional and global developments in political, economic and cultural domains have become faster than ever, national identity deserves special attention.

Iranian arts, Persian language, Islamic believes, mysticism, rituals, customs and holidays are all constituents of our national identity, developed throughout ages and centuries and embodied in outstanding figures, literature, ethics, spirituality, unity etc. (Fazeli, 2007). This priceless capital belongs to all, and the entire Iranian nation should seek its preservation. If a nation wishes not to submit to other cultures and not to lose its identity, it should foster the power of creation in order to find the courage to confront and challenge rival cultures. Preparation of such a mode implies an open, dynamic atmosphere. In a closed environment where short-sightedness rules no nation can manage to keep its culture dynamic (Varjavand, 2008).

The basic argument of the present study is that in the Iranian society, women have an influential role in formation, reinforcement and preservation of national identity. This argument is based on the following rationales:

The Role of Women in Nurturing Children: According to Talcott Parsons, the well-known

American sociologist, for a child, “socialization” is learning and absorbing the culture (s)he is born in. In other words, socialization is the process of acquiring the behaviors and competence required to fulfill a specific social role. The influence of mother on this learning process is undeniable as she is the most intimate person in direct touch with the infant after birth. In fact, the infant’s life starts with a biological contact between her/him and the mother. Not only does this contact satisfy the infants’ needs, but also affects their psychological and emotional conditions. The child’s physical and mental development primarily depends on the mother, who performs the most important role in the child’s life for a long time. Besides, teaching language (which reflects the cultural, mental and moral circumstances of the society and is a vector to transfer cultural heritage to the next generation) is carried out by the mother. With mother’s help, the toddler masters this tool and becomes able to describe phenomena. Transference of basic concepts, new information, cultural customs and traditions etc. is conducted by the mother. She is the one who helps the child absorb information about the environment, daily language, social institutions and causality relations between phenomena (Akhavi Rad, 1385/2006, p. 45). Legends, fables and other ancient Iranian tales that form a large part of Iranian national identity are conveyed by mothers and grandmothers to the next generation.

Women’s Role in Conservation of Iranian Arts: Handicraft, as invaluable cultural heritage, is regarded as a material practice from the point of view of national identity, not regarding its economic aspect which contributes to national production and income. Handicrafts in Iran have thousands of years of history, enjoying patterns rooted in the rich civilization of Iran and the intellectual principles of its dwellers. In a world where men have occupied the more important social roles, it may appear hard to believe that women have been the creators of a large portion of artistic works. Many experts believe that the fine, attractive elements used in handicrafts are originated in women’s delicate feelings. Meanwhile, facts and figures show that at the moment, a considerable portion of handicraft products, a potentially lucrative source of income and tourist attraction, is manufactured by women. Women’s role is so significant that in Iran’s educational system, some handicraft branches are exclusive to women and the market is actually dominated by the female gender.

According to the Deputy Head of the Cultural Heritage Organization for Handicrafts, 60% of handicraft producers in the city of Karaj (in west of Tehran) and 98% in Hormozgan Province in southern Iran are women (Sanaye-e Dasti-ye Hormozgan,

Ganji Penhan dar Konj-e Khaneha [Hormozgan's Handicrafts, a Hidden Treasure in the Corner of Houses], 2007). Handicraft is no more considered a ‘rural’ activity: today, many of the urban women are practicing and utilizing traditional Iranian the art in fields such as interior design. Some branches of handicraft such as doll-making, traditional clothes-weaving and *suzan-douzi* (needle-weaving) are monopolized by female artisans. In many other branches such as *gelim-bafi* (kilim-weaving), traditional *rou-douzii* (cover-weaving), carpet, *jajim*- (a kind of two-sided carpet), *gabbeh* (hand-woven pile rug) weaving, *hasir-bafi* (wicker-weaving), *borqa’-sazi* (burqa-weaving), traditional textile industry, *chador-shab* (literally ‘night veil’, a type of delicately woven silk veil) and creating ferry maquettes, women form the majority of workforce (Teymourzadeh, 2008).

Preservation of National and Religious Customs and Traditions: Formation of national identity is a lengthy, complicated process. The cumulative impact of geographical, ethnic, lingual and religious elements combined with life quality, history, holidays, rituals etc. shapes throughout centuries the collective identity of a nation. Inside the amalgam of elements which build up the national identity of a country, traditions and rituals occupy a unique position. Iranians have enjoyed their exclusive religious and national beliefs and traditions, with women playing a key role in their preservation. The singular taste of Iranian women in holding the *Norouz*² celebration ceremony and its rituals including *khaneh-tekani* (literally ‘house-shaking’, an all-out cleaning of one’s residence on the verge of *Norouz*), shopping new clothes for children, baking pastries, preparing *sabzeh* (greenery grown to celebrate the arrival of *Norouz* and rebirth of the world), *haft-sin* (literally ‘the seven Ss, traditional table setting for *Norouz* decorated by seven elements of nature whose name starts with the ‘s’ sound in Persian) and *Norouz* night’s specialty, i.e. *sabzi-polow va mahi* (rice with green herbs served with fish) is not negligible (Sa’eedi, 2008).

Deeply-seated religious beliefs of Iranian women encourage them to assume a key part in holding religious ceremonies such as *Tasou’a* and *Ashoura* (days in which Shi’a Muslims mourn the anniversary of the martyrdom of their third *Imam*, namely *Imam Hussein*), *Ramadan* (holy month in which the Muslims fast from sunset to sunrise) and other religious holidays. Typically female-exclusive gatherings, namely *roazeh-khani* (mournful recitation of the passions of Shi’a Imams) and *nazri* (food

² The first day of the Iranian new year which starts on 21st of March

cooked and distributed among relatives, neighbors or the poor usually to mark a certain religious event) are only a part of their activities to sustain Iranian religious-national identities (Bahar, 1383/2004).

Women as the Basic Target of Advertisements and Consumerism Culture: In the contemporary society, consumption has turned into an indicator of one's social status. As a result of a paradigm shift towards the material face of life, values that underscored hard work and production are now replaced by those which elevate consumption. Consequently, an individualistic, materialistic and hedonistic approach has dominated humankind's life, one which underscores physical pleasures and ecstasy. In that way, not only the identity of individuals, but also their entertainment is tied to consumption and shopping.

Women's role in regulation of the household expenditure and socialization of children signifies their role in promotion of optimum consumption and purchase. In a consumerist society, women are both the agent and subject of commercial advertisements. They are portrayed as dependent, consumerist beings having no concern but spending their husband's money for unnecessary, luxury items ranging from garments and jewelry to home appliances. Although at times dissatisfaction with daily chores and lack of vision may tempt women to make unnecessary purchases, they are definitely not submissive consumers. They defy the stereotypical image constructed by advertisements and are conscious of their role in regulating family's pattern of consumption. In fact, many of them resist the capitalistic model of consumption and demonstrate their power in influencing consumption patterns, values and behavior of family members. University studies and a broad range of researches conducted to date on women and redefinition of their social identity prove that the higher the level of education and material and cultural capital of women, the stronger their resistance to normative intellectual and behavioral patterns, including consumerism (Raf'atjah, 2007).

The cases above were just a few from many evidences which demonstrate women's role in identity-construction. They clarified that if women are supposed to function as an essential part of the society in preservation of national and religious identity and culture of the country, and if their participation inside the family and society can determine the revival/decline of the Iranian national identity in domestic and international scenes, a paradigm shift needs to take place in the gender-based attitude towards women inside the families, educational system and media and also among the decision-making circles of the Islamic Republic.

To pave the way for women's success in outdoor careers and stop moral corruption, increasing use of cosmetics and the mounting rate of divorce in the society, the first step is discarding gender-biased attitudes and treating children not as 'boys' or 'girls', but as individuals who are supposed to be productive members of the society in the future.

The bitter reality of today, however, is that Iranian girls and women are trained by families, media, schools and society to fulfill certain functions whose consequences are rejected by the very same institutions. Values such as beauty, emotionality, delicacy and decency are instilled into girls and they inevitably result in the female gender's focus on ostentation and competition with their peers over values deemed suitable for them by the society.

Disregarding the process of socialization which they have perpetuated, parents, society and cultural policy-makers of the country demands young women to reject the values they have been taught since their childhood and avoid Western fashions and glitz and glamour to preserve their national identity. However, for a female taught to appear beautiful and serve as a good mother/wife, pursuing education, knowledge and awareness seems to be useless efforts. It is a matter of question if they would be able to preserve the Islamo-Iranian culture and identity against the massive wave of cultural plans designed by international media.

Clothing style is only a part of national identity; others including geopolitics, cultural heritage, religion and language. Preservation and reinforcement of national identity by women is achievable only after providing them with knowledge, admitting them in key positions and placing trust in them. In today's world where people are exposed to diverse cultures, the surviving culture is one which can fulfill both material and spiritual needs. Identity implies selection; hence, the cultural foundations of Iranian identity should be reinforced such that they convince individuals through adequately powerful rationale to adopt their own country's identity symbols.

Conclusion and Suggestion

In this research drawing on the Gender Schema Theory proposed by Sandra Bem we studied the Iranian women's gender identity in terms of the factors which affect its formation besides its impact on Iranian national identity. Findings of the study showed that women's gender awareness is formed through nurture and under the influence of interactions inside the family, educational system and the society. The author maintained that biological factors have inconsiderable impact on formation of gender identity. Since their early childhood, young girls are socialized for beauty, attractiveness,

household duties and nurturing their future children. Young females are taught that demanding tasks and macro-scale management is beyond their abilities or at least not necessary for them.

On the other hand, it was clarified how Iranian women, due to their critical role in nurturing children, managing family affairs and preserving national culture and traditions, can heavily influence national identity. Nevertheless, gender discrimination, transitional Iranian society and lack of efficient cultural management, in addition to international phenomena such as globalization of culture and spread of information and communication technology, have directed the attention of Iranian girls and women towards issues such as luxury, ostentation and imitation of Western women, a reality that can undermine Iranian national identity.

Today, women are on the one hand exposed to mass media propaganda and on the other hand, fettered by mental, cultural and behavioral restrictions of a traditional society. These circumstances, typical of a transitional society, place responsibility on cultural decision-makers and educational system to reconcile tradition and modernity and help the Iranian women redefine their identity to prepare for confrontation with realities of the society and revive the Islamo-Iranian culture in a globalized world.

If we expect the 'future mothers' of the society to fulfill their role in nurture and education of the next generation satisfactorily, we should try to shape their attitude through family and educational system today. Otherwise, what emerges is a generation of youth inflicted by identity crisis and detached from its religious and national culture. Today, in the Western world, culture had been commoditized and commercialized, seeking its own market. Against this phenomenon, we can't erect barriers around the country and isolate ourselves from the world. If Iran enters the tough global cultural competition unprepared, it will be severely hurt.

To improve the Iranian women's gender identity and preserve our national identity, the following approaches may be efficient:

1. *Revision of Gender Stereotypes*: As it was mentioned, the educational system of our country, from family to mass media, promote certain gender stereotypes which attributes power, thought, management and efficiency to men and leave women with beauty, delicacy, simple-mindedness and at times even naïveté. Hence, the responsibility is placed on parents, educational and cultural decision-makers to alter such attitudes, habits, images and linguistic features which are rooted in gender discriminations. Revision and modification of gender clichés and gaining a correct understanding of basic

psychological traits of men and women can be carried out via course books, academic papers, athletic and academic contests, conferences, forums etc.

2. *Definition of Appropriate Behaviors Based on National Culture*: Appropriate behavioral patterns should be defined based on national culture. If course books, mass media and other influential cultural loci base their definition of appropriateness on a culture in contradiction with the national culture, decline of the latter and emergence of intellectual and behavioral irregularities will be a normal outcome.

3. *Sustained and Balanced Development*: Sustained development provides appropriate circumstances for maintenance of the society's stability and security and reorients the identity-constructing approach towards national culture. A society on the path of development appreciates its own cultures and values and adopts national symbolic cultures as this is the way to replace foreign culture with the national. Development calls the participation of all individuals and groups including men and women in the process.

4. *Acknowledgment of the Others' Rights and Liberties*: Preservation of identity and dignity is realized only through mutual understanding and respect for the others' rights and liberties. Individuals' right to choose their own lifestyle and participate in determination of their fate should be respected. There is a need to instill this basic concept that humankind is able to distinguish its path relying on rationality. Tolerance should be promoted and through culture-construction and presentation of appealing models to encourage citizens to preserve national identity and traditions.

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