

**ZANCOUVER: THE HISTORY OF IRANIAN WOMEN MIGRANTS IN  
VANCOUVER 1978-2007**

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 2004

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the migration of Iranian women to Vancouver, B.C., between the period 1978 through 2007. One of the most significant factors influencing this migration was the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979, although Canadian immigration policy also impacted the migration of Iranian women to Vancouver during the last quarter of the twentieth century. This study utilizes oral history interviews with Iranian women to analyze the multiple reasons for their emigration from Iran and subsequent settlement in Vancouver. It demonstrates the internal diversity of Iranians in Vancouver in terms of their reasons for leaving Iran and coming to Canada, their political affiliations, religious beliefs, personal value systems, and attitudes regarding class and status. These differences have resulted in feelings of divisiveness and distrust amongst Iranian women in Vancouver and have inhibited the development of a sense of community based on a shared national background for Iranians in Vancouver to date.

**Keywords:** migration; Iranian women; Vancouver; gender roles; oral history

*For my mother.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the 1978-1979 revolution in Iran, Vancouver B.C. became home to an increasing number of Iranian migrants. This study examines how the histories of Iran and Canada shaped the reasons Iranian women left Iran, and the reasons they chose to migrate to and settle in Vancouver. Far reaching changes to the prevailing social, political and economic systems in Iran following the revolution meant dramatic shifts in the daily lives of many Iranian women. These changes led many women to emigrate, whether in fear for their lives or due to a more complex combination of factors. The way they experienced these changes differ according to their religious views, political ideologies, class and personal familial background. For example, women affiliated with dissident political groups, along with religious minorities such as Baha'is, were persecuted under the new regime, while other women encountered obstacles to their personal freedom in different ways, such as through the imposition of a mandatory dress code. Iranian women who settled in Vancouver during the period 1978 to 2007 comprise an internally diverse population. Their differing backgrounds and reasons for migrating also created new challenges for these women in developing a unified sense of community in Vancouver based on a shared national identity.

### ***Background***

The history of the Iranian revolution is important in understanding the various factors that influenced the emigration of many men and women from Iran in the years following 1978. The Iranian revolution of 1978-1979 led to the fall of the Pahlavi

monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran. The Iranian monarch, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was forced to abdicate his throne and flee the country on January 16, 1979, after nearly a year of popular uprisings, demonstrations and protests against his regime involving a broad spectrum of Iranian society.<sup>1</sup> Following the abdication of the Shah, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile in Paris on February 1, 1979, usurped control of the Iranian government proclaiming Iran an Islamic Republic, and named himself the supreme leader.<sup>2</sup> The revolution and subsequent creation of an Islamic Republic had countless ramifications for Iranian society: of particular interest to this study is how these ramifications impacted the emigration that ensued. Different segments of Iranian society migrated from Iran in the years following the revolution. The reasons varied: many fled due to religious, political or gender persecution; others emigrated due to loss of employment, inflation and economic uncertainty; many more left due to the violence and turbulence of the revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war; still others left Iran in order to obtain improved access to education for themselves or their children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Kelley, "Chronology of the Pahlavi Era and the Islamic Republic," in Ron Kelley and Jonathan Friedlander Eds. *Irangenes: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Nikki R. Keddie in *Roots of Revolution: An interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 258.

<sup>3</sup> Mitra Shavarini, *Educating Immigrants: Experiences of Second-Generation Iranians* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2004), 30.

A significant number of Iranian migrants have since settled in Vancouver, British Columbia, also known as *Zancouver*.<sup>4</sup> Vancouver's north shore, in particular, has been labelled "the capital of the Iranian population in Western Canada."<sup>5</sup> Over 15,000 Iranians migrated to Vancouver between the years 1996 and 2001 according to the 2001 Canada Census.<sup>6</sup> The 2006 Canada Census recorded the number of Iranians living in Vancouver as 26,985.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, members of this population have imagined it to be as many as two hundred thousand people.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Literature Review***

Research regarding Iranian women in Vancouver is quite limited. Afsaneh Sabet-Esfahani's doctoral dissertation in psychology, published in 1988 appears to be the first study conducted regarding Iranian women migrants in Vancouver specifically.<sup>9</sup> Her study, *Experience of Immigration: the Case of Iranian Women*, uses oral interviews to examine the ramifications that migration had in terms of mental health on some of the earliest Iranian migrants to Vancouver. Parin Dossa's more recent book, *Politics and*

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<sup>4</sup> The term *Zancouver* was shared with me during an informal meeting with an Iranian woman migrant in Vancouver. *Zan* is Farsi for woman, and *Zancouver* is a play on words used by Iranians living in Vancouver referencing their perception of Vancouver as a "woman-friendly" city. It was explained to me that some Iranians (particularly Iranian men) refer to Vancouver as *Zancouver*, because they view it as a city that benefits Iranian women. Her explanation was that when Iranian men used this term it was a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the numerous social programs, and educational or employment opportunities available to Iranian women in Vancouver. Unrecorded Interview, Vancouver, B.C., (May 25, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Todd, "Culture Clash," *The Vancouver Sun*, Saturday, October 13, 2007, C11.

<sup>6</sup> Strategic Research and Statistics in collaboration with Informetrica Limited. *Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas*. Canada. A Comparative Profile Based on the 2001 Census. April 2005, 13.

<sup>7</sup> 2006 Profile of Census Tracts / Ethnic origin and visible minorities: Census Metropolitan Area: Vancouver, West Asian Origins/ Iranian. *Canadian Census Analyzer*. <http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/census/rp.html> Accessed June 5, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Afsaneh Sabet-Esfahani, *Experience of Immigration: the Case of Iranian Women* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988).

*Poetics of Migration: Narratives of Iranian Women from the Diaspora*, is certainly the most notable research that has been conducted regarding Iranian women in Vancouver.<sup>10</sup> Like Sabet-Esfahani, her study uses oral interviews as the primary source for understanding the impact that migration has had on the mental health of Iranian women. Dossa's sociological study relies on both subaltern and feminist theoretical perspectives to elucidate the ramifications that institutionalized racism in Canada has had for Iranian women living in Vancouver. Her study is a valuable source that deals more explicitly with the emotional and psychological challenges Iranian women have encountered since migrating to Vancouver. Despite the important issues addressed by their work, however, both of these studies leave room for further enquiry, particularly from a historical perspective.

The dearth of scholarly literature regarding the history of Iranians in Vancouver has necessitated the use of sources that discuss the migration of Iranian women to Canada and North America more broadly to provide context for this study. Scholars Haideh Moghissi and Shahnaz Khan both address the challenges Iranian women migrants have encountered in Canada as a whole from a feminist perspective. Moghissi's discussion of "cultural resistance" argues that patriarchal values are often perpetuated amongst Iranian migrants in Canada, to the detriment of Iranian women.<sup>11</sup> She argues that these women reclaim traditional values in response to the racism and exclusion they experience in Canadian society, despite the fact that they may not have held fast to these values in Iran. Khan also addresses the negative attitudes encountered by Iranian women in Canadian

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<sup>10</sup> Parin Dossa, *The Politics and Poetics of Migration: Narratives of Iranian Women from the Diaspora* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press and Women's Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Haideh Moghissi, "Away from home: Iranian women, displacement, cultural resistance and change," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 30, Iss. 2 (Spring, 1999), 207-218.

society. Because her work focuses specifically on Muslim Iranian women, however, she frames her discussion in terms of the competing “regulating discourses of Islam and Orientalism.”<sup>12</sup> Khan explains that Muslim women living in Canada are essentially caught between two differing sets of values, that of their homeland and that of Canada.<sup>13</sup> She argues that monolithic concepts of “Islamic” or “Western” societies must be broken down and reinterpreted in order to provide a more realistic understanding of the daily lives and negotiations of Muslim women in Canada. Although it is important not to conflate Iranian women with Muslim women, the theoretical framework of Khan’s discussion proves useful for understanding the cultural and ideological tensions that Iranian women migrants have dealt with in the new context of Vancouver.

While the aforementioned studies have provided an important background for understanding the issues facing of Iranian women in Vancouver, they represent the beginning of a still emerging field: studies of Iranian migrants in Canada. In contrast, the literature regarding Iranian women migrants in the United States is more prolific and varied. This is due to the larger population of Iranian migrants in the United States and the high percentage that came to the United States originally as university students, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two of this study. One of the most interesting and comprehensive texts regarding this population is *Irangleles: Iranians in Los Angeles*, an edited work including numerous essays, transcribed oral interviews and photographs of Iranian migrants in Los Angeles California.<sup>14</sup> This compilation includes

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<sup>12</sup> Shahnaz Khan, “Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space,” *Signs* 23, No. 2. (Winter, 1998), pp.463-494.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Ron Kelley Ed. *Irangleles: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

essays from Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Hamid Naficy, Nayereh Tohidi and Shideh Hanassab, all of who have greatly contributed to the literature regarding Iranian migrants to the United States. Tohidi and Hanassab's studies are particularly concerned with issues of gender for Iranian women in the United States. Tohidi discusses how migration has affected gender roles differently for Iranian women and Iranian men, while Hanassab's research is more concerned with the tensions felt by young Iranian women in the United States who are negotiating different standards of appropriate sexual behaviour in America.<sup>15</sup> Both studies explore the way that differing standards and cultural values have in some cases maintained, and other cases transformed, gender dynamics and sexuality for Iranian women in the United States. Research regarding Iranian migrants in the United States and Canada more broadly provides an important framework for understanding the history of Iranian migrants in Vancouver. The following study aims to contribute to a growing body of literature regarding Iranian migrants. However, rather than approaching this topic from the perspective of psychology or sociology, the following discussion will address the migration of Iranian women to Vancouver from a historical perspective.

The period covered by this study begins in 1978, the year that the Iranian revolution began. Due to the fact that this study relies primarily on oral sources, the period it covers ends in 2007, the year that the last interview utilized in this study was conducted. The following is not intended to be representative of the history of all Iranian women in Vancouver. Rather, this study uses the narratives of twelve Iranian women

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<sup>15</sup> Nayereh Tohidi, "Iranian Women and Gender Relations in Los Angeles," in Ron Kelley Ed. *Irangenes: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp 175-217; Shideh Hanassab, "Caught Between Two Cultures: Young Iranian Women in Los Angeles," in Ron Kelley Ed. *Irangenes: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 223-229.

who migrated to Vancouver following the 1978-1979 revolution in order to better understand the history of their migration. The personal background of each woman impacted their reasons for migration and their subsequent experiences in Vancouver. This study seeks to represent the diversity of these women while still demonstrating how certain aspects of their culture and personal experience lend a degree of unity to the history of their migration.

### ***Chapter Outlines***

Chapter One is divided into two parts. The first section discusses the socio-political climate in Iran in the period leading up to and following the 1978-1979 revolution. The 1978-1979 revolution greatly informed the reasons given by many Iranians for emigrating, whether because of political persecution, religious intolerance, gender discrimination, or economic woes. Moreover, the revolution serves as an important historical marker, representing an epoch of cataclysmic change in the personal narratives of many Iranian migrants and in much of the literature surrounding Iranians in North America. As such, the history of the revolution in Iran provides the necessary context for any understanding of the emigration that followed. The second part of this chapter discusses Canadian immigration policy during the latter half of the twentieth century. Examining Canadian immigration policy allows for a clearer understanding of the obstacles that Iranians encountered when immigrating to Canada. This chapter also uses statistical data from previous Canada Censuses and Citizenship and Immigration Canada in order to explain the composition of the Iranian population in Vancouver in terms of the number who migrated, their time of arrival, and how they came (as refugees

or immigrants). This chapter explains how the migration of Iranians to Vancouver was impacted by conditions in both sending and receiving countries.

Chapter Two introduces the Iranian women who participated in this study and the specific reasons they gave for leaving Iran and settling in Vancouver. The multiple reasons given by these women for their migration and settlement demonstrate the complex and sometimes overlapping factors influencing their decision. Examining the various motivations that led these women to migrate to Canada also demonstrates the diversity of Iranian women and their experiences. However, a number of parallels also emerge between these women's explanations for their decision to migrate to and settle in Vancouver. Important factors such as the desire for increased social freedom, improved access to education, the presence of family or friends in Vancouver, and the geographical similarities between northern Iran and Vancouver represented the most common reasons cited by these women for their migration and settlement.

Chapter Three is concerned with perceptions of distrust and divisions among Iranians living in Vancouver. A majority of the women who participated in this study articulated a sense of disunity among the broader Iranian population in Vancouver, and also within Iranian families. Some of women identified this divisiveness as the main obstacle to the creation of a sense of community among Iranian migrants living in Vancouver. The divisions that were identified were the result of different backgrounds and values in regard to culture, class and status, gender roles, and notions of sexual appropriateness. While some divisions emerged due to changes in personal identity or value systems that resulted from these women's migration from one cultural context to another, other divisions were the result of pre-existing hierarchies and social divisions



that had been imported from Iran and perpetuated in Vancouver. In many cases these divisions could be understood as a combination of these factors. This chapter demonstrates the internal diversity of the Iranian population in Vancouver and the ways that certain aspects of identity have been re-negotiated due to migration.

### *Methodology*

The primary sources utilized in this historical study of Iranian women in Vancouver were oral history interviews. These interviews provide important insight into the history of these women's migration, particularly for a non-Iranian researcher, by explaining their motivations for coming to Canada; their perceptions of the divisiveness and lack of community amongst Iranians in Vancouver; and the emotions and meaning associated with the experience of revolution, migration and re-settlement. Oral history provides a useful medium for researching the history of groups who have been neglected in other historical studies due to a dearth of textual sources. Due to the relative absence of historical literature regarding Iranian women in Vancouver, and the difficulty of obtaining accurate statistical data regarding this population, oral interviews serve as a crucial resource for analysis.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, interviews illuminate the more nuanced

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<sup>16</sup> The difficulty with obtaining accurate statistical data regarding this population is due to a number of reasons. The Canada census compiles statistics regarding the "ethnic origin" of respondents, which is at best a vague category. Iran is comprised of many different ethnic groups, such as Kurds, Persians and Armenians to name a few, and respondents to the census may list these groups as their "ethnic origin," rather than Iranian. Therefore, those individuals from Iran who identify with an ethnicity other than "Iranian" (which is in actuality a national identity, not an ethnic identity), are not accounted for in Census data regarding Iranians. Although data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada is more specific in terms of detailing both people whose last place of residence was Iran and people who are Iranian citizens, it fails to account for inter-provincial migration. This data lists the province migrants arrive in, and their intended province of settlement, but does not account for migration over time within the destination country. As such, statistics regarding the population of Iranians living in Vancouver are unreliable and inaccurate at best.

aspects of particular histories, which are often absent in more quantitative sources. As such, the following oral narratives of Iranian women have infused memories, emotions and meanings into the history of their migration and settlement in Vancouver.

Oral interviews are useful particularly when studying the history of groups who are not represented in broader historical narratives. In fact, the majority of research that has been conducted regarding Iranian migrants to North America has relied upon oral interviews partially due to the fact that their migration has been so recent. Also, as Patricia Higgins has argued, oral interviews have proven to be the most successful method for collecting data regarding Iranians migrants.<sup>17</sup> In her article “Interviewing Iranian Immigrant Parents and Adolescents,” Higgins also explains a number of the methodological considerations associated with conducting oral history interviews with Iranian migrants. She addresses the challenges that researchers who have studied Iranian migrants have discussed through examining 83 research publications regarding this target group. In Higgins’ view, the key issues that researchers have been confronted with in attempting to study Iranians migrants include difficulty isolating their research population due to the lack of census data or equivalent statistical information; difficulty in gauging the truthfulness of respondents; difficulty in gaining trust and respect amongst Iranians; and the general unwillingness of Iranians to take part in social sciences research.<sup>18</sup> Although the issues addressed in Higgins’ article are demonstrative of the challenges that face many oral historians, it is important to acknowledge that it is the complexity and layers of meaning contained within these sources that are of use to historians. As such,

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<sup>17</sup>Patricia Higgins, “Interviewing Iranian Immigrant Parents and Adolescents,” *Iranian Studies* 37, no.4 (December, 2004), 697.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 697-698.

the challenge is less to assess the “truthfulness” of particular responses than it is to understand how individuals choose to represent history in a particular way.

Oral interviews are highly subjective and require an understanding that both interviewer and interviewee serve as historical actors who shape the way that historical narratives are constructed. My personal identity, as a young, Canadian-born woman of British and Irish descent, made me a visible outsider to the women who agreed to share their personal histories with me. Having never been to Iran and not having experienced the revolution or migration, I could not personally identify with many of the stories or experiences that these women shared with me in their interviews. I was reminded of this during my research when one woman stated, “Horrible story, you wouldn’t know, you wouldn’t understand.”<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, my outsider status impacted the way these women narrated their experiences and beliefs to me. Also, my inability to speak Farsi, the first language of all but two of the women involved in this research, limited the understanding I could gain from their stories.

The observations and discussions in this study are based on oral history interviews that were conducted with twelve Iranian women who resided in Vancouver. Women were selected based on the criteria that they had migrated to Canada following the 1978-79 revolution in Iran; that they were proficient in conversational English; and that they had lived in Vancouver for at least one year. The women who participated in this research were contacted in a number of ways: in person, via email and telephone, and through mutual acquaintances. Over the course of 2006 and 2007 I attended a number of Iranian cultural events held in Vancouver in order to meet women who might be

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<sup>19</sup> Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 10, 2007), 2.

interested in participating in my research. However, these did not prove to be the most useful venue for meeting potential interview participants. Some of the women whom I encountered reacted with hostility and suspicion when I approached them with my research interests. However, other women were eager to share their story and to contribute to the literature regarding Iranian migrants in Vancouver. By far the most useful and effective method for meeting women who were interested in sharing their story was through introductions from other Iranian women. As such, interview participants were largely obtained using this “snowball method.” While I contacted four of the women who were interviewed independently, Iranian women with whom I had already become acquainted introduced the other eight women to me. In this sense, some of the participants in the following study were self-selected: women put me in contact with other Iranian women who were their friends or, in some cases, shared similar attitudes and ideologies. In other cases, however, the women who I was put in contact with were of very different backgrounds and ideology, and these women were eager to demonstrate the diversity of the population of Iranians living in Vancouver.

The interviews that were conducted in this study focused largely on the personal experiences of these women in regards to their memory of Iran and the revolution; their individual reasons for coming to Vancouver; their memory of the experience of migration; their values in regards to marriage, family, and religion; and their notions of cultural identity. The interviews were semi-structured in format so as to allow interview participants the freedom to expand on issues of importance to them while maintaining some degree of consistency across the different interviews. Interviews ranged from

forty-five minutes to three hours in length and were recorded on a hand-held tape recorder. Following the completion of the interviews they were transcribed verbatim.

Although all the interviews were conducted in English, it constituted the second language for all but two women. As such, some of the women who participated in the interviews commented that they had difficulty expressing their thoughts and opinions in English during the interviews. This became an issue during the process of transcription, as in some instances the literal transcriptions of interview participant's responses were somewhat confusing or unclear. However, the words of these women were transcribed as directly as possible, in order to avoid imposing an alternate voice, meaning or ideas onto their narratives. That said, upon weaving their narratives into the text of this study, grammar within the quotations was at times modified in order to improve clarity. However, the words of these women remain theirs and the meanings have not been altered. Any changes made to the text were done in order to portray these women as articulately on paper as they were in person.

The women who participated in these oral history interviews ranged in age from their early twenties to their mid-fifties. Their dates of arrival in Canada also ranged from shortly after the revolution, in 1981, to very recently, in 2006. With the exception of one woman, Ghazal, who specifically requested that her name be used, all the names of these women have been changed in order to protect their privacy. Similarly, any identifiable locations or descriptors, such as their place of employment or current residence have also been altered. I have randomly selected eleven names, which have been substituted for the real names of the interviewees throughout the following discussion: Azar, Homa, Afsaneh, Farah, Baharak, Mina, Nasrin, Roya, Samira, Taraneh and Zahra.

The women who were interviewed for this study comprise a diverse group and are not intended to be representative of the entirety of the Iranian population in Vancouver. While it is problematic to make generalizations about the women who participated in the interviews, it is possible to draw out a few commonalities shared by them all. Firstly, all of the women who participated in the interviews were highly educated, which is common among Iranian migrants.<sup>20</sup> Every woman had attended post-secondary educational institutions either in Iran or upon coming to Canada, and some had attended post-secondary educational institutions in both Iran and Canada. Secondly, with the exception of three women who arrived in Canada as refugees, all those who participated in these interviews came to Canada as immigrants. Thirdly, a majority of these women were from wealthy professional, aristocratic or upper middle class backgrounds in Iran. Finally, all of the women who participated within this study were born in Iran, migrated to Canada thereafter, and identify themselves as Persian or Iranian.

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<sup>20</sup> Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States," *Iranian Studies* 31, No. 1 (Winter, 1998), 19.

## **CHAPTER 1: Revolution and Relocation: The Migration of Iranian Women to Vancouver 1978-2007**

The migration of a significant number of Iranians to Vancouver in the years following 1978 links together the histories of two countries that otherwise would likely be viewed as unrelated to one another. The Iranian revolution, which lasted from 1978 until 1979, profoundly changed the lives of people living in Iran.<sup>1</sup> The changes that occurred in Iran had distinctly gendered implications and affected Iranian men and women in very different ways; it is the implications for women that particularly interest us in the present context. New legislation imposed by the leaders of the Islamic Republic from 1979 onwards imposed gender identities on men and women that were modelled on notions of tradition and justified through Islamic rhetoric. This legislation sought to control and restrict Iranian women's mobility in the public sphere of Iranian society and stressed the importance of their domestic and maternal duty on nationalist and religious grounds. In the years following the revolution, millions of Iranian men and women left their homeland as both emigrants and refugees, some of whom made Vancouver their new home. This massive out-migration of people was largely due to the social and political climate in Iran during the final decades of the twentieth century, as a result of

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to the 1978-1979 revolution, I use the term Iranian revolution, rather than Islamic revolution in order to make explicit the popular rather than religious basis of the movement. However, as it progressed over time the revolution took on a more religious tone, which was also largely responsible for a number of changes that occurred in Iranian society. Mehrdad Amanat, "Nationalism and Social Change in Contemporary Iran," in Ron Kelley, ed., *Irangels: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 24.

the changes wrought by the Iranian revolution. The reasons that Iranian women left Iran and the reasons they chose to settle in Canada, however, need to be considered separately.<sup>2</sup> For example, the number of Iranian women who made Vancouver their home in the years following the 1978-1979 revolution was restricted in significant ways by racist, elitist and gendered immigration and refugee legislation in Canada. This chapter interrogates larger structural conditions in both Iran and Canada in the years following the Iranian revolution to identify and explain the factors that impacted a number of Iranian women's decisions to migrate to Vancouver.

The Iranian revolution was a populist revolution, in which a number of men and women from disparate social, political and religious groups united in order to achieve a common objective: namely, to bring down the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.<sup>3</sup> The Iranian monarch, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), had alienated a large proportion of society, particularly during the latter period of his rule due to his repressive policies, violent directives, financial mismanagement and general lack of awareness as to the needs of Iranians.<sup>4</sup> The wide-ranging dissatisfaction amongst Iranians with the policies of Muhammad Reza Shah was compounded by the popularly

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<sup>2</sup> The specific reasons that Iranian women have given for both leaving Iran and for coming to Vancouver are the focus of the second chapter of this study. Chapter Two analyses oral interviews with Iranian women paying particular attention to the numerous factors impacting their decision to migrate to and settle in Vancouver following the 1978-1979 revolution in Iran.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, when I refer to the Iranian revolution as popular, I am referring to the idea put forth by Ervand Abrahamian in his book, *Khomeinism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). In this work, Abrahamian suggests that although the rhetoric of Khomeini leading up to and during the Iranian revolution contained Islamic elements, it was directed towards the working classes who were struggling financially under the Pahlavi regime and yet was vague enough to appeal to all strata of Iranian society.

<sup>4</sup> Asef Bayat, "Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamic Activism in Iran and Egypt," *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* (1998), 143.



held belief that he acted as a puppet to serve American and British interests in Iran.<sup>5</sup> As such, men and women from varying social classes, including *bazaaris* (merchants), *ulama* (Muslim clerics, jurists and scholars), leftist student groups, communist groups, and the *Mojahedin-e-khalq* (leftist Islamist militant group), along with many other diverse segments of Iranian society came together in 1978 under the common goal of overthrowing the Shah. The forced abdication of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi on January 16, 1979, marked the end of a long history of monarchical rule in Iran. Although many of the early activists were leftist students and secularists, the revolution took on a distinctly Islamic character following Khomeini's rise to power some years later.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the nature of the revolution changed significantly over time. Numerous social, economic and political factors led up to the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979. Historians, sociologists and political scientists who study Iran have attempted to explain

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<sup>5</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 483.

<sup>6</sup> Ron Kelley "Chronology of the Pahlavi Era and the Islamic Republic," in Ron Kelley Ed., *Irangenes: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 24. The changing character of the revolution also holds significance in terms of emigration from Iran. While some of the earliest emigrants fleeing the Iranian revolution were those who were affiliated with the regime of the Shah, they were later joined by intellectuals, leftists, businessmen associated with "Western" companies, and a number of ethnic and religious minorities.

how and why the revolution occurred as it did.<sup>7</sup> Theories range from attributing the revolution to the changing economic conditions in Iran in the late 1970's to stressing the central role of Islam. Still others see the Iranian revolution as a backlash against Western Imperial encroachment vis-à-vis American petroleum companies, banks and armament manufacturers.<sup>8</sup> Most scholars, however, agree that the revolution began as a popular movement, with a broad and inclusive agenda, which was later co-opted by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his Islamist supporters.<sup>9</sup>

The numerous perspectives regarding the reasons underlying the Iranian revolution demonstrate the complexity of the social and political situation in Iran during the latter half of the twentieth century and leading up to the revolution of 1978-1979. However, they do little to explain how women specifically were impacted by the social and political climate in Iran under the Shah. Under the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), women increasingly moved into the public sphere of Iranian

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<sup>7</sup> A number of attempts have been made by historians to explain the reasons for the 1978-1979 Revolution in Iran. Scholars such as Nikki R. Keddie in *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) argue that the revolution in Iran was the reaction of Iranian people against the encroachment of Western political and cultural influence in Iran. Another school of thought put forth by Hamid Dabashi stresses the centrality of Shi'ia religious beliefs, which he argues are inherently revolutionary in *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007). In contrast, Ervand Abrahamian argues in *Khomeinism* that the rhetoric of the revolution was more akin to communism and socialism than Islamist extremism in the years leading up to and during the revolution, therefore appealing to a broader cross-section of society. This challenges the notion that Khomeini and all of his followers were hard line Islamist fanatics in ideology. Still another perspective has been espoused by Ali Ansari in *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After* (London: Pearson Education Ltd., 2003). He resists defining the revolution as distinctly Islamic, rather he contextualizes it historically as the culmination of attempts to "confront and harness the challenge of modernization and 'modernity.'" While the reasons for the revolution are contested, it is widely accepted that a number of ideologically different groups united in opposition to the Pahlavi regime, thus making it a populist movement rather than an Islamic movement.

<sup>8</sup> Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, 177-178.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ali Ansari *Modern Iran Since 1921*; Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*; Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*; and Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*.

society. Changes to legislation that occurred during his rule facilitated a number of new opportunities for Iranian women, particularly in regard to employment, education and political participation.<sup>10</sup> For example, Iranian women were granted the vote in 1963, allowing them the opportunity to actively participate in national politics. Another such example pertains to women's ability to obtain employment. While the 1935 Iranian Civil Code granted husbands the authority to prevent their wives from working, the Family Protection Act of 1967 revoked this right, which assisted the movement of women into the paid workforce in Iran.<sup>11</sup> The number of women who participated in the formal economy of Iran rose from 573,000 women in 1956 to 1,400,000 women in 1972.<sup>12</sup> While these numbers indicate that women moved into the formal economy because they had gained greater social mobility, it is important to note that women's employment held different implications depending on the class of the woman in question. Hammed Shahidian notes that women's employment was less stigmatized

in rural areas or among working-class families, where women's work is a financial imperative...[than] among middle-class families wherein female employment was considered indicative of fiscal problems.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, most statistical analyses of women's employment tend to ignore women's domestic labour within the private sphere. It is important to distinguish between the

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<sup>10</sup> Minoo Derayah, *Gender Equality and Iranian History: From Pre-Islamic Times to the Present* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 146-150.

<sup>11</sup> Hammed Shahidian, *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 39. The use of terms such as "formal economy" and "paid workforce" refer to the fact that women's labour in the private or domestic sphere is often unpaid. As such, work that is commonly associated with women, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for children, is generally not recognized as labour, is unpaid and is not valued in the same way as employment in the paid workforce.

<sup>12</sup> Shahidian, *Women in Iran*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

formal economy and the informal economy, and to include both in any analysis so as not to exclude the significance of women's labour in the private domestic sphere.

Women's literacy and education also improved under the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah. Between the years 1956 and 1966, the literacy rate of urban Iranian women rose from 20% to 40%.<sup>14</sup> The number of women enrolled in secondary school rose from fewer than 25% in the years 1955-1956 to greater than 35% by 1974.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by 1975 Iranian women comprised nearly 35% of all college students.<sup>16</sup> As such, it is clear that women were increasingly moving into the public sphere of Iranian society through the seeking of employment outside of the home and education. However, it is important to note that these statistics largely reflect the experience of middle-class women who lived in urban Iran and are not representative of all Iranian women. For many rural and urban poor women, employment was a necessity and education was a luxury for those who did not need to work in order to survive. Moreover, some Iranian women from deeply religious families did not pursue education or employment in the formal economy due to their convictions that, with the exception of immediate family, it was improper for men and women to interact within the public sphere of society.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah created opportunities for some Iranian women, for

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<sup>14</sup> Shahidian, *Women in Iran*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Zoreh T. Sullivan's chapter "Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth Century Iran," in Lila Abu-Lughod Ed. *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 215-242, argues that the imposition of supposedly emancipatory policies by Muhammad Reza Shah often failed to translate into improved opportunities for women within Iran. Fatemeh E. Moghadam explains the implications that veiling has had for women within Iran in regards to employment in "Commoditization of Sexuality and Female Labor Participation in Islam: implications for Iran, 1960-90," in *In The Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran* Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl Eds. (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), 80-97.

others practical economic considerations and cultural values still informed their mobility within the public sphere of society.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed analysis of the extent to which all women in varying social and economic positions in Iran were affected by the legislative changes of the Shah. And despite evidence that some women were increasingly gaining access to education, employment and political rights, the regime of the Shah nonetheless alienated a broad cross-section of Iranian women in many of the same ways it alienated Iranian men. Hundreds of thousands of women from a broad cross section of Iranian society actively participated in the revolution.<sup>18</sup> Iranian women were an integral part of the revolutionary movement as growing numbers gained a new awareness of their potential to create change through education and participating in politics within Iran. They were also equally as affected as men by the changing economic conditions in Iran and confronted similar challenges in reconciling notions of tradition and modernity within Iranian society as large numbers of people migrated into urban centres and many women began to move into the workforce. The following discussion of the historical background of the revolution seeks to provide a framework for understanding where women fit into the revolution in Iran and how they were specifically affected by its outcome. The Revolution

The event often identified in historical accounts as marking the beginning of the Iranian Revolution occurred in 1978 in Qom. Over a dozen people involved in a peaceful protest in Qom were killed by the Shah's military troops, who had been deployed to quell

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<sup>18</sup> Haleh Esfandiari, "Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in Lois Beck and Guity Nashat eds. *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 153.

the protest.<sup>19</sup> For many Iranians, the murder of these people symbolized the repressive nature of the Shah's regime and a wave of protests and uprisings spread throughout towns and cities across Iran in response to the killings.<sup>20</sup> Women from opposing sides of the ideological spectrum were actively involved in these protests throughout the revolution.<sup>21</sup> Those Iranians who participated in the anti-Shah protests perceived the events in Qom as deplorable, but popular discontent with the policies and practice of the Shah's government had existed long before this. Thus, the incident in Qom served as a catalyst to activate and unify those Iranians who were already dissatisfied with the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Muhammad Reza Shah came to power following the 1953 military coup which deposed the then Prime Minister and nationalist hero, Mohammad Mossadegh.<sup>22</sup> The American and British governments, under Eisenhower and Churchill respectively, orchestrated this military coup with the assistance of the CIA in order to bring down Mossadegh and (re) install Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi as the head of the Iranian

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<sup>19</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (London: Westview Press, 1988), 191.

<sup>20</sup> Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, 234-235.

<sup>21</sup> Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 237.

<sup>22</sup> Although the Shah officially became the head of state in 1941 when his father abdicated, his power was largely circumvented by the Allied occupation of Iran during World War II and following that, the nationalist government of Mossadegh. As such, Muhammad Reza Shah did not truly exercise sovereign control in Iran until 1953. Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 105-133.

state.<sup>23</sup> The policies of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi had alienated a large proportion of the Iranian population by the latter half of the twentieth century. His industrializing and centralizing policies during the 1960's had wrested power away from powerful landowners and the *ulama*, both groups that had previously wielded a significant amount of power within Iranian society.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the Shah's policies sparked dissent amongst those who had benefited from the earlier system. Opposition to these policies arose not only amongst the landlords and *ulama* but also the peasants who had relied on the patrician landlords for protection and support in times of hardship.<sup>25</sup>

The Shah's mismanagement of the economy in Iran, which relied largely on the export of oil, became another source of discontent within Iran in the years leading up to the revolution. Although oil revenues led to a steady increase in Iran's wealth, particularly after the OPEC embargo of 1973, Iran's elite reaped the majority of these monetary benefits.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the sale of oil increased the disparity between rich and poor in

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<sup>23</sup> The history of this coup and the significance it has had in regards to Iranian-American foreign policy are discussed in detail in Stephen Kinzer's book, *All The Shah's Men* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2003). Kinzer explains that although the Shah had maintained his title as monarch while Mossadegh was Prime Minister, the popularity of Mossadegh led the Shah to flee to Italy in a self-imposed exile rather than overtly oppose the Prime Minister. Following the coup, the Shah returned to Iran to reclaim his position. Consequently, Muhammad Reza Shah was often seen as a puppet, who had derived his power with the assistance of Imperialist powers and his policies often reflected his sympathy for British and American interests in Iran: namely oil. Muhammad Reza Shah received much criticism from clerics, specifically Khomeini for granting immunity to Americans living in Iran. This was in fact the reason that Khomeini was exiled, his diatribe against Western Imperial encroachment and the hypocrisy of the Shah.

<sup>24</sup> Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 166. The Shah's "White Revolution," demonstrates how his increasingly authoritarian policies alienated powerful and influential groups within Iranian society. The White Revolution was intended to catapult Iran into a new age of modernity through a series of drastic changes such as land reform, the emancipation of women, mechanization and industrialization. Through redistributing land away from landlords to peasants the Shah hoped to build nationalist sentiment amongst the latter by giving them a "stake" in their country. However, these changes disrupted the traditional power relations that had existed between local notables and peasants in rural areas of Iran for centuries.

<sup>26</sup> Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution*, 167.

Iran. While wealthy Tehranites flew to Paris for the weekend to buy the latest designer fashions, those of the lower classes suffered from high rates of inflation and unemployment.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that Iran's oil wealth remained largely in the coffers of the Shah and others directly involved in the oil industry became a source of resentment amongst Iranians as a whole. That Muhammad Reza Shah was known for his ostentatious displays and frivolous expenditures contributed to the sense of alienation amongst working classes in Iran. One example of this was the celebration of Iran's 2,500 years as an empire, which was held at Persepolis in 1971. The celebration was held outdoors in silk tents and featured "partridge with foie gras and truffle stuffing and wines ranging from a pink Dom Perignon to a Chateau Lafitte from the Rothschild vineyard," prepared by a caterer from Paris.<sup>28</sup> In reference to the Shah's extravagance, one journalist noted that "[f]or sheer grandeur, his gala in a silk tent will be hard for any nation to surpass."<sup>29</sup> Nearly every historical account of the Iranian revolution cites this event, which Zoreh T. Sullivan refers to as a "megalomaniacal 2,500-year celebration of Persian monarchy," in order to illustrate the ludicrous way in which Muhammad Reza Shah used Iranian oil revenues.<sup>30</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the event on October 31, 1971, from his exile in Najaf by asking:

Are millions of *tumans* of the people's wealth to be spent on these frivolous celebrations? Are the people of Iran to have a festival for those

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<sup>27</sup> During an interview, one woman recalled that her mother often flew to Paris to buy designer clothing: Interview #9, Vancouver, B.C., May 24, 2007, 14. The statement regarding the effects of inflation in Iran is taken from Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Curtis, "A Persian Night of Kings, Queens, Sheiks, Sultans and Diamonds," *New York Times (1857-Current file)*, Oct 15, 1971, p.43. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers, The New York Times (1851-2004)*. www.proquest.com

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan, "Eluding the Feminist," 216.



whose behaviour has been a scandal throughout history and who are a cause of crime and oppression, of abomination and corruption, in the present age? <sup>31</sup>

Khomeini's anger as expressed in this declaration was directed towards the nature of this festival and the way that Muhammad Reza Shah used Iranian oil revenues to glorify his regime. Khomeini also invokes the longer history of perceived corruption within the Iranian monarchy, and implies that the monarchy was to blame for the hardships being suffered at the time in Iran. These sentiments vividly demonstrate the dissatisfaction felt towards the Shah's policies and behaviour, and the institution of the monarchy in general.

The policies of Muhammad Reza Shah's government were also notoriously repressive in terms of human rights abuses and censorship. The Shah's totalitarian style of rule led to his banning of all political parties but the one he was aligned with – the *Rastakhis* – in 1975.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, during the 1970's the Shah received worldwide attention when Amnesty International released reports that revealed the use of torture in Iran and began its "Campaign for the Abolition of Torture" in 1974-1975.<sup>33</sup> The Shah's organization of secret police, the S.A.V.A.K., was feared and hated by many Iranians, as it was increasingly used by the Shah in order to intimidate and silence those who expressed political or ideological dissent.<sup>34</sup>

The economic decline in Iran between 1976 and 1978, when the world price of oil dropped, also served as a catalytic factor for the revolution. In Iran production decreased

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<sup>31</sup> Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 202.

<sup>32</sup> Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 186.

<sup>33</sup> *Amnesty International Annual Report 1974/75* (Nottingham: Amnesty International Publications London, 1975), 18-19.

<sup>34</sup> Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, 144.

from over 5.5 million barrels a day in 1975 to less than 1 million barrels a day in 1978.<sup>35</sup> This drastic decline in oil revenues led to inflation and destabilized Iranian society. The economic hardship that resulted was felt most acutely amongst the lower classes. The inflation that followed also led to conflicts amongst Iranian *bazaaris* regarding the control and regulation of prices within Iranian *bazaars*.<sup>36</sup> Undoubtedly this economic disparity exacerbated the dissatisfaction with the frivolity of the Pahlavi regime. In January 1979 the Shah and his family finally left Iran due to the continued unrest and violent demonstrations that demanded an end to the Pahlavi regime.

Upon the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from his exile in Paris to lead the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Khomeini and his supporters successfully seized power during a momentary vacuum of power in Iran, thereby co-opting what was a diverse populist movement under the banner of Islam. The leaders of the newly established Islamic Republic drew up a constitution based on Khomeini's principle of *vilayet e-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), under which the ultimate power within the government belonged to the *fuqaha* (Islamic jurists).<sup>37</sup> Under this new constitution, the state was to be governed by Islamic principles, as interpreted by jurists selected by Khomeini.

Following their seizure of power, Khomeini's government began its campaign to purge those suspected of harbouring loyalties to the Pahlavi regime, executing thousands

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<sup>35</sup> Manoucher Ganji, *Defying the Iranian Revolution: From a Minister of the Shah to a Leader of Resistance* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Bazaaris* have historically played an important role within Iranian society. *Bazaaris* exert a large degree of influence over the economic conditions of the popular classes in Iran, as they are in control of establishing the prices of essential consumer goods. Moreover, *bazaaris* have close ties to the *ulama* in Iran, who rely on *bazaaris* for monetary donations, and in turn validate the decisions of the *bazaaris*. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, 32-33.

<sup>37</sup> Dale E. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 49.

of officers who had served under the Shah.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, groups that had previously aligned themselves with Khomeini during the revolutionary struggle, such as Liberals, Marxists and the *mojahedin e-khalq*, now became targets of the Islamic Republic.<sup>39</sup> The Islamic Republic responded to perceived threats against their newly established regime with “mass arrests and executions of such intensity that they constituted a reign of terror.”<sup>40</sup> The Amnesty International Report on Iran in 1981 estimated that over 700 executions had taken place within the past year.<sup>41</sup> The report further stated that

defendants before Islamic Revolutionary Tribunals were consistently denied fair trials ... [m]any people were executed almost immediately after the imposition of the death sentence.<sup>42</sup>

Between the years 1981 and 1982, it was estimated that over one thousand prisoners were executed from a broad cross-section of Iranian society. The victims of these executions included political dissidents such as those sympathetic to the monarchy; members of the *mojahedin e-khalq*, the National Front, and the Tudeh Party; religious minorities such as Baha’is and Jews; and ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Qashqayis and Turks.<sup>43</sup>

From 1979 onwards the Islamic Republic imposed legislation based on their interpretation of Islamic law on the Iranian people, restricting the personal and religious freedom of both Iranian men and women. The legislation had its basis in the new Constitution, officially completed in 1981, which states:

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<sup>38</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 485.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004) 421.

<sup>41</sup> *Amnesty International Report 1981* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1981), 356.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, 131.

Since the family is the fundamental unit of Islamic society, all pertinent laws, regulations and programs must tend to facilitate the foundation of a family and to protect the sanctity and stability of family relations on the basis of the law and the ethics of Islam.<sup>44</sup>

Under these new laws, women's mobility within the public sphere of society became restricted as previously public places such as beaches and sports arenas became segregated by gender.<sup>45</sup> The new Civil Code of the Islamic Republic limited women's access to divorce while granting men the right to unilateral divorce; denied women equal custody of their children; reduced the legal age of maturity (and thus marriage) from eighteen to nine years of age for girls and from twenty to fifteen for boys; reduced daughters' inheritance to half that of their brothers; and revoked the Passport Act of 1972, which had granted women the right to leave Iran without the consent of their husbands or fathers.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, in 1980 new legislation made the *hijab* (veil) mandatory for all women.<sup>47</sup> The imposition of a dress code upon women was justified through Islamist nationalist rhetoric, which claimed that these regulations were meant to protect the virtue of Iranian women. The discourse of the Islamic Republic emphasized women's maternal role by linking motherhood with nationalist and religious duty.<sup>48</sup> An example of the way that Islamist nationalist rhetoric functioned in Iran at this time is demonstrated in a speech made by Khomeini in 1979. The following address demonstrates the way that women's maternal bodies became sites for the articulation of nationalist sentiment in Iran:

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<sup>44</sup> Hamid Algar trans., *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Derayeh, *Gender Equality in Iranian History*, Appendix C: Islamic Republic's Gender Based Discriminatory Laws, 220.

<sup>47</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 423.

<sup>48</sup> Sullivan, "Eluding the Feminist," 233.

It is woman who, with her correct education, produces humanity, who, with her correct education, cultivates the country. The origin of all happiness arises from the lap of the woman.<sup>49</sup>

This rhetoric espoused by Khomeini utilizes nationalist sentiment in order to justify the restrictive and gendered nature of the legislation of the Islamic Republic. The ideal gendered identity for women embraced by the regime was one that valued modesty, Islamic piety, nationalism and maternal duty.

The imposition of gendered regulations such as the *hijab* and other restrictions upon women's mobility and legal freedoms understandably created discontent amongst many Iranian women, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. All women were forced to comply with Islamic laws, which required them to veil, and those women who did not comply with the mandatory *hijab* or those who were considered to be improperly veiled risked arrest and lashing.<sup>50</sup> The discontent of Iranian women towards this new restriction and the severity of the regime's reaction to dissent were demonstrated on March 8, 1979, International Women's Day. When a number of Iranian women marched unveiled in protest to the new regulation, they were attacked and "brutally beaten by the *pasadran Inqilab* (Guardians of the Revolution) as well as by the mob."<sup>51</sup>

While fear of imprisonment, torture and death made life unbearable for many Iranian women under the Islamic Republic, still others faced losses of freedom in other respects, such as in the context of access to employment and education. The regime barred those not considered sufficiently religious from engaging in certain kinds of work,

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<sup>49</sup> Azar Taberi and Nahid Yeganeh, "Khomeini's Speech on the Occasion of Fatima's birthday when first proclaimed as Iranian Women's Day, 19 May 1979," *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran* (London: Zed Press, 1982), 101.

<sup>50</sup> Derayeh, *Gender Equality and Iranian History*, 154.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

particularly in the fields of education, law and positions in government. Following the consolidation of power of the Islamic Republic under Khomeini, thousands of Iranians lost their jobs and their means to financially support their families. Within the first year of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, over 3,500 university teachers had either been fired or had resigned from their positions, and within the first five years over 10,000 civil servants were dismissed.<sup>52</sup> The new regime also imposed legislation restricting employment opportunities for women, with the exception of fields such as education and health care which remained necessary due to newly imposed gender-segregated policies.<sup>53</sup> The professional fields that women were excluded from were largely within government and the judiciary.<sup>54</sup> Women were prohibited from becoming judges and serving in legal practice following the revolution.<sup>55</sup> The gendered rhetoric being propagated by the Islamic regime at this time was “that a woman’s time should be spent primarily on reproductive labor and on other non-market labor at home.”<sup>56</sup> As a result, between the years 1976 and 1986 women’s participation in the labour market declined by approximately 2% per year, with the most significant decline occurring amongst rural and blue-collar working urban women, whose participation declined on average each year by 5% and 10%, respectively.<sup>57</sup> These figures suggest that while gendered legislation affected the employment opportunities and mobility of all Iranian women,

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<sup>52</sup> Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, John O’Kane Trans. (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997), 139.

<sup>53</sup> Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, “Women and Labor,” in Lois Beck and Guity Nashat Eds. *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 163.

<sup>54</sup> Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran*, 140.

<sup>55</sup> Derayeh, *Gender Equality in Iranian History*, 156.

<sup>56</sup> Moghadam, “Commoditization of Sexuality and Female Labor,” 93.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

rural and poor urban women [were] likely to have been more subject to discrimination in the family and in the workplace than well-to-do urban women.<sup>58</sup>

The regime of the Islamic Republic also endeavoured to transform the education system in Iran from the secular system implemented under the Pahlavi regime to an Islamic education system. This campaign, termed the “Cultural Revolution,” sought to rid Iranian universities of “subversive” elements and bring an end to their role as “centres for the dissemination of decadent Western ideas and culture.”<sup>59</sup> As such, all universities in Iran were shut down in 1980 for periods ranging from 30 to 36 months in order to “Islamicize” the education system.<sup>60</sup> It was during this period that a number of teachers and administrators who were “not Islamic enough” lost their jobs. Furthermore, with the exception of some advanced math and physics texts, all the textbooks were re-written in order to convey the ideals of an Islamic society as it was interpreted by the regime of the Islamic Republic at this time.<sup>61</sup> Changes to educational policies limited the subjects that an individual could study according to their gender:

Women were forbidden to study veterinary medicine, geology, agrarian sciences, animal husbandry, and natural resources. Similarly, men could not enter such fields as dental hygiene, mid-wifery, family health, or fashion design.<sup>62</sup>

These restrictions demonstrate the way in which the gendered nature of the legislation imposed by the Islamic Republic limited opportunities for women in terms of education and subsequently their potential employment options.

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<sup>58</sup> Moghadam, “Commoditization of Sexuality and Female Labor,” 94.

<sup>59</sup> Milani, *The Making of Iran’s Islamic Revolution*, 295.

<sup>60</sup> Derayeh, *Gender Equality in Iranian History*, 166.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-167.

<sup>62</sup> Mitra K. Shavarini, “The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education,” *Review of Education* 51 (2005), 336.

The revolution also drastically changed the lives of religious minorities living in Iran. Although the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran recognized Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism as legitimate religions or “people of the book,” non-Muslims were consistently denied equal treatment in regards to political representation and employment.<sup>63</sup> Although Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians were provided the right to send representatives to Parliament within the Constitution, they were still denied the right to occupy top posts in the government. As such, these representatives to Parliament were in essence “deprived of the right to take an active part in decisions which determine the form of the prevailing order.”<sup>64</sup> Religious discrimination led to the Christian and Jewish population in Iran being reduced by more than half due to emigration: from 168,593 to 82,061 Christians and from 62,258 to 26,354 Jews in the period between 1976 and 1986.<sup>65</sup> Baha’is were overtly discriminated against due to the fact that their religion was established in the latter half of the nineteenth century, well after Islam, and that the founder of their religion, Baha’ollah, claimed to be a prophet.<sup>66</sup> This was seen as blasphemous amongst Muslims, because Muhammad was believed to be the last prophet. Baha’is were seen as committing apostasy, as it was assumed that all Iranians had been born Muslims, with the exception of followers of faiths that pre-dated Islam, such as Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. Under the regime of the Islamic Republic,

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<sup>63</sup> Hamid Algar, trans., *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* Article 13 (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 32.

<sup>64</sup> Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran*, 139.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>66</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 473.



Baha'is lived their daily lives in fear of being charged with apostasy, which was punishable by death.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the many ways in which the revolution negatively disrupted the lives of Iranians, it is necessary to also acknowledge the reality that a great number of Iranians supported Khomeini's regime. While the legislation imposed by Khomeini is often generalized as wholly restrictive, particularly towards women, it also provided new opportunities for many people. Perhaps one of the most significant ways to demonstrate this is to note the overall increase in the percentage of women attending post-secondary institutions in the years following the revolution, particularly in rural areas.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the number of women attending university in Iran has far outnumbered men in recent years; in 2003 the number of men and women who passed the *Konkoor* (university entrance exam), for example, were 38% and 62% respectively.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, both scholars and Islamic feminists alike have argued that the mandatory veil increased mobility for women, particularly for those from families who had previously restricted their movement in the public sphere of society, although it is difficult to assess the actual numbers of affected women.<sup>70</sup> In short, the Islamisation of the public sphere of Iranian society actually increased the freedom and mobility of women from highly religious families. Patricia Higgins, moreover, notes that the majority of Iranian women live in rural settings, and since women's "behaviour patterns are determined as much by habit, patterns of socialization, institutional constraints, and peer evaluation as by law," their

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<sup>67</sup> Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran*, 139.

<sup>68</sup> Patricia J. Higgins and Piroos Shoar-Ghaffari, "Women's Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran." In Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl Eds. *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post Revolutionary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), 42-43.

<sup>69</sup> Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 8.

<sup>70</sup> Derayeh, *Gender Equality in Iranian History*, 155.

lives may not have been affected by the legal changes to their status under either the Pahlavi regime or the Islamic Republic.<sup>71</sup>

As a result, while one may draw general conclusions about the way that the revolution restricted the lives of many Iranians, it is important to remember that it also created new opportunities for those Iranians who were marginalized by the previous regime. The Iranian revolution of 1978-1979 and the tumultuous years that ensued, however, also disrupted the lives of many Iranians, often violently. One important example of this is the Iran-Iraq war, lasting from 1980-1988. Although the onset of this war has been attributed to factors surrounding the revolution, the massive loss of life and devastation in Iran resulting from the war, along with the effort to avoid conscription associated with the war, soon became reasons in and of themselves for emigration.<sup>72</sup> In sum, the restrictive new regulations along with the distrust and fear instilled by the regime of the Islamic Republic, together with other consequences stemming from the revolution forced many Iranians to emigrate.

### **Iranians in Vancouver**

The Iranian population in Vancouver steadily increased during the years following the 1978-1979 revolution in Iran, and as of 2006 the estimated number of Iranians living in Vancouver was 26,985.<sup>73</sup> Iranian migration to Canada did not occur as one mass influx of people immediately following the revolution. Rather, the majority of

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<sup>71</sup> Patricia Higgins, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes," *Signs* 10, No. 3. (Spring, 1985): 479.

<sup>72</sup> Shahram Chubin, "Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire," in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, ed. Efraim Karsh (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1989), 13.

<sup>73</sup> 2006 Profile of Census Tracts / Ethnic origin and visible minorities: Census Metropolitan Area: Vancouver, West Asian Origins/ Iranian. *Canadian Census Analyzer*. <http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/census/rp.html> Accessed June 5, 2008.

Iranians who have migrated to Vancouver, B.C. have done so over a period of nearly thirty years, and for a plethora of reasons.<sup>74</sup> The specific reasons given by Iranian women for their migration and settlement in Vancouver are the focus of chapter two of this study. The following discussion, however, will provide a broad framework within which to understand these personal narratives of migration.

While many Iranians who had the financial wherewithal migrated to Vancouver in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, others remained in Iran for years before deciding to relocate their lives and families. A number of Iranians also migrated to Vancouver after years of living in another country where they had sought refuge immediately following the Iranian revolution such as Turkey, Sweden and Germany.<sup>75</sup> Some Iranians who migrated to Vancouver came as refugees, while still other Iranians immigrated to Vancouver in order to pursue their education. It is due to a variety of reasons, in short, that Vancouver has become home to nearly thirty thousand people who identify themselves as Persian or Iranian in recent years.<sup>76</sup>

In the years following the Iranian revolution, the number of Iranians who came to Canada and particularly Vancouver grew steadily. In other words, there is a similar upward trend in the number of Iranians who migrated to Canada and to Vancouver at

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<sup>74</sup> This statement must be qualified by understanding that there were some Iranians who moved to Vancouver prior to the revolution in Iran. However, the overwhelming majority migrated to Canada during the last thirty years.

<sup>75</sup> Amir Hossein Mirfakhraie, "Transmigration and Identity Construction: The Case of Iranians in Canada, 1946-1998," (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University: April 1999).

<sup>76</sup> This figure is based on the 2006 Canadian Census Profile. 2006 Profile of Census Tracts / Ethnic origin and visible minorities: Census Metropolitan Area: Vancouver, West Asian Origins/ Iranian. *Canadian Census Analyzer*. <http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/census/rp.html> (accessed June 5, 2008). The reliability of this number is questionable due to the format of the questions in the census, which lists "Iranian" as a visible minority group and an ethnic identity alongside other ethnicities such as Kurdish. As such, the number of Iranians in Vancouver is likely larger than that calculated by the census due to the fact that some Iranians may not consider themselves a visible minority, and may not consider "Iranian" their ethnicity.

both the national level and the municipal level. Citizenship and Immigration Canada records indicate that in 1980, the year immediately following the Iranian revolution, the number of Iranians who arrived in Vancouver and were accepted as landed immigrants was a mere 221 people.<sup>77</sup> It is difficult to gauge with accuracy the number of Iranians who fled Iran in these initial years that the regime was establishing itself, but estimates posit that anywhere between one and two million Iranians fled Iran in first few years following the 1978-1979 revolution.<sup>78</sup> Considering the number of Iranians who are estimated to have left Iran, the number who came to Canada may seem insignificant. However, leaving Iran was difficult to do in this tumultuous period and those who were able to leave often moved to countries in closer geographic proximity to Iran than Canada, such as Afghanistan, Turkey, India, France, Sweden and Germany.<sup>79</sup> In 1991 the number of Iranians accepted as landed immigrants in Vancouver was 1076 and the number of refugees totalled 528.<sup>80</sup> These numbers declined in the following year and continued to do so through the early 1990s, eventually bottoming out at 495 landed immigrants and 146 refugees in 1994. However, by 1997 a dramatic increase put the numbers of Iranian landed immigrants and refugees who arrived in Vancouver at 2023 and 400 respectively.<sup>81</sup> The fluctuation in the number of Iranians who were accepted as landed immigrants to Canada throughout the latter half of the twentieth century is due to

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<sup>77</sup> Table: Landed Immigrants whose last place of residence was Iran. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Landed Immigrant Database.

<sup>78</sup> Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran*, 139.

<sup>79</sup> Table: Iranian Immigrants by Continent, Country and City of Application, 1980-1998. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Electronic Information Services, Electronic Information Management, Information Systems and Technologies Branch. Data based on Country of Last Permanent Residence, Iran, 1980 to July 1998. In Mirfakhraie, "Transmigration and Identity Construction."

<sup>80</sup> Table: Landed Immigrants whose last place of residence was Iran. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Landed Immigrant Database.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

factors in both Iran and Canada. While the socio-economic context of Iran leading up to, during and following the revolution explains some of the broader reasons that motivated Iranians to emigrate, the discussion below will address the factors within Canada that led Iranians to choose Vancouver as the place they intended to settle.

### **“Points” and Policies: receiving Iranian migrants in Canada**

The migration of Iranians to Canada cannot be understood solely through an analysis of Iranian history. Rather, the reasons people left Iran and the reasons they migrated to Canada, should be understood as the product of two different but sometimes overlapping combinations of motivations. Factors that impacted the number of Iranians who migrated to Vancouver in the years following the Iranian revolution include conditions there as well as Canadian legislation pertaining to immigrants and refugees. Practically speaking, legislative changes to Canadian immigration laws during the latter half of the twentieth century have had a direct impact on the number of Iranians who have been able to immigrate to Canada. Canadian immigration policies have restricted the number of immigrants accepted into Canada based upon specific criteria set out by immigration laws. Legislative changes in Canadian immigration policies demonstrate how attitudes towards immigrants and refugees have shifted over time in Canada.

Prior to 1962 Canadian immigration laws were explicitly racist, basing the desirability of immigrants upon their country of origin.<sup>82</sup> Canada’s first Immigration Act, which was introduced in 1910 and remained largely unchanged until 1967, favoured immigrants from European countries. As socially constructed notions of what constituted

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<sup>82</sup>Ather Akbari, “Immigrant ‘Quality’ in Canada: More Direct Evidence of Human Capital Content, 1956-1994,” *International Migration Review* 33, no.1 (Spring, 1996), 158.

racial difference were highly subjective, so, too, was Canadian immigration legislation. The 1910 Act stated that Canadian immigration officials were authorized to “prohibit for a stated period, or permanently, the landing in Canada, or the landing at any specified port of entry in Canada, of immigrants belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada.”<sup>83</sup> The Act allowed for different interpretations of what constituted racial unsuitability in Canada at varying periods of time. Nonetheless, there was a definite effort to encourage immigrants from countries in Europe to come to Canada and discourage or limit immigration from Asia.<sup>84</sup> The view of W.D. Scott, a Canadian immigration official between 1906-1923, reflected popular sentiment towards immigrants from the Middle East during the early twentieth century in Canada. Scott explained his view that “Turkey, Armenia and Syria supply some of Canada’s most undesirable immigrants.... With them assimilation is out of the question.”<sup>85</sup> Instead, Scott declared that of

Scandinavian races – Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes – nothing but good can be said.... With the Scandinavian race there is really no question of assimilation. They are sprung largely from the same stock as are the English.<sup>86</sup>

He assessed desirability in immigrants according to their work ethic, ability to learn English and assimilate into Canadian society. But, one can see from his comments above, these assessments were made largely on the basis of racial and national stereotypes, rather than individual attributes. As non-Europeans, Iranians faced

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<sup>83</sup>Canada, “An Act Respecting Immigration,” *Immigration Act: Acts of the Parliament of the Dominion of Canada*, (Ottawa: C.H. Parmelee, 1910) Chapter 27, 38C.

<sup>84</sup> W.D. Scott, “The Immigration by Races,” (1914) in Thomas Thorner ed., “*a country nourished on self-doubt: documents in Post-Confederation Canadian history*,” (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 140-141.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

discrimination under this Act, and were excluded based on their perceived inability to assimilate into Canadian society.

In 1962, reforms to the Canadian Immigration Act attempted to remove the ethnic and racial discrimination within the existing Act. However, these reforms still restricted the sponsorship of relatives for the majority of people from Africa, Middle Eastern countries and Asia, excepting Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, thus directly limiting the number of Iranians who came to Canada, as they were unable to sponsor their families.<sup>87</sup> In fact, Canadian immigration legislation favoured immigrants from European countries until the introduction of the 1976 Immigration Act. Thus, legislation pertaining to immigration during the first half of the twentieth century reflects a continuing and concerted effort to control the makeup of migrants to Canada, in terms of physical (racial/ethnic), religious, political and moral characteristics.<sup>88</sup>

In 1967, the Canadian government took the first major step toward establishing a more equitable system and changed its criteria for determining the eligibility of immigrants. The implementation of the 1967 Immigration Act marked the first attempt by the Canadian government to standardize their criteria for the selection and admittance of immigrants to Canada.<sup>89</sup> The 1967 Immigration Act provided that immigrants were to be assessed through a “points system.” This new system allotted points to immigrants who possessed certain skills and/or abilities that would enable them to contribute

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<sup>87</sup> Freda Hawkins, *Canada and Immigration: Public Policy and Public Concern* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1972), 125-126.

<sup>88</sup> Canada, “An Act Respecting Immigration,” *Immigration Act: Acts of the Parliament of the Dominion of Canada*, (Ottawa: C.H. Parmelee, 1910) Chapter 27, 3A-H.

<sup>89</sup> Hawkins, *Canada and Immigration*, 374.

economically to Canadian society.<sup>90</sup> These changes to Canadian immigration legislation made migration to Canada much more accessible to Iranians who possessed the requisite skills and resources: largely those from urban, middle class backgrounds. By replacing explicit ethnic and racial considerations with a seemingly benign “points system,” the Canadian government appeared to officially repudiate the discriminatory nature of the earlier immigration legislation. However, while the official discourse of the Canadian government, as reflected in the new immigration legislation, rejected the explicit racism of the earlier Immigration Act, in actuality the points system was also inherently discriminatory and continued to favour British migrants.<sup>91</sup> Anna Pratt notes that

the “skill” criteria continued to discriminate against immigrants from developing countries, and most of the resources committed to the recruitment of migrants continued to reflect a “preference for British migrants,” as did the government’s placement of foreign visa offices.<sup>92</sup>

For example, the Canadian embassy in Damascus handles all of the immigration applications from Cyprus, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.<sup>93</sup> There are only three offices in the whole of the Middle East (Abu Dhabi, Damascus and Tel Aviv) that handle permanent residence visa applications, whereas there are nine offices to serve this same function in Europe (Ankara, Berlin, Bucharest, Kyiv, London, Paris, Rome, Vienna and

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<sup>90</sup> Points were granted based upon nine factors: Education and Training; Personal Assessment; Occupational Demand; Occupational Skill; Age; Arranged Employment; Knowledge of French and English; Relative; Employment Opportunities in Area of Destination.

<sup>91</sup> Anna Pratt, *Securing Borders: Detention and Deportation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>93</sup> Citizenship and Immigration Canada, “Canadian Foreign Visa Offices.” <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/offices/missions/damascus.asp> (accessed March 17, 2008).



Warsaw).<sup>94</sup> The number and placement of these offices demonstrates the preference for European immigrants rather than those from the Middle East, such as Iran. As such, the practical application of the points system and its proposed ideals differed quite significantly. It follows, in short, that the Canadian points system is not as benign as it may appear.

In 1976, the Canadian government passed a new Immigration Act. Supporters of the 1976 Immigration Act claimed that it demonstrated an ideological shift in Canadian government policies and in attitudes towards immigrants and refugees in Canada. The Act's stated purpose was to "remove all explicit traces of moral and racial grounds for exclusion" contained in Canada's prior immigration legislation.<sup>95</sup> The 1976 Act emphasized humanitarian principles such as family reunification, the implementation of social programs for immigrants, and benevolence towards refugees.<sup>96</sup> Prior to the 1976 Immigration Act, Canada had dealt with refugees on a case-by-case basis. In 1976, Canada recognized – albeit belatedly – its responsibility as a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees and established the Refugee Status Advisory Committee.<sup>97</sup> These new legislative changes enabled increased migration of individuals from Iran as both refugees and dependents.

While the 1976 Immigration Act, which espoused humanitarian and liberal democratic principles, was a marked improvement over the overtly racist legislation of

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<sup>94</sup> Citizenship and Immigration Canada, "Canadian Foreign Visa Offices." <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/offices/apply-where.asp> (accessed March 22, 2008). Turkey is listed as a European country according on this website.

<sup>95</sup> Pratt, *Securing Borders*, 87.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-1997* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), 170.

old, it nevertheless contained discriminatory elements. Scholars of Canadian immigration legislation such as Reg Whitaker argue that while the 1976 Act attempted to reconcile pragmatic administrative concerns on the part of the Canadian government with notions of individual civil liberty, the reality was much different.<sup>98</sup> He notes that Canadian immigration law tended to favour ambiguous concerns about national security, which restricted entrance to Canada of

persons who have engaged in or there are reasonable grounds to believe are likely to engage in acts of espionage or subversion against democratic government institutions or processes, as they are understood in Canada.<sup>99</sup>

This provision in the Canadian Immigration Act allowed immigration officials to deny entrance to immigrants and refugees suspected of allegiance to political groups, which espoused communist or leftist principles deemed as dangerous or subversive to democracy.<sup>100</sup> As such, those Iranians who suffered political persecution in Iran following the revolution due to their communist or leftist political beliefs had to conceal their political history and affiliations in order to avoid difficulty and suspicion migrating to Canada.

The 1980s marked a period of high immigration to Canada, which was met with growing xenophobia amongst Canadians who feared that ‘opportunists’ and ‘bogus refugees’ were abusing the new immigration program. In response to this increasing concern about the number and character of immigrants and refugees in Canada, the Mulroney government implemented Bill C-86 in 1992. This bill resulted in the

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<sup>98</sup>Reg Whitaker, *Double Standard: The Secret History of Canadian Immigration* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Publishers, 1987), 272.

<sup>99</sup>Immigration Act of Canada 1976, Section 19(1)d, as quoted in Whitaker, *Double Standard*, 269.

<sup>100</sup> Whitaker, *Double Standard*, 273.

imposition of a number of new restrictions such as fingerprinting of refugees. It also allowed for the deportation of refugee claimants without a hearing and instituted the “safe third country” provision.<sup>101</sup> These changes made by the Mulroney government were criticized as being overtly racist. NDP immigration critic Dan Heap observed:

the [safe third country] policy discriminated against refugee claimants from countries that do not have direct air routes to Canada, i.e., many African, Asian, and Central American Countries.<sup>102</sup>

Sociologist Parin Dossa has also examined the implications that legislative changes have had on the admittance of refugees to Canada. Dossa argues that although official government discourse in Canada emphasises humanitarian concerns, in actuality refugees are favoured based on their country of origin, with preference given to those from Eastern Europe, those with certain skills and types of education, and “those who enhance the compassionate/saviour image of Canada,” such as Middle Eastern women.<sup>103</sup> She notes that the latter provision holds specifically gendered implications whereby women are not granted asylum unless they claim that they are being oppressed due to their gender by their home country. Thus, she argues Canada assumes a neo-imperialist role by rescuing women from the men or patriarchal institutions in what they perceive as a less civilized and oppressive culture.<sup>104</sup> This argument refers in part to the fact that

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<sup>101</sup> The “safe third country” provision refused refugee claimants who had travelled to Canada from or through a country deemed “safe” by the Canadian governor-in-council. It required individuals to remain in the first “safe country” they arrived in and apply for asylum or refugee status there. This, for example, would prevent refugee claimants from South or Central America from travelling overland through the United States to claim refugee status in Canada. This provision drastically limited the number of people eligible to claim refugee status in Canada, which is relatively isolated geographically. Pratt, *Securing Borders*, 106.

<sup>102</sup> Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates*, 198.

<sup>103</sup> Parin Dossa, “Reconfiguring the Question: ‘Who is a Refugee?’ Coming to Voice, Coming to Power: One Woman’s Story.” *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies* 9, no.1 (2002), 28.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

gender-based persecution was accepted in 1991 by the UNHCR as a ground upon which one could apply for asylum or refugee status.<sup>105</sup> Dossa's discussion is particularly salient in the case of Iranian women, as the codified law in Iran so explicitly discriminates on the basis of gender. As such, Dossa's argument explains how Iranian women who apply for refugee status on the basis of gender persecution are inadvertently placed in the position of perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes within Canada, which assume women from Muslim societies to be subordinate victims. Nonetheless, acknowledging gender as a category of persecution under which an individual may claim refugee status has opened up another avenue for Iranian women to migrate to Canada.

Despite this new category for claiming refugee status from the late 1990's on, the number of Iranians who received landed immigrant status in Vancouver has steadily declined, dropping from 2023 in 1997 to 1280 people in 2005.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, Iran still represents the number one source country for immigrants to Canada from the region defined as the Middle East and Africa between the years of 1996-2005.<sup>107</sup> The fact that the migration of Iranians from Iran to Vancouver significantly increased from the early 1980's through the late 1990s suggests that some change occurred motivating people to leave Iran and/or come to Canada. Statistical data regarding the number of Iranians who migrated to Canada corroborates the notion that the changes initiated by the revolution did indeed cause many people to leave Iran. In 1970, the number of Iranians who migrated to Canada was 123. This number remained relatively stable, ranging between

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<sup>105</sup> "Fact Sheet: Gender-Based Persecution," *International Federation of Iranian Refugees*. <http://www.hambastegi.org/english/index.htm>. March 7, 2007

<sup>106</sup> Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Landed Immigrant Database. Table: Landed Immigrants whose last place of residence was Iran.

<sup>107</sup> Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Facts and Figures 2005. Immigration Overview: Permanent Residents. Table: Canada-Permanent Residents from Africa and the Middle East by Top Source Countries.

174 and 305 people a year until 1976, when it jumped to 500.<sup>108</sup> The significance of 1976 is that it was the year that Canadian immigration legislation drastically changed with the implementation of the 1976 Immigration Act. After 1976 the number of Iranians who migrated to Canada remained relatively stable until 1979 when it doubled, reaching 1044 people.<sup>109</sup> The fact that the number of Iranians who migrated to Canada doubled in 1979 suggests that the revolution likely was a factor motivating people to leave Iran.

Of the Iranians who migrated from Iran to Canada, many chose to make Vancouver their home. According to the 2001 Canada Census, of the 61,600 Iranians who came to Canada as recent immigrants between the years of 1996 and 2001, 15,300 settled in Vancouver.<sup>110</sup> By 2006 the Canada Census estimated that 26,985 Iranians had made Vancouver their home.<sup>111</sup> The percentage of Iranians who chose to settle in Vancouver is similar to that of immigrants to Canada as a whole: Vancouver is home to 13.6% of all immigrants to Canada, second only to Toronto, which is home to 37.3% of all Canadian immigrants.<sup>112</sup> British Columbia and Ontario are the only provinces in Canada that have a larger percentage of immigrants than Canadian born population. According to the 2001 Canada Census, British Columbia was home to 11.8% of Canada's

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<sup>108</sup> Employment and Immigration Canada, Immigration Statistics. Quarterly Statistics Immigration, 1970 to 1979.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas: A Comparative Profile Based on the 2001 Census.* (Canada: Strategic Research and Statistics in collaboration with Informetrica Limited, 2005), 13. Recent immigrants are classified as those people who migrated to Canada between the period of 1996 and 2001 (or within five years of the census taking place). Vancouver was home to the second largest population of Iranians in Canada at the time of this study, after Toronto, which was home to 30,800 Iranians.

<sup>111</sup> 2006 Profile of Census Tracts / Ethnic origin and visible minorities: Census Metropolitan Area: Vancouver, West Asian Origins/ Iranian. *Canadian Census Analyzer*. <http://datacentre.chass.utoronto.ca.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/census/rp.html> (accessed June 5, 2008).

<sup>112</sup> *Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas*, 10.

Canadian-born population and 18.5% of the country's immigrant population.<sup>113</sup> This demonstrates that Vancouver has become a desirable location for migrants from all countries. Statistics related to migration to North Vancouver in particular, however, indicate a definite preference for settlement in this area amongst Iranians. Between the period of 1996 and 2001, 2,460 Iranians migrated to the city of North Vancouver, comprising over 50% of all recent immigrants in this municipality.<sup>114</sup> The population of Greater Vancouver is 37% foreign born, while the percentage is 34% in North Vancouver.<sup>115</sup> As such, the city of North Vancouver has become an urban enclave for Iranians who have immigrated to British Columbia. Attempts to build a sense of community amongst Iranian migrants within Vancouver, however, have been challenging due to the heterogeneity of this population, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Three.

Iranians who have migrated to Canada have done so for a variety of reasons and over a broad period of time. Consequently, the political, religious and social affiliations of Iranians living in Vancouver are as diverse as the reasons that they left Iran. Some Iranians living in Vancouver arrived as refugees and are unable to return for fear of persecution, while others are suspected of having close connections with the current regime, which provides them the financial wherewithal to purchase a second home in Canada and immigrate as members of the "investor class."<sup>116</sup> Still others who held positions of authority during the regime of the Shah fled Iran in the immediate aftermath of the revolution in order to escape certain execution during Khomeini's purges. These

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<sup>113</sup> *Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas*, 8.

<sup>114</sup> *2004 Community Profile: City of North Vancouver*. Summary of Data, 2001 National Census, 7.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Interview #4, Vancouver, B.C., (May 4, 2007), 10.

differing and at times conflicting ideologies, interests and affiliations have complicated attempts by Iranians to create a unified community within Vancouver. Chapter three of this study analyzes the divisions and distrust as perceived by Iranian women in Vancouver as a result of these factors.

The reasons that Iranian women have chosen to emigrate from Iran and come to Vancouver are not entirely different from those of Iranian men. However, one cannot neglect the fact that the regulations imposed in Iran following the revolution impeded the personal freedom of Iranian women based upon their gender to a degree that was not the case for men. The International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR) has produced a document outlining the ways in which women in Iran face gender-based persecution, as defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>117</sup> According to the IFIR fact sheet, there are two broad categories of gender-based persecution which pertain to women in Iran: (1) “[a]cts that are female-specific or are targeted toward women because of their sex,” such as sexual discrimination, imputed persecution, sexual violence, forced abortion, marriage or sterilization; and (2) “[p]enalties imposed because of a woman’s transgression of social norms by refusing to comply with restrictions on the rights and activities of women,” such as violating the dress code in the case of Iran.<sup>118</sup> For this reason, one might expect that Iranian women would outnumber Iranian men as immigrants or refugees in Canada. However, the opposite is true, with Iranian men outnumbering women by 4,200 at the time of the 2001 Canada Census.<sup>119</sup> This difference may be a function of Canadian immigration policy. Parin Dossa speaks to this issue

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<sup>117</sup> “Fact Sheet: Gender-Based Persecution,” *International Federation of Iranian Refugees*. <http://www.hambastegi.org/english/index.htm>. Accessed March 7, 2007.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas*, 18.

when she notes that Canadian refugee and immigration policies are “heavily biased towards economic male migrants.”<sup>120</sup> Sunera Thobani articulates this point in more detail by stating,

immigration officers tend to process the applications of women under the family class. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be processed under the independent class as heads of households.<sup>121</sup>

As such, women are immediately perceived as dependents and less likely to contribute to the Canadian economy due to their gender. Thobani thus argues that the patriarchal perception of men as independent economic actors is perpetuated in Canadian immigration legislation to the detriment of women.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, limitations exist within Iran such as the Passport Act, which hinders Iranian women’s ability to leave the country without permission from their husband or father.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, while the gendered restrictions that were imposed by the regime of the Islamic Republic shortly following the 1978-1979 revolution caused discontent amongst women in Iran, a number of obstacles in both Canada and Iran have limited women’s ability to migrate.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, Iranians who migrated to Vancouver in the years following 1978 have done so for a variety of reasons. The composition of Iranian migrants living in Vancouver is heterogeneous in regard to religion, class and political ideologies. While the Iranian revolution in 1978-1979 disrupted and altered Iranian society, it did not result in a mass influx of Iranians to Vancouver immediately following the revolution.

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<sup>120</sup> Dossa, “Reconfiguring the Question: ‘Who is a Refugee?’” 32.

<sup>121</sup> Sunera Thobani, “Sponsoring Immigrant Women’s Inequalities. *Canadian Women’s Studies* 19, No.3 (1999), 11-17. *ProQuest*, [www.proquest.umi.com](http://www.proquest.umi.com)

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> See above discussion of the Passport Act, page 29.



Rather, the greatest number of Iranian migrants arrived in Canada during the 1990's, nearly ten years after the revolution. Gendered decrees and legislation in Iran following the revolution severely impeded the personal freedoms and legal rights of Iranian women, although this alone does not account for their migration to Canada. Broader social, economic and political concerns that arose in Iran in the years following the revolution have in large part influenced the migration of these women. Concurrently, the inherent ethnic, gender and class biases within Canadian immigration and refugee legislation limited the number of Iranian women who migrated to Canada. Nonetheless, changes wrought in the social, economic and political fabric of Iran were facilitated by the Iranian revolution, and as such serve as a key factor in understanding the migration of Iranian women to Vancouver in the years following 1978.

## **CHAPTER 2: Mountains, Ocean and Opportunity: Reasons For Migration and Settlement in Vancouver, B.C.**

Since the 1978-1979 revolution in Iran, Vancouver, B.C., has become an increasingly popular destination for Iranian migrants. While a majority of Iranian women in Vancouver came after the revolution, their reasons for migration are multifaceted and diverse. The individual history of each woman, combined with larger historical events, such as the ramifications of the Iranian revolution, informed their decision to migrate to and settle in Vancouver. Each woman's choice to leave Iran and come to Vancouver can thus be seen as the result of a complex combination of motivations and influences. Despite the diversity of explanations given for their migration and settlement, some parallels have emerged among the narratives of Iranian women regarding their choice to settle in Vancouver. Greater social freedom, geographical similarities to Iran, the presence of other Iranians in the city, and improved access to educational and economic opportunities available in Canada underlie the various reasons given by Iranian women for settling in Vancouver.

The literature surrounding Iranian migrants to Canada is extremely limited, and the migration of Iranian women to Vancouver in particular is a subject that has been largely neglected thus far by historians. This may be due to the fact that Iranian migration to Vancouver is a relatively recent occurrence, with significant numbers of people migrating only following the 1978-1979 Iranian revolution. Indeed, between the

years of 1946 and 1973 a total of only 2,075 Iranians migrated to Canada.<sup>1</sup> Iranian immigration rates increased only slightly during the decade immediately prior to the revolution (1968-1977) when only 2,408 migrants whose last place of residence was Iran came to Canada.<sup>2</sup> In the decade between 1978 and 1987 nearly seven times as many (14,812) migrants whose last place of residence was Iran came to Canada, 6731 of whom were women.<sup>3</sup> Many of these migrants subsequently settled in Vancouver, although for varied reasons. The following discussion utilizes oral interviews with Iranian women in Vancouver to answer the questions: what reasons do Iranian women give for their migration to Vancouver; how do Iranian women represent the history of their migration; and is there any consensus amongst Iranian women living in Vancouver as to why they left Iran and settled in Vancouver?

### **Iranian migrants in the United States and Canada**

Due to the scarcity of literature regarding Iranians in Canada, this discussion will begin by introducing the literature regarding Iranians' migration to the United States. The reasons given for Iranians' migration and settlement in the U.S. will then be compared

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<sup>1</sup> Table #7, "Country of Citizenship of Immigrants." Calendar Year 1973, p.16. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Immigration Statistics Archives. Accessed May 24, 2008. [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration\\_statistics-ef/index.html](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration_statistics-ef/index.html)

<sup>2</sup> Table #3, "Country of Last Permanent Residence of Immigrants." Calendar Years 1968-1977. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Immigration Statistics Archives. Accessed May 24, 2008. [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration\\_statistics-ef/index.html](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration_statistics-ef/index.html)

<sup>3</sup> Table #3, "Country of Last Permanent Residence of Immigrants." Calendar Years 1978-1987. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Immigration Statistics Archives. Accessed May 24, 2008. [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration\\_statistics-ef/index.html](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration_statistics-ef/index.html) And Table: Landed Immigrants whose last place of residence was Iran. Citizenship and Immigrant Canada, Landed Immigrant Database.

with the narratives provided by female Iranian migrants to Vancouver in order to illuminate parallels and divergences in these two historical experiences. It is important to be aware of the differing histories of Canada and the United States, particularly in relation to Iran, and how this has impacted the experience of migration for Iranians to both countries.<sup>4</sup> The differences and similarities between these two migrations allow for a greater understanding of the migration of Iranians to Vancouver.

In contrast to Canada, studies regarding Iranian migrants proliferated in the United States within social science disciplines in the years following the revolution of 1978-1979.<sup>5</sup> Iranian migrants living within the United States are primarily responsible for conducting and producing these studies, many of which seek to explain the reasons underlying Iranian migration to the U.S.<sup>6</sup> Studies of particular relevance to this discussion include those by Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Mohammad Chaichian, Farnaz S. Kerendi, Zohreh

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<sup>4</sup> The 1953 coup, which overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh, marks the beginning of the relationship between Iran and the United States. This relationship, which held numerous benefits both for the United States and the regime of Reza Shah, ceased with the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy. The foreign relations between Iran and the United States further broke down due to the 1979-1981 Iranian hostage crisis, during which 52 American diplomats were held hostage in the American Embassy in Iran for 444 days. Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, (New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 83-103. In comparison, Canada's relationship with Iran during this period was much less confrontational. While Canadian diplomats in Iran provided asylum and facilitated in the eventual return to America of several American diplomats in Iran during the hostage crisis, this took place under a veil of secrecy. Therefore, although Canadian policy and behaviour supported the United States, they avoided directly alienating the Iranian government. Jean Pelletier and Claude Adams, *The Canadian Caper* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1981), 230.

<sup>5</sup> Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States" *Iranian Studies* 31, No. 1 (Winter, 1998), 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Mirzadegan Niknia and Esther Sameyah-Amiri.<sup>7</sup> For the most part, these studies agree upon several important points that characterized the migration of Iranians to the United States. First, they note that Iranians migrated to the U.S. in different waves and use the 1978-1979 revolution as a point demarcating these waves. Second, these studies emphasize the difference in the composition of migrants in these waves: while the wave(s) before the revolution were composed primarily of students and professionals, the wave following 1978 was mainly composed of refugees and political or religious exiles. Third, these studies note that in many cases the permanent settlement of Iranian migrants in the U.S. was unintentional.<sup>8</sup> This is attributed to the fact that many Iranians who were studying in the U.S. when the revolution happened were forced to remain there due to the chaotic situation in Iran. The difficulty for those students who feared returning to Iran was that when their student visas expired they would either be deported back to Iran or become illegal immigrants in the U.S., unable to legally obtain employment.<sup>9</sup> Still other Iranians migrated to the U.S. immediately following the revolution in order to escape

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<sup>7</sup> Bozorgmehr, "Iranians in the United States;" Mohammad Chaichian, "First Generation Iranian Immigrants and the Question of Cultural Identity: The Case of Iowa" *International Migration Review* 31, No.3 (Autumn, 1997); Farnaz S. Kerendi "Acculturation and Gender Role Attitudes as Related to Acculturative Stress in Iranian Immigrant Women" (Ph.D. diss., California School of Professional Psychology, 1998); Zohreh Mirzadegan Niknia, "The intersection of immigration and gender; the socioeconomic integration of Iranian immigrant women in Kansas City," (Ph.D. Diss. University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2001); and Esther Sameyah-Amiri, "Cultural Orientation, Coping Style, and Psychological Symptomatology Among Iranian Female Immigrants" (Ph.D diss., California School of Professional Psychology, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Bozorgmehr, "Iranians in the United States," 6-8; Kerendi "Acculturation and Gender Role Attitudes as Related to Acculturative Stress in Iranian Immigrant Women," 1-4; Niknia, "Iranian Immigrant Women in Kansas City," 98-107; and Sameyah-Amiri, "Cultural Orientation, Coping Style, and Psychological Symptomatology Among Iranian Female Immigrants," 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Niknia, "Iranian Immigrant Women in Kansas City," 105.

persecution and/or turmoil but did not intend to remain there permanently, and planned to return after the situation in Iran became less tumultuous and dangerous.<sup>10</sup>

These studies agree that the composition of Iranian migrants who arrived to the United States before and after the revolution and the reasons they migrated both differ. These scholars also highlight the unintentional nature of a large proportion of Iranians' settlement in the United States and the lack of control felt by those who fled Iran as exiles or refugees. However, the migration of Iranians to Vancouver offers a different understanding because of the relative absence of significant numbers of Iranians living in Vancouver as students prior to the revolution. For many Iranians, their decision to migrate to the United States did not reflect a desire to settle permanently prior to the revolution, as they came to the U.S. as students.<sup>11</sup> In comparison, Canada was not as desirable a location for Iranians to migrate to or obtain their education prior to the Iranian revolution. Between the years of 1974 and 1977, only 174 Iranians came to Canada as students.<sup>12</sup> This was in part due to the fact that American universities were perceived as more prestigious than Canadian universities, and due to the close ties that existed between the Iranian and American governments during the regime of Muhammad Reza

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<sup>10</sup> Kerendi "Acculturation and Gender Role Attitudes as Related to Acculturative Stress in Iranian Immigrant Women," 1-4 and Sameyah-Amiri, "Cultural Orientation, Coping Style, and Psychological Symptomatology Among Iranian Female Immigrants," 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Bozorgmehr, "Iranians in the United States," 7.

<sup>12</sup> Table #11, "Country of Last Permanent Residence by Groups of (Intended) Occupation and Destination of Immigrants." Calendar Years 1974-1977, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Immigration Statistics Archives. [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration\\_statistics-ef/index.html](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration_statistics-ef/index.html) (accessed March 30, 2008). Prior to 1974 the Canadian Immigration Statistics Archives do not list "students," as a separate sub-category in their records. Since students did not intend to stay in Canada, they were not technically immigrants, and were considered visitors. Records of students included within the list labelled "other" immigrants from 1974 onwards. Although this allows direct comparisons with the number of Iranian students in the United States at the same time period problematic, it also suggests that the number of migrants coming to Canada as students was relatively insignificant at this time.

Shah from 1953-1978. One example of this was the establishment of Pahlavi University in 1962, which was modelled on the American education system: classes were instructed in English by American professors and through this university “close ties with American universities began to develop.”<sup>13</sup> The number of Iranians living in the United States as students prior to the revolution is an important distinction between Iranian migrants in Canada and the U.S. in terms of their attitudes towards settlement and their experience of migration more broadly.

Comparing the acquisition of citizenship amongst Iranian migrants in the United States and Canada provides an interesting differentiation between these two groups. Both Chaichian and Bozorgmehr make note of the fact that pre-revolutionary Iranian migrants to the United States were less likely to obtain citizenship than post-revolutionary migrants, and that Iranians have increasingly become citizens of the United States following 1978.<sup>14</sup> Bozorgmehr notes that while only 8,877 of 35,000 Iranian immigrants became naturalized citizens between the years of 1950 and 1977, between 1978 and 1995 nearly 82,465 Iranians became naturalized citizens.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Mohammad Chaichian notes in his study of Iranians migrants in Iowa that only 43% of the Iranians who migrated to the United States prior to 1980 became naturalized citizens. However, Iranians who migrated following the 1979 revolution were more likely to become naturalized citizens.<sup>16</sup> Bozorgmehr argues that the increased number of Iranians who

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<sup>13</sup> Mitra K. Shavarini, *Educating Immigrants: Experiences of Second Generation Iranians* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2004), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Bozorgmehr, “Iranians in the United States,” 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. The data listed in this article does not specify the total number of Iranians living in the United States during this period. As such, the exact ratio or percentage who became citizens is left unknown.

<sup>16</sup> Chaichian, “First Generation Iranian Immigrants,” 616.

became naturalized citizens over time reflects the unintentional nature of their settlement in the U.S. He argues that their naturalization demonstrates Iranian migrants' acceptance that their stay in the United States was permanent.<sup>17</sup> Chaichian argues that the refusal to trade their Iranian citizenship for American citizenship is due to nationalist pride and culture.<sup>18</sup> Although these theories only provide a limited explanation of Iranians' acquisition of American citizenship, both scholars have highlighted the significance of the particularly low rate of pre-revolutionary Iranians who became American citizens following their migration.

In contrast, a significant percentage of all Iranian migrants to Canada subsequently acquired Canadian citizenship. Over 90% of Iranians who migrated to Canada between 1986 and 1995 acquired Canadian citizenship.<sup>19</sup> The high percentage of Iranians who have become citizens of Canada is not in itself conclusive, but it suggests that some important differences exist in Canada as compared to the United States. Differences in the nature of citizenship or naturalization processes in each country may, in part, explain these numbers. For example, unlike Canada, individuals who acquire U.S. citizenship are required to renounce their previous citizenship in an oath, which may

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<sup>17</sup> Bozorgmehr, "Iranians in the United States," 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> Chaichian's assertion, though interesting, seems only to explain the sentiment behind the failure to acquire citizenship, as Iran continues to recognize Iranian citizenship regardless whether an individual becomes a citizen of another country or not. As such, it is not an issue of "giving up" one or another.

<sup>19</sup> Table A-4, "Acquisition of Canadian citizenship by country of birth, Canada, 2001" *Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas: A Comparative Profile Based on the 2001 Census*. (Canada: Strategic Research and Statistics in collaboration with Informetrica Limited, April 2005), 5.



have deterred Iranians from obtaining citizenship in the United States, in contrast to Canada, which tolerates dual citizenship.<sup>20</sup>

Attitudes towards Iranians and immigration policies in Canada and the United States were also significant factors, influencing patterns of Iranian migration to both countries. The relationship between the United States and Iran became intensely antagonistic following the Iranian revolution, due to anti-American rhetoric espoused by the Islamic Republic and the ensuing takeover of the American embassy in Tehran.<sup>21</sup> In reaction to this hostage taking, American policy towards Iranians in the United States became extremely harsh and many were threatened with deportation.<sup>22</sup> In comparison, Canadian policy during this period focused on maintaining an appearance of uninvolved neutrality.<sup>23</sup> Aside from the fear of deportation, the hostile attitudes of many Americans towards Iranians living in the United States during this time undoubtedly served as a deterrent. Indeed, scholars have noted that between 1980-1985 Iranian immigration to

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<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that this verbal renunciation is required by the United States, it is not always enforced and individuals are not required to sever ties with their country of previous citizenship. Moreover, many countries, like Iran, just ignore the renunciation required by the United States and do not revoke citizenship when an individual becomes a citizen in another country. Therefore, the United States tacitly accepts dual citizenship and Iranians retain their citizenship regardless of becoming naturalized. These blurry lines make it difficult to assess what actual impact citizenship requirements have upon Iranian migration. Stanley A. Renshon, "Dual Citizenship and American National Identity," *Center for Immigration Studies*. Accessed July 1, 2008. <http://www.cis.org/articles/2001/paper20/renshontoc.html#introduction>

<sup>21</sup> Ron Kelley, "Chronology of the Pahlavi Era and the Islamic Republic," in Ron Kelley and Jonathan Friedlander Eds. *Iranages: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 21.

<sup>22</sup> "The Rights of Iranians," *New York Times (1857-Current file)*; Nov 21, 1979; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2004) pg. A18

<sup>23</sup> "Revisiting Canada's Contribution to Resolving the Iranian Hostage Crisis." On the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal to Former Canadian Ambassador to Iran Kenneth Taylor, March 1, 2005. [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?event\\_id=107570&fuseaction=events.event\\_summary](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?event_id=107570&fuseaction=events.event_summary) (accessed May 24, 2008).

the United States slowed by nearly half the number it was between 1974-1979.<sup>24</sup> It may be that Iranians who would have otherwise migrated to the United States were diverted to Canada during this period. One Iranian woman who was studying in the United States during the hostage crisis recalls feeling as though the “the frenzy of the atmosphere made me feel bad to be around Americans.”<sup>25</sup> She was told by an American guest at a Thanksgiving dinner that “Iranians are shits. We should get the hostages out and exterminate the entire land.”<sup>26</sup>

Differing immigration policies in both Canada and the United States also affected the migration of Iranians to each country. In 1952, for example, the McCarran-Walter Act eased restrictions placed upon individuals from the “Asiatic Barred Zone” who entered the U.S. as students, which at least partially explains the high number of Iranians who came to the U.S. as students prior to the revolution.<sup>27</sup> Further changes in immigration laws in 1965 allowed for a greater number of immigrants from Asia, the Middle East and Africa to enter the United States, opening the doors for many more Iranians.<sup>28</sup> The ability to enter the United States as refugees and asylum seekers allowed even more Iranians to migrate to the United States following the 1978-1979 revolution.<sup>29</sup> By 1986, however, changes in American immigration policy required that all those who arrived in the U.S. to claim asylum without documentation be incarcerated, a

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<sup>24</sup> Bozorgmehr, “Iranians in the United States,” 6.

<sup>25</sup> Zoreh T. Sullivan, *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 226.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>27</sup> John R. Hinells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 428.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

<sup>29</sup> Bozorgmehr, “Iranians in the United States,” 7.

development which certainly would have served as a deterrent for Iranian migrants when deciding where to settle.<sup>30</sup>

Canadian immigration policy also changed a number of times during the latter half of the twentieth century. Following 1967, it relied on a supposedly non-discriminatory “points system.” As explained in Chapter One of this study, however, many of the explicit racial and ethnic biases were not removed from the Immigration Act until 1976.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, provisions allowing for the admittance of refugees in Canada, according to the UN Convention on Refugees, were also not implemented until 1976.<sup>32</sup> These changes to Canadian immigration policy and their impact on Iranian migration to Vancouver are discussed in greater detail in Chapter One, but it is clear that American policy would have allowed for the increased migration of Iranians earlier than in Canada.

In sum, a number of factors led to the migration of Iranians to the United States before and after the 1978-1979 revolution in Iran, while the vast majority of Iranians who migrated to Canada did so following the revolution. Iranian populations in the United States and Canada differ in terms of the periods that they arrived, their reasons for migrating and their reasons for settling. The significance of this comparison is to highlight the discrepancies between these two groups of migrants and demonstrate why one should not necessarily assume that the reasons behind Iranian migration to Canada and to the United States are the same. The reasons that Iranians chose to migrate to Vancouver reflect a number of different personal and political motivations, such as

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<sup>30</sup> “No Celebrations for Some Immigrants,” *ProQuest Historical Newspapers, The New York Times (1851 - 2004)*, Jul 3, 1986, A31. <http://proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/login?COPT=REJTPTFhY2QmSU5UPTAmVkVSPTI=&clientId=3667> Accessed on June 3, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Anna Pratt, *Securing Borders: Detention and Deportation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

maintaining their Iranian citizenship or living in a country that did not have an openly hostile relationship with their homeland. Using oral narratives as a historical source, the following discussion will address the reasons given by the Iranian women interviewed for this project for leaving Iran and for their subsequent migration to Vancouver.

### **Leaving Iran**

The Iranian women who participated in this research cited a broad array of reasons for leaving Iran and for settling in Vancouver. Four of the twelve women left Iran due to political persecution: Mina, Farah, Ghazal and Samira. Of these women, three left as refugees: Mina as a UN convention refugee who came directly to Canada; Farah, who initially left Iran and claimed refugee status upon her arrival in Sweden before later migrating to Canada; and Ghazal, who came directly to Canada and claimed refugee status upon arrival.<sup>33</sup> The father of the fourth woman, Samira, was the manager of an American owned hotel in Tehran. He was imprisoned and tortured by agents of the regime of the Islamic Republic in the immediate aftermath of the revolution due to his affiliation with this company. Following his release from prison, her family was able to formally immigrate due to their high status and financial resources. They first travelled to Spain and then to France for a short time until their Canadian immigration application was accepted.<sup>34</sup>

The fifth of the twelve women, Azar, left Iran due to the religious persecution she faced as a member of the Baha'i faith in Iran. The persecution of Baha'is was

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<sup>33</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007); Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 5, 2007); and Ghazal Omid, *Living in Hell* (Oklahoma: Park Avenue Publishers, 2004), 287-291.

<sup>34</sup> Interview # 9, Vancouver B.C., (May 24, 2007).

particularly severe in Iran following the 1978-1979 revolution, as previously discussed in the Chapter One of this study. Due to the discrimination and restrictions on their personal freedoms they faced in Iran, Azar fled with her family from Iran to Turkey using counterfeit passports. There they sought and received UN convention refugee status.<sup>35</sup> The sixth woman, Afsaneh, left Iran and claimed refugee status in Sweden due to her fear of the bombings during the Iran-Iraq war. She was concerned for the safety of her family as she had one young daughter and was pregnant with her second child when the bombing began in Tehran.<sup>36</sup> Three of the twelve women, Nasrin, Roya and Zahra, left Iran due to their dissatisfaction with the policies of the Islamic republic in regards to gender, religion and impingement on individual freedoms. Zahra moved from Iran to Dubai as a young child before coming to Canada. Although her family were very religious *Shi'ite* Muslims, her parents disagreed with the way the new regime politicized religion and consequently decided to emigrate. Nasrin and Roya both expressed dissatisfaction in terms of the specifically gendered restrictions placed upon them in Iran, and came directly to Vancouver.<sup>37</sup> The tenth and eleventh women, Homa and Taraneh, left Iran in order to further their own education or the education of their children at a Canadian university and subsequently chose to stay and settle.<sup>38</sup> The final woman,

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<sup>35</sup> Interview #1, Vancouver, B.C., (December 29, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Interview #4, Vancouver B.C., (May 4, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Interview #7, Vancouver, B.C., (May 13, 2007); Interview #8, Vancouver, B.C., (May 23, 2007); Interview #11, Vancouver B.C., (June 18, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Interview #10, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007); Interview #2, Vancouver, B.C., (December 30, 2006).

Baharak, left Iran due to her arranged marriage with an Iranian man who lived in Vancouver.<sup>39</sup>

To summarize, the reasons the women interviewed gave for leaving Iran were quite diverse, ranging from concerns of personal safety to a desire for improved educational opportunities. Together they represent the variety of reasons that Iranian women settled in Vancouver, B.C. The period of time during which these women left Iran ranges from immediately following the revolution in 1980 to more recently in 2006. Three of the four women who left Iran earliest (between 1980 and 1988) did so as political or religious exiles and refugees, whereas just three women who emigrated after 1995 did so primarily for reasons of persecution. Most of the women participating in this study emigrated between the years of 1995 and 2006 as economic migrants, students and dependent spouses. Thus, there appears to be some degree of correlation between reasons given for leaving Iran and the year in which women did so. Three out of the four women who left Iran earliest did so primarily for reasons of persecution, as compared to only two of the eight women who left Iran following 1995. Given the size of this study, that correlation is not conclusive, but it is still worth noting. Moreover, the fact that five of the twelve women who participated in these interviews have returned to Iran to visit at least once since emigrating challenges the argument, made by scholars such as Mitra

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<sup>39</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007). I interviewed two women consecutively in this interview, Mina and Baharak, however it began as a single interview with Baharak.

Shavarini, that exile is a fundamental part of the experience of post-revolutionary Iranian emigrants.<sup>40</sup>

### **Coming to Canada**

The reasons that the women interviewed gave for moving to Canada and settling in Vancouver were as varied as the reasons they left Iran. There are a number of parallels in the narratives of these women, as their grounds for choosing to migrate to and settle in Vancouver were never singular and often overlapped with one another. It is also important to recognize that the reasons the women gave for migrating to Vancouver in their interviews were not necessarily the only reasons they had. In this sense, their explanations reflect the way in which these women wanted to portray their migration and themselves to a non-Iranian researcher. A number of themes arose across the women's narratives that illustrate why Vancouver has become a popular destination for Iranians over time.

Some women had no choice as to where they would initially settle, such as Azar and Mina who both came to Canada as UN convention refugees at sixteen and fifteen years old respectively. Azar's family arrived first in Ottawa where they remained for only two weeks before moving to Vancouver. Their decision to settle in Vancouver was influenced in part by the fact that Azar had a relative (her father's cousin) who already lived in Vancouver. However, she explained that their decision was also influenced by the

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<sup>40</sup> Mitra Shavarini, *Educating Immigrants: Experiences of Second Generation Iranians* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2004), 41. As discussed above (see pages 52-56), much of the literature regarding Iranian immigrants in the U.S. has emphasized the unintentional nature of their settlement, and their inability to return to Iran. This argument does not necessarily apply to Iranian women in Vancouver, particularly those who frequently return to Iran to visit.

fact that her family had heard the weather and climate in Vancouver was similar to that in Iran.<sup>41</sup>

Mina's family had initially settled in a smaller city in Eastern Canada, where they had first been placed as refugees. Although Mina had no choice in where she was initially placed as a convention refugee and a dependent youth, she migrated to Vancouver upon graduating from high school and getting married. The reasons she gave for deciding to settle in Vancouver were the warmer climate and because of "the Iranian community here. We didn't have a community, we didn't even have a store over there."<sup>42</sup> Thus, the growing Iranian population and the existence of Iranian grocery stores, restaurants and the like in Vancouver served as a motivation for inter-provincial migration.

Both Azar and Mina named weather as a motivation for their migration to Vancouver rather than factors such as religious tolerance or freedom of political expression, despite the highly controversial religious and political reasons that underlay their emigration from Iran. The geography – particularly in North Vancouver – is said to be reminiscent of the mountains in northern Iran, a place that some women associated with the peace and relaxation of family vacations.<sup>43</sup> One woman, for example, recalled northern Iran as her childhood holiday destination "I had a very happy childhood, my family, we had so much fun, my dad he used to take us to the north of Iran, the Oceanside."<sup>44</sup> The familiar nature of the geography of B.C. evokes nostalgia for Iranian migrants, and has influenced Iranians' decision to settle in Vancouver regardless of the reason that they left Iran.

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<sup>41</sup> Interview #1, Vancouver, B.C., (December 29, 2006), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007), 36.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Todd, "Culture Clash," *Vancouver Sun*, Saturday October 13, 2007, C11.

<sup>44</sup> Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 5, 2007), 6.



Baharak came to Canada as a result of an arranged marriage to an Iranian man who lived in Vancouver. She explained that it was very difficult for her to leave Iran and to “leave my country, my family, my friends, you know, everything was really hard, and I didn’t like it. And, I came here just because he [her new husband] likes it.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that her marriage was arranged does not necessarily mean that she did not consent to her migration. Baharak was aware when she married him that her husband intended for her to return to Vancouver with him. This makes it difficult to assess the degree of choice she exercised in her initial decision to migrate to Canada. In any case, Baharak explained that she chose to remain and settle in Vancouver. She explained that when she first moved to Vancouver her husband told her:

“after three years, when you get your citizenship, then you are free, you can go over there [back to Iran] and you have your daughter too.” But after that when I went to Iran I didn’t want to (quietly) live over there. I couldn’t live over there anymore.<sup>46</sup>

She decided not to return to Iran because of social factors such as the inaccessibility of post-secondary education and environmental factors such as pollution: “The weather over there has a lot of gas [pollution]... you cannot breathe well because there is no rain. Especially in Tehran.”<sup>47</sup> Baharak’s concerns about air quality and traffic reflect a growing problem in Iran whereby government subsidized gasoline has led to an increase in traffic and air pollution, particularly in Tehran.<sup>48</sup> Some scholars have argued that traffic congestion and inadequate urban planning are the fundamental problems behind

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<sup>45</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007), 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Alidad Mafinezam and Aria Mehrabi, *Iran and Its Place Among Nations* (Wesport: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 91.

the low standard of living for urban Iranians living in post-oil boom Iran.<sup>49</sup> Baharak recalls when she visited Iran “you gag. And the traffic is killing you... That’s why I [realized I didn’t want] to live over there.”<sup>50</sup> She initially resisted attributing her decision to remain in Canada to societal or political issues and instead framed it in terms of pollution and traffic in Iran. Later in her interview, however, Baharak discusses how growing up under the regime of the Islamic Republic restricted her personal freedoms. She explained that people in her generation who grew up under the regime wondered

what’s freedom? That’s why most people right now, I believe... four million, or five million people...are outside of Iran. Because just, they long to have... freedom.<sup>51</sup>

When living in Iran she had not felt restricted to the point of wanting to leave, but after moving to Canada she found the prospect of returning to Iran unappealing. After migrating to Canada and experiencing a new social and political atmosphere, she has come to identify with Iranians who are seeking a broadly defined sense of freedom.

A number of the Iranian women who migrated to Canada explained their decision to settle in Vancouver in terms of chain migration, whereby they moved to Vancouver to join family or friends. These examples demonstrate that chain migration is a factor in explaining the growth of the Iranian population in Vancouver. Reports sent back by friends or family as to the reality of life in Vancouver allowed them to make a more informed decision about their migration. Having a network of family and friends also provides important financial and emotional support for new migrants, who may live with relatives or friends until they are able to establish themselves. In this sense the experience

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<sup>49</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007), 6.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

of Iranian migrants parallels that of other immigrant groups over time: John Bodnar argues that it has historically been one of the most important factors in determining settlement patterns of migrants in a receiving country.<sup>52</sup> One woman, Roya, decided to migrate to Vancouver from Iran at the age of twenty-eight because she had family friends already living here. She explained,

I picked Vancouver because it was easier for me to move to Vancouver... You know, [I had] at least one connection. Yeah, for one year I was living with them.<sup>53</sup>

She left Iran due to the restrictions placed on her as an artist because she felt constrained by regulations prohibiting painting pictures of women's bodies.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, she came to Canada as an immigrant after finishing university in Iran. The reasons behind her choice to migrate and settle in Vancouver are epitomized in her statement "you know why I like it here? Because I do whatever I want."<sup>55</sup>

Ghazal also came to Canada on her own due to restrictions placed upon her personal freedom. However, Ghazal felt as though she had no choice but to leave Iran due to the harassment and persecution she faced within Iran. Government authorities (*pasadran*) responsible for enforcing moral conduct in her university had singled her out due to her resistance to the dress code they imposed on her. She was harassed on several occasions for her failure to wear a veil, the "sexy buttons" on her raincoat, and her use of a briefcase which was considered a masculine accessory.<sup>56</sup> She was also later threatened for taking a class photo with her favorite professor in her university classroom because it

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<sup>52</sup> John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 57-82.

<sup>53</sup> Interview #8, Vancouver, B.C., (May 23, 2007), 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Interview #8, Vancouver, B.C., (May 23, 2007), 5.

<sup>56</sup> Omid, *Living in Hell*, 287-291.

was perceived as subversive.<sup>57</sup> After numerous confrontations she began to fear severe repercussions and left Iran for Canada, where she claimed refugee status upon her arrival. Her decision to come to Vancouver was largely influenced by the fact that her brothers already lived in Vancouver and she could stay with them upon her arrival. But her decision was also motivated by pragmatic concerns, such as avoiding deportation. She explains in her memoir that at the time she was leaving Iran, she had been informed that many Iranians who fled to European countries and subsequently claimed refugee status were being deported back to Iran.<sup>58</sup> Ghazal's family in Iran was quite wealthy and she had the financial wherewithal to decide where to move upon leaving Iran. She chose to come to Canada based upon her intention to remain and settle in the country she migrated to, due to her inability to return to Iran.

In contrast, Homa and Taraneh's decisions to migrate to Canada were not motivated by their inability to return to Iran, as they had each travelled to Canada and back to Iran once before deciding to settle in Canada. Homa had originally visited her brother in Toronto twenty years earlier, and this trip inspired her eventual migration to Canada. While she did not live with her brother when she arrived to Canada, her earlier visit motivated her to migrate to Canada. She recalled, "I had visited here a long time ago... almost twenty years ago...And I loved it here very much. And I thought I would like to come and live here."<sup>59</sup> Her family connection affected her decision to migrate by providing her an avenue to first visit and experience Canada, thereby allowing her insight and first hand experience before migrating to an unknown country.

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<sup>57</sup> Omid, *Living in Hell*, 295.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>59</sup> Interview #2, Vancouver, B.C., (December 30, 2006), 1.

She also explained that an important reason for moving to Canada was to improve access to education for her and her children. She noted that she came to Canada “partly for my children...because if they know English and they know another country I think that their world will expand.”<sup>60</sup> Due to the fact that post-secondary education was much more accessible in Canada than Iran, Homa explained that, “coming here could be an opportunity for me too... [t]o continue my own education.”<sup>61</sup> Homa’s explanation demonstrates the value placed upon education among Iranians and the limited opportunities for education in Iran, due to a limited number of schools and a growing number of students. But her narrative also suggests that what is at issue is a broader lack of opportunities for women in Iran, which is a reflection of the social, political and economic situation in the country. This sentiment underlies a number of these women’s stated reasons for pursuing education in Canada.

Taraneh’s family’s decision to migrate to Vancouver was influenced by the fact that they had relatives in Vancouver that would facilitate their settlement and transition to Canada, and that their family had been to Canada before they decided to immigrate permanently. She had initially moved to Vancouver with her family in 1990, when she was four years old, while her father completed his Ph.D. They returned to Iran in 1996. She then migrated back to Vancouver in 2004 with her mother and younger brother while her father finished his job and sold their house in Iran. She noted that her aunt, uncle and cousin lived in Vancouver, which was an important source of support for her family until her father was able to join them permanently in Vancouver. As with Azar, Mina and Baharak, Taraneh explained that another factor motivating her family’s return to

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<sup>60</sup> Interview #2, Vancouver, B.C., (December 30, 2006), 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Vancouver was the climate. In this regard she stated, “Vancouver is similar to some of the northern parts of Iran.... So we’re more used to the climate and everything.”<sup>62</sup>

Taraneh also explained her family’s choice of migrating to Vancouver as a practical decision: “[i]n terms of the services that they provide for foreign people, immigrants. I think [Canada is] much better than the States.”<sup>63</sup> However, access to post-secondary education was also a high priority for her family and the main reason she gave for their leaving Iran. She explained

The thing about Tehran is that there is not much opportunity for women to succeed. It is possible, there’s nothing impossible, but it is very hard. And you need to get over a lot of barriers. Um, whether getting support from the University itself, or having services that are for women. There is no such thing as that and it’s very competitive getting in the University.<sup>64</sup>

As such, Taraneh’s family decided that migrating to Vancouver would allow her greater access to education and other opportunities that weren’t available for women in Iran. In short, she attributed her family’s choice to migrate to Vancouver to the presence and support of their family in the city, their prior stay in the 1990’s, similarities in climate, the availability of social services, and the desire to access better educational and opportunities.

Zahra also named education as the primary reason her family migrated to Canada. Her family had been living in Dubai since they left Iran in 1986, but due to the extremely high cost of university in Dubai, her family decided to migrate to Canada in order to provide her and her sister access to post-secondary education. She explained that her family had never intended to permanently settle in Dubai since it was too economically

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<sup>62</sup> Interview #10, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007), 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

and politically dependent on the U.S. and Britain, and therefore unstable. Her family decided to migrate to Canada long after deciding to leave Iran. She recounted her family's decision to come to Canada as follows:

[to arrive in time for] my first years ... in high school. That's one of the main reasons and also, Dubai is kind of like a bubble. Like everything is picture perfect right now, but the Middle East is always in conflict and so, we've learned like once, not to you know, stay put somewhere around there and so we're like why not just shift here, and go to school here. And university there [in Dubai] is super expensive, it's like around eight thousand U.S. a semester? ... I mean, we couldn't have gone basically. So we moved here mainly for that but also because Dubai is a bubble and at some point it's going to fall apart.<sup>65</sup>

Zahra's narrative also demonstrates the value her family placed upon education, in that they were willing to migrate to another country to give their daughters the opportunity to attend university. However, the concerns of her family regarding the instability of the political and economic situation in Dubai are also significant. She states, "we'd learned...once not to... stay put somewhere around there [the Middle East]" – a reference to the upheaval that occurred in Iran following the revolution.<sup>66</sup> Their choice to come to Canada was perhaps related to the fact that Canada is quite stable – politically – and not likely to encounter any sort of violent political, religious or social upheaval.

Another woman, Samira, whose family fled Iran in 1980 due to political persecution when she was only two years old, noted that her parents chose to migrate to Vancouver because they had heard from friends that it was a good place to raise children. She explains

my parents heard that Canada was a good place to raise children. They had heard Vancouver, Montreal and they also heard Australia. So it was kind of a choice between these places and I don't know, we ended up

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<sup>65</sup> Interview #11, Vancouver B.C., (June 18, 2007), 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

coming here and driving over the Lion's Gate Bridge, and my mother fell in love. We settled in West Van at first. She's like, "I wanna live here." So that's kind of how it happened. (laughs) But we didn't have any friends, and then later my parents found out that a lot of their friends had come here too.<sup>67</sup>

Samira's family had been forced to flee Iran in the face of considerable violence and threats to the life of her father due to his association with an American owned hotel in Tehran. While their decision to leave Iran was literally a matter of life or death, their decision to come to Canada was based on recommendations from friends regarding where they might subsequently settle. This freedom of choice was partly the result of her family's wealth, as they could afford to live in France and Spain for a year until their Canadian immigration application was processed. Therefore, her family could afford to be selective in choosing their destination, as they had the financial resources they needed to live on until they settled permanently in Canada.

Afsaneh and Farah, the two women who left Iran for Sweden and then claimed refugee status, also decided to move to Canada because they had heard positive things about it from friends. In fact, these two women had been friends both in Iran and then in Sweden. The friendship that survived emigration from Iran to Europe and then on to Canada enabled these women to make more personally informed decisions as to where they would migrate and settle. Afsaneh explained, "we [found] out about Canada through some friend[s], they moved here from Europe from Iran so they let us know how everything goes here."<sup>68</sup> Afsaneh's initial settlement in Vancouver inspired Farah's eventual migration and settlement – another example of the importance of chain migration in explaining settlement patterns among Iranian immigrants. Farah also noted

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<sup>67</sup> Interview # 9, Vancouver B.C., (May 24, 2007), 1.

<sup>68</sup> Interview #4, Vancouver B.C., (May 4, 2007), 2.



that the physical landscape in Vancouver reminded her of northern Iran. She recalled receiving a post card from Afsaneh who had decided to move to Vancouver with a picture of the city on the front. Her friend wrote on the back: “we are settling down in Vancouver, and this is a nice place, it looks so much like the North of Iran. There is rain but no snow.”<sup>69</sup>

Both of these women also explained that another reason they wanted to move to Canada from Sweden was because they had been told that Canada was less racist than Sweden. Afsaneh described the racism she experienced in Sweden as one of the main reasons they wanted to migrate to Canada.

[W]e realized we’re not going to go back to Iran. [And Sweden] is not a place that I want to live and raise my children ... it was such a closed society... They can’t let you in. You never feel part of the society. That’s how it was. Now, it’s everything has changed, they’ve got more immigrants, people from all different countries. That’s how it was. Much harder. The dark hair was always an issue. You would see on the bus, you could feel all the faces staring at you, every little thing you do... Yeah, at that time. It got better, it’s not as good as here. Europe is not as good as here still. Then, we chose our beloved Canada! (laughs)<sup>70</sup>

Afsaneh’s description of her migration to Sweden as a refugee during the Iran-Iraq war was infused with a sense of urgency,

we just found the first place we could get in. It wouldn’t matter, we didn’t think of the language, the culture, the geography, nothing! Wherever we could, we just put our hand on it [a map] and said “we’ll try here.” And, the first stop we had was in Sweden.<sup>71</sup>

Her choice to migrate and consequently settle in Vancouver, however, reflected a more deliberate and conscious decision. In this sense Farah’s experience parallels Afsaneh’s in

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<sup>69</sup> Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 5, 2007), 9.

<sup>70</sup> Interview #4, Vancouver, B.C., (May 4, 2007), 1-2.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

a number of ways. After moving to Sweden as a refugee, Farah was very successful but she was ultimately unhappy living in Sweden. She explained,

I had two very good jobs. They loved me and I loved the relationship with my co-workers and everything, but after ten years of living there and the racist attitude, I don't want to say everyone was racist, but in Europe they are still struggling with the idea of why other people come here [Europe] right?<sup>72</sup>

The same xenophobic attitudes also prevented Farah and her family from wanting to settle permanently in Sweden:

[W]e lived in a very good neighborhood in Stockholm, but those attitudes kind of killed me really: "Why did you come here," "are you a Muslim," "are you not," and you know, all those things, they wouldn't let me live my life somehow.<sup>73</sup>

These attitudes that motivated Afsaneh and Farah to leave Sweden for Canada may be partially understood in terms of the different histories of migration and settlement in these two countries. Unlike Sweden, Canada is a settler society with an increasingly diverse population of migrants, most of whom arrived from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.<sup>74</sup> Since 1971 the Canadian government adopted multiculturalism as official federal policy, recognizing the importance of respecting cultural difference and the promotion of "racial/ethnic harmony and equality."<sup>75</sup> In 1988, a Ministry of Multiculturalism was established, which further demonstrated Canada's commitment to combating xenophobic and racist attitudes towards migrants.<sup>76</sup> As with numerous other

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<sup>72</sup> Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 5, 2007), 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Daiva Stasiulis and Rhada Jhappan, "The Fractitious Politics of a Settler Society: Canada," In Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis Eds., *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 109-119.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>76</sup> John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 441-442.

settler societies, Canada constructed its policy of multiculturalism due to the diversity of its population and the need to promote an inclusive national identity through “new ideologies of ‘common destiny’ and ‘solidarity’” amongst its citizens.<sup>77</sup> As such, “[M]ulticulturalism often corresponds to the interests of immigrant minorities and especially their leadership.”<sup>78</sup> However, multiculturalism has also been critiqued

for its failure to alleviate racism or discrimination, for ghettoizing ethnocultural communities’ justice and equity concerns, and for handicapping the movement of ‘ethnics’ into the mainstream.<sup>79</sup>

Yet, despite these shortcomings and criticisms of multiculturalism, the espousal of Multiculturalism by the federal government demonstrates that overt racism and culturally intolerant behavior are not condoned in Canada. Indeed, Afsaneh and Farah insist that they have not experienced racism in Canada in the same way they did in Sweden. Their experience may, however, have been impacted by their particular personal backgrounds in terms of their high level of education, upper middle class status, their proficiency in English, and other factors such as the racism they faced in Sweden which may have reduced their perceptions of racism in Canada.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval Davis, “Introduction: Beyond Dichotomies-Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class in Settler Societies,” in Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis eds., *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 23.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>79</sup> Stasiulis and Jhappan, “Fractitious Politics,” 124.

<sup>80</sup> Another factor which may impact the discriminatory attitudes and racism faced by Iranian women in Vancouver is the fact that many Iranians are not immediately distinguishable as non-Europeans, as noted by Haideh Moghissi, “Away from home: Iranian women, displacement, cultural resistance and change,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 30, Iss. 2 (Spring, 1999), 209. Although notions of race are arbitrary and shifting, visible ethnic difference certainly serves as imputes for racism and discrimination. For an insightful firsthand account of an Iranian woman confronting notions of race, color and what constitutes “whiteness,” upon her migration to the United States, see Gelaresh Asayesh “I grew up thinking I was white,” in Lila Azam Zanganeh ed., *My Sister Guard Your Veil, My Brother Guard Your Eyes : Uncensored Iranian Voices* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.).

Another difference between these women's migration from Iran to Sweden and their migration from Sweden to Canada was their freedom of choice. Farah explained,

this time I felt like, compared to last time I sought refugee status in Sweden... This time it was on my own free choice here... That time, the other time, I was forced to kind of pick a place, find a place to hide basically.<sup>81</sup>

Both Afsaneh and Farah, in short, juxtapose their experiences of seeking refugee status in Sweden with their subsequent migration to Canada as immigrants. The decision of these women to migrate and settle in Canada with their families was motivated by a number of concerns, but not the same fear for their lives that they felt in migrating to Sweden. Their migration to Canada involved a voluntary decision that their migration to Sweden did not.

Nasrin's migration to Vancouver offers yet another perspective. Her decision to migrate to Canada was not based upon the fact that she had family here or that she was able to better access education here. Rather, she explained more broadly, "I moved to Canada for a better life."<sup>82</sup> In particular, she also alluded to the idea that one of the reasons that she moved to Canada was to get a divorce because of the taboo associated with divorce in Iran. She explained that she and her husband "decided [to] get [a] divorce when we moved to Canada."<sup>83</sup> She also explained that she was generally dissatisfied with the policies of the government of the Islamic Republic in Iran, particularly as they pertained to women. She related her experience as one common amongst Iranian women who have migrated to Vancouver:

other people like us, they haven't any political problems. We came here as immigrants, and we had a good job, with opportunity, everything in Iran. But, the government in Iran, they are not doing enough women-wise.

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<sup>81</sup> Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 5, 2007), 9.

<sup>82</sup> Interview #7, Vancouver, B.C., (May 13, 2007), 10.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Especially for women ... And for this reason, many of them are like me, and move to another country...Because we have had it, had it with everything, you know?<sup>84</sup>

Nasrin explained her choice in coming to Canada in terms of her desire to settle permanently in one country. Although she had been granted a student visa to pursue her Ph.D. in Germany, she chose instead to come to Canada as an immigrant when her application was accepted. Therefore, her preference in moving to Canada was reflected in the fact that she left her studies in Germany to migrate to Canada. Moreover, the fact that she did not feel any sense of political persecution or force in leaving Iran, demonstrates the freedom of choice she exercised in coming to Canada.

## **Conclusion**

A number of conclusions can be drawn in reviewing the reasons that Iranian women gave for their migration to Canada. Firstly, many of the women who were interviewed in this study represented their settlement in Canada in terms of choice. These women gave a number of explicit and pragmatic reasons for why they or their parents chose to migrate to Canada and settle in Vancouver. Whether these women felt as though their decision to leave Iran was one that was imposed or forced upon them due to persecution, harassment or war, or whether they left for such seemingly benign reasons as pursuing an education, these women largely explained their decision to settle in Canada – as opposed to anywhere else – as intentional. In contrast to literature regarding Iranians in the U.S., a majority of women did not express a lack of control or feeling of helplessness in coming to Canada. Nonetheless, in this sense, the narratives of Iranian

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<sup>84</sup> Interview #7, Vancouver, B.C., (May 13, 2007), 4-5.

women in Vancouver diverge from the literature regarding Iranians in the United States and suggest differences between these two experiences of migration.

Secondly, there is some consistency across these women's stories, suggesting that dominant narratives may exist among Iranian women in terms of how they choose to represent themselves as a population of migrants. It is possible that expressing their migration and settlement in these terms also reflects the way that Iranian women in Vancouver have chosen to represent their migration to a non-Iranian researcher. Three factors which surfaced frequently as reasons for migrating to Canada and settling in Vancouver included: their quest for improved access to education; their familiarity with the climate and geography in Vancouver; and having close friends or family move there first and recommend it. The emphasis placed upon improved access to education as a factor for migration is representative of the fact that education was valued among these women and their families. But while education was cited as a factor in their migration to Vancouver, implicit in these women's explanation was also the idea that Vancouver held other opportunities for them as women. Improving their access to education would in turn give them access to other opportunities. The fact that education was named as the primary motivation for the migration of some of these women to Vancouver also tells us something about the broader restrictions these women felt in Iran, whether these restrictions were due to social or economic constraints.

The geographical similarities between Vancouver and Iran were also a factor in the decision of a number of women to settle in Vancouver. The mild climate of Vancouver and their positive associations with mountainous landscapes were expressed as important, and perhaps eased these women's transition to a new country. Furthermore,

the presence of friends and/or family already living in Vancouver provided women with support networks to help them adjust to a new city, a factor that again highlights the importance of chain migration in the context of Iranian migration to Vancouver.

The Iranian women interviewed in this study explained their migration from Iran to Vancouver as due to a wide range of reasons. It is important to understand the motivations for migration expressed by these women in terms of the broader national histories of Canada and Iran. It should also be understood that their emigration and subsequent immigration to Canada was the result of an array of complex incentives and decisions. For most women, their decision to migrate was at least partially based upon dissatisfaction or persecution in Iran; this is arguably characteristic of many Iranian migrants, whether they arrived in Canada as refugees or not. Even for women who did not feel dissatisfied with social or political conditions when they lived in Iran, they expressed their feeling that they would be unhappy if they returned permanently to Iran after having lived in Vancouver. Broader social freedoms and opportunities in terms of education and employment were undoubtedly also key factors in influencing these women to settle in Vancouver.

### **CHAPTER 3: “We are lonely islands, every one of us Iranian people.”<sup>1</sup> Divisions and Distrust among Iranian Migrant Women in Vancouver**

In some cases the experience of migration serves to strengthen the bonds between individuals from a shared homeland, while in other cases the divisions that existed between groups in their homeland are reproduced in their new locale. Yet these divisions are the result of more than migrants simply clinging to past values or adopting those of their new environment; they are often also impacted by the circumstances surrounding migration. Conditions in the destination country can also produce new kinds of divides and connections. As Cole Harris has observed, in settler societies: “[p]eople who had lived apart, and had been aware of each other only in the most general terms, if at all, met abruptly on unfamiliar terrain.”<sup>2</sup> The same is true of Iranian women from different ethnic, religious and class backgrounds, with different political or personal affiliations, who migrated to Vancouver following the 1978-1979 revolution, and came into contact with one another in the new cultural context of Vancouver in ways they would not have in Iran. While some divisions that existed between groups within Iran were reproduced in Vancouver, the experience of migration also transformed some of these pre-existing divisions and, in some cases, created new ones. New kinds of coalitions also occur and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 5, 2007), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographic Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 266.



migrants' lives and attitudes are reshaped in various ways by their interaction with their new environment. As John R. Hinnells so eloquently explains, "[m]igrants do not come like sheets of clean blotting paper, ready to absorb anything; they are not free of suppositions, nor do they remain unaffected" by conditions in their new surroundings.<sup>3</sup> The following discussion will interrogate how social and economic factors in Vancouver interacted in the context of migration to shape the relationships Iranian women formed with other Iranians in Vancouver.

North Vancouver has become an urban enclave for a growing number of Iranian migrants in Vancouver, as discussed in Chapter One of this study.<sup>4</sup> And yet, Iranian women who participated in these interviews explained that Iranians have encountered challenges in creating a sense of community based on a shared national identity in Vancouver. In some cases the experience of migration to Vancouver altered the class and social status of Iranian women, but for others their social status and class was carried over from Iran. It is important to note here that class and status refer to more than just financial wherewithal; an individual's social position is impacted by a number of factors including their level of education, profession, the neighbourhood in which they live, and their family background in Iran. According to the women's interviews, conceptions of class and status affected gender relations and produced divisions both within their own families and among Iranians in Vancouver generally. These were not entirely separate

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<sup>3</sup> John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 430.

<sup>4</sup> A number of Iranian businesses have been established on the North Shore of Vancouver including restaurants, travel agencies, grocery stores, beauty salons and the like. Iranians in Vancouver also have several Farsi newspapers, a radio show of Vancouver's co-op radio, and a Farsi language school to serve their population of migrants. Fram Dinshaw, "Vancouver's Iranian community," *The Thunderbird.ca*, December 5, 2007, <http://thethunderbird.ca/blog/2007/12/05/vancouver-iranian-community/> (accessed June 24, 2008).

issues, as the changes that produced divisions amongst families also had ramifications on the lives of individual women, which impacted their relations in the broader community. While some Iranian women challenged accepted gender roles in terms of their behaviour and sexuality, others sought to maintain the values that they saw as part of their culture. The divisions between Iranians in Vancouver can also be partially explained by understanding the resonance that religious or political affiliations from Iran continued to have upon the lives of Iranian migrants. This is not meant to imply that Iranian women living in Vancouver have not formed networks of support with other Iranian women on the basis of shared experience, religion and cultural background.<sup>5</sup> Explored here, however, are the reasons for the perceived divisions identified in the interviews, and how these divisions inhibited the relationships formed amongst Iranian women and complicated attempts to create a sense of community based on an Iranian national identity in Vancouver.<sup>6</sup> As John Bodnar notes,

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<sup>5</sup> Vancouver Iranians have established a number of organizations such as the Persian Independent Women's Group, which offers counselling and legal advice to Farsi-speaking Iranian women, and the Persian Immigrants and Refugee Association, which is concerned with preventing the wrongful deportation of Iranians living in Vancouver. Hadani Ditmars, "Iranians" in Chuck Davis ed., *The Greater Vancouver Book: An Urban Encyclopedia* (Vancouver: Linkman Press, 1996), 322. Celebrating *Nowrooz* is an important event, which brings together Iranians from various backgrounds. A number of cultural organizations such as the Vancouver chapter of the Pars National Ballet demonstrate the cultural traditions of Persian music and dance in Vancouver on important occasions like *Nowrooz* (Persian new year). Oker Chen, "Forbidden dance finds home in Vancouver," *The Ubyyssey Online*, March 18, 2008, <http://www.ubyssey.ca/?p=2834> (accessed June 23, 2008). also, Iranians within particular religious groups such as Baha'is, Muslims and Zoroastrians have formed communities of shared belief and built centers for worship within Vancouver where they have found support and preserved their religious traditions. Interview #1, Vancouver, B.C., (December 29, 2006); Interview #11, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007); Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 453.

<sup>6</sup> The way in which migration has facilitated the construction of a sense of community amongst migrants on the basis of shared ethnic or national identity has been examined by Kathleen Neils Conzen and David A. Gerber in Kathleen Neils Conzen and David A. Gerber, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no.1 (Fall 1992): 3. *Academic Search Elite*, EBSCOhost. [www.search.ebscohost.com](http://www.search.ebscohost.com). They have noted that some migrants constructed their ethnic or national identity as a source of

[i]n nearly every immigrant settlement of any consequence in urban America...division based upon old world backgrounds, status distinctions, or class was widespread.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, Bodnar sheds light on the impact that class differences had upon the formation and stratification of immigrant communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His ideas, however, are also applicable in more recent contexts. He argues that this important aspect of the immigrant experience has often been neglected in studies of immigration history, despite “the fact that class antagonisms separated ethnic aggregations is indisputable.”<sup>8</sup> Dino Cinel has also examined divisions within migrant communities who share a common ethnic or national background. In his study of Italian immigrants in San Francisco in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cinel describes how class divisions, *campanilismo* or “loyalty and attachment to the traditions of one’s commune,” and regionalism divided this population.<sup>9</sup> He also explains that class-based hierarchies, which had their origins in Italy, were perpetuated amongst Italian migrants in San Francisco. Moreover, he argues that the existence of these class hierarchies strengthened Italians’ reliance on regional ties within their new geographical locale, as they could not rely on leadership or assistance from the wealthy Italian merchant migrants or the educated Italian political exile elite in America due to these class cleavages.<sup>10</sup> These

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empowerment and solidarity in the face of a hostile, new country. However, they by no means created wholly unified communities within their new geographic locale based on a shared ethno-national background despite the fact that these new ethnic categories attempted to erase difference

<sup>7</sup> Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 118.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>9</sup> Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 197.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

examples demonstrate the way that social hierarchies and value systems have travelled across geographical space and continued to hold meaning, shaping the lives of migrants. However, it is also important to note that new hierarchies, which are specific to the hegemonic systems that operate within migrants' new environment, can also be produced.

The way that the transformation of gender roles has affected Iranian women migrants has been examined by a number of scholars, primarily within the fields of sociology and psychology.<sup>11</sup> Esther Sameyah-Amiri notes, for example, that upon moving to North America, some Iranian women were subject to “anger, rejection, and blame [from] their family members and the larger Iranian community” when they attempted to take advantage of the new opportunities available to them in terms of employment, education, social and also sexual freedom.<sup>12</sup> Her study, *Cultural Orientation Coping Style and Psychological Symptomatology Among Iranian Female Immigrants*, positions North American culture and Iranian culture in opposition to one another, with “the traditionally oppressive and restrictive heritage of Iran” leading to “[t]he oppression of Iranian women ... on practically all levels.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast, she presents North America as liberal and egalitarian with regard to gender relations. Farnaz S. Kerendi's study, which is also based on psychological theories of acculturation

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<sup>11</sup> I hesitate to make any generalization regarding what constitutes “traditional” gender roles for Iranians, as any historian must be aware that gender roles and the ways that gender has been constructed have changed over time in every society and for different parts of each society, due to a number of factors. For a more in-depth discussion of the history of gender roles and the construction of gender identity in modern Iran, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Esther Sameyah-Amiri, “Cultural Orientation, Coping Style, and Psychological Symptomatology Among Iranian Female Immigrants” (Ph.D diss., California School of Professional Psychology, 1998), 24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

amongst Iranian immigrant women in the United States, likewise presents Iranian and American gender roles in binary terms.<sup>14</sup> His study presumes that a dichotomy exists between “traditional” Iranian gender roles, which he sees as inherently patriarchal, and egalitarian gender roles as they exist in the United States. According to Kerendi,

[i]n the United States, attitudes toward gender roles began shifting away from a more traditional ideology towards a more egalitarian one in the late 1960’s.<sup>15</sup>

He attributes this to the second wave feminist movement, which gained momentum during the 1960’s and 1970’s in North America. In contrast to shifting attitudes among Americans as a whole he states:

[i]ndividuals from traditional cultural backgrounds (e.g., Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern cultures) tend to hold conservative attitudes toward gender roles with regards to such aspects of life as employment, housework, childrearing, and sexual behavior.<sup>16</sup>

His perception of “traditional” Iranian gender roles is therefore placed in opposition to “modern” American gender roles. The fundamental problem with this dichotomy is that it fails to account for the fact that many urban Iranian women had been grappling with this tension between multiple and contested notions of “traditional” and “modern” gender roles long before migrating to North America, as is demonstrated by Nayereh Tohidi’s

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<sup>14</sup> Farnaz S. Kerendi “Acculturation and Gender Role Attitudes as Related to Acculturative Stress in Iranian Immigrant Women” (Ph.D. diss., California School of Professional Psychology, 1998), 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

article “Iranian Women and Gender Relations in Los Angeles.”<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, these studies all agree that Iranian women migrants who transgress accepted gender roles risk alienation from their immediate family and also from the broader and highly heterogeneous Iranian migrant community.<sup>18</sup>

Shahnaz Khan provides a more sophisticated theoretical approach to the issue of gender roles and culture raised by Sameyah-Amiri and Kerendi through her discussion on Muslim women in Canada.<sup>19</sup> Although Khan’s discussion focuses specifically on Muslim women, rather than Iranian women, the theoretical underpinnings of her argument prove useful for a more general analysis of Iranian women in Canada. Khan asserts that Muslim women in Canada are caught between the competing discourses of Islamism and Orientalism.<sup>20</sup> Khan proposes that “[t]he Orientalist notion of the Muslim Woman as synonymous with passivity must be challenged” while simultaneously “[d]econstructing racist discourses, particularly those that emphasize the need to modernize traditional cultures and religions,” thereby providing a “third space” where

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<sup>17</sup> Nayereh Tohidi, “Iranian Women and Gender Relations in Los Angeles,” in *Iranegales: Iranians in Los Angeles*, ed. Ron Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 178. Dialogues regarding notions of “tradition” and “modernity” in respect to women’s role in society have a long history in Iran. It is important to note that these terms are problematic in that they tend to characterize “tradition” as being oppressive towards women, whereas modernity is often conflated with westernization. Despite the problems with these terms, it is important to recognize that these issues have a history in Iran. Studies that fail to historicize this discussion tend to view migration as bringing about these tensions in regards to gender roles, when this is not the case.

<sup>18</sup> When I refer to the idea of acceptable gender roles, I am not assuming that there is one particular gender role that is acceptable for Iranians. As in any culture, gendered expectations and notions of what constitutes acceptable gender roles differ according to a number of factors, including class, religion, ethnicity and social values. Therefore I resist defining what constitutes Iranian gender roles, and instead leave this to the narratives of the Iranian women who have themselves identified certain norms and values as indicative of Iranian gender roles.

<sup>19</sup> Shahnaz Khan, “Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space,” *Signs* 23, No. 2. (Winter, 1998), 463-494.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

these women may negotiate life within Canada.<sup>21</sup> By the same token, Iranian women in Vancouver, whether Muslim or not, are caught between the complex and multiple discourses of Iranian and Canadian culture, even though the two do not necessarily need to be constructed in binary terms and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Iranian women migrants in Vancouver, dealing with multiple and contested ideas of modernity and tradition, are also grappling with how to construct a “positive” ethnic identity within the context of Vancouver, which is broad enough to incorporate such a heterogeneous population but is still able to communicate and maintain important aspects of Iranian culture.

The composition of the Iranian population in Vancouver is diverse in terms of religion, political ideology, class and status. As discussed above, Iranian migrants who left Iran between the years of 1979 to 2006 came to Vancouver for a variety of reasons. Many middle class Iranians fled Iran immediately following the forced abdication of Reza Shah in 1979. As a result, the Iranian diaspora, as it is commonly referred to, is often generalized as being largely secular and composed of political exiles.<sup>22</sup> Iranian scholar Haideh Moghissi, for example, asserts, “the vast majority of the Iranian diaspora shares an urban and modern...middle-class background,” and

left Iran in objection to cultural and gender oppression and discriminatory practices of the post-revolutionary government-practices which are rooted, or, are perceived as having their roots, in the Islamic moral code and its belief system.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Khan, “Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space,” 490.

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the literature regarding the composition of these migrants and their reasons for leaving Iran and coming to Canada or the United States see the first and second chapters of this study.

<sup>23</sup> Haideh Moghissi, “Away from home: Iranian women, displacement, cultural resistance and change,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 30, Iss. 2 (Spring, 1999), 209.

Her statement suggests that Iranians living abroad are opposed to the religious nature of the current regime, hold egalitarian values in regard to gender, and are of middle class background. Mohammad Chaichian notes a similar trend amongst Iranians in the United States in his study of first generation Iranian immigrants in Iowa. According to his survey of this group, 23.5% migrated due to “social constraints” in Iran; 17.6% due to “political repression;” 14.7 % left due to circumstances surrounding the 1981-1988 Iran-Iraq war such as “loss of loved ones/property;” 8.8% due to “loss of job or confiscation of property,” which was, in many cases, a direct result of the new policies of the regime of the Islamic Republic; and 5.9% cited their reason for leaving Iran as due to “religious constraints.”<sup>24</sup> Chaichian also makes note of the fact that “the existence of a harsh social and political environment in the home country seems to be a determining factor for women to emigrate from Iran.”<sup>25</sup> Chaichian’s case study of Iranians in Iowa provides a more detailed breakdown of the specific reasons Iranians left Iran and his results corroborate Moghissi’s argument that the majority of Iranians emigrated following the 1978-1979 revolution due to societal constraints which emerged thereafter.

While middle class Iranians undoubtedly comprise a large percentage of the population of Iranians in Vancouver, it is difficult to speculate as to the exact economic composition of Iranian migrants to Vancouver. Neither Citizenship and Immigration Canada nor Canada Census compiles statistics outlining the specific immigrant class of

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<sup>24</sup> Mohammad Chaichian, “First Generation Iranian Immigrants and the Question of Cultural Identity: The Case of Iowa” *International Migration Review* 31, No.3 (Autumn, 1997), 616. Chaichian notes that the remaining 29.4% of respondents cited obtaining better education as their reason for leaving Iran.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 617.



migrants to Vancouver by their last country of residence.<sup>26</sup> However, records do show that 15,753 Iranian immigrants - as compared to 5,577 Iranian refugees - arrived in the Greater Vancouver Area between the years of 1980 to 2005.<sup>27</sup> While these statistics are not entirely conclusive, they do allow for some inferences to be drawn regarding the composition of the Iranian population in Vancouver. Firstly, one may assume that those people able to qualify as economic migrants to Canada were of upper to middle class backgrounds, as they would have required at minimum a high level of education to qualify as a skilled worker, or possess funds in the amount of approximately \$400,000.00 to invest in the Canadian economy in order to qualify as an investor immigrant.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, one may presume that those people who came to Vancouver as refugees were either forced to leave their possessions and assets in Iran, or did not have the financial wherewithal in the first place to qualify as economic migrants to Canada although they may have been middle class in Iran. Therefore, Iranians who came to Vancouver as refugees likely have less in the way of financial resources than those who arrived as economic migrants. However, those people who arrived as refugees in Canada may have been from wealthy upper-class families in Iran who were simply forced to flee.

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<sup>26</sup> Immigrant class refers to the category under which individuals are admitted to Canada. Classes include Family Class; Economic Class, which is comprised of both skilled workers and also business immigrants who must qualify as either “Investor, Entrepreneur [or] Self-Employed” based on their net worth and their willingness to make a contribution to the Canadian economy; and Refugee class. See *Canada’s Immigration Law* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2002), 6-13.

<sup>27</sup> Table: Landed Immigrants whose last place of residence was Iran, *Citizenship and Immigrations Canada, Landed Immigrant Database*.

<sup>28</sup> *Canada’s Immigration Law* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2002), 9-11. These observations are based on the immigration criteria as set out in the aforementioned document. It is important to note that Canadian immigration legislation has gone through numerous changes during the period of 1980-2005; it is beyond the scope of this study, however, to list in detail the numerous changes to this legislation. Suffice it to note that following 1976 and the implementation of the points system, Canadian immigration policies have been guided by similar economic and humanitarian principles.

Conversely, many Iranians who arrived in Vancouver as economic migrants may also identify with the refugee experience due to the persecution they faced in Iran, and their life in exile. Yet another group of Iranian migrants who did not suffer persecution in Iran and do not identify with the idea of exile have moved to Vancouver in order to allow their children better access to post-secondary education. Therefore, descriptions that label the population as largely middle class, and their reasons for leaving as due to their general dissatisfaction with the regime of the Islamic Republic, only allow for a limited understanding of Iranian women migrants in Vancouver.

The narratives of Iranian women living in Vancouver demonstrate the diversity of this population in terms of their political ideologies, social values, religious beliefs and class background. As one Iranian woman explained it, the difficulty with this lay in the fact that there were “[t]oo many different people. You don’t know who...you can trust, who can be your friend.”<sup>29</sup> A majority of the women who participated in this study identified distrust and divisions as important factors that have inhibited the development of a stronger sense of community amongst Iranians in Vancouver. These divisions were attributed to differences in class and status, religion, political affiliation, gender roles and cultural values. By demonstrating the tensions that exist amongst Iranian women living in Vancouver, this discussion attempts to analyze divisions that exist as a result of both pre-migration hierarchies and ideals as well as shifting notions of class, gender, religious and political identities in a new geographic locale.

This is not to suggest Iranians in Vancouver have not formed nationalistic or communalistic groups and mutual aid societies, or that Iranians have not carved out an

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<sup>29</sup> Interview #8, Vancouver, B.C., (May 23, 2007), 15.

enclave within the urban landscape of Vancouver. Only one of the Iranian women who participated in this study, Baharak, firmly asserted, “[w]e have a big community.”<sup>30</sup> She estimated that 200,000 Iranians participated in the most recent *Nowrooz* (Persian New Years) celebration in Vancouver. And when questioned if there were any issues or events that caused conflict or disagreement amongst Iranians in Vancouver she stated that there were none. She perceived Iranians in Vancouver as a unified community tolerant of one another’s beliefs: “we don’t care, we have Baha’i...we have [Christians], Muslim, we’re all together, we don’t care that much. *Here* (emphasis mine) we don’t care that much.”<sup>31</sup> However, she was alone in this belief that migrating had allowed for the growth of a widespread sense of community among Iranians in Vancouver.

Understanding that divisions exist amongst Iranian migrants provides a more nuanced and complex portrait of this population. These divisions also tell us more about the individual histories of the women who left Iran for Vancouver and the way that migration has impacted their lives. Hierarchies based on class and social status figured prominently in creating and maintaining divisions between Iranian immigrants. In this sense, divisions can be seen as a way for individuals to preserve a social position or status that may have become threatened due to circumstances surrounding migration. However, other factors such as gender roles, political affiliations, religion, notions of tradition, education and regional identity also led to the sense of difference and disunity amongst these particular Iranian women in Vancouver. It is of particular importance to note that the hierarchies and identities that led to the divisions perceived by these women were not static, and notions of class, status, gender roles, traditions as they relate to the following

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<sup>30</sup> Interview #6, Vancouver, B.C., (May 11, 2007), 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

discussion, were both imported from Iran and also transformed within the context of Vancouver. For example, divisions that arose between Iranian women in Vancouver regarding perceptions of what constituted provocative clothing could not have occurred in the same way in Iran due to the government enforced dress code. The ability of these women to freely express their individual beliefs through dress in the public sphere has forced them to relate to each other in new ways.<sup>32</sup> Those who were seen to be dressing provocatively were believed to have “changed” too much, and those who disapproved were perceived as too “conservative” or “traditional.”

### **Changing Standards of Appearance and Behaviour**

The way that Iranian women presented themselves, in terms of physical appearance and behaviour in Vancouver was a reflection of their personal values and beliefs. Due to the diversity of the Iranian population in Vancouver in terms of ideologies and backgrounds, perceptions of what constituted appropriate behaviour or dress for Iranian women in Vancouver also differed. One woman, Roya, described two separate experiences which illustrated how her transgression of what was perceived as appropriate behaviour led to her alienation from other Iranians in Vancouver. Roya first explained her attempt to hold an art show in conjunction with an Iranian association in

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<sup>32</sup> It is important to acknowledge that Iranian women have demonstrated resistance to the dress code in Iran from 1979 onwards. As mentioned in Chapter One, women protested against making the hijab mandatory on March 8, 1979, and women in Iran have continued to find ways to resist which have led to government “crackdowns” against these women. “New Iranian dress code crackdown,” Monday, June 16, 2008, *BBC News online*. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7457212.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7457212.stm) (accessed on July 22, 2008). Wearing noticeable makeup, flamboyant or form-fitting clothing, or showing parts of their hair beneath loosely tied scarves can be seen as subversive behaviour but also a way for these women to assert their personal identity in the public sphere in Iran. As such, while women have found ways to express their individuality in Iran, it is much easier to do so in Vancouver.

Vancouver. Many of Roya's paintings and sculptures involved nudity or images of the body:

[A] couple of years ago I tried to have an art show...I know I'm a little different, but when I put [a] picture of my painting to have art show in the Iranian community, I was told "no, I'm sorry. We can't put your painting [in]." Because sort of ...[c]ulture or whatever, because I had a nude lady or whatever.<sup>33</sup>

The rejection of her art, based on its seemingly inappropriate subject matter and nudity, suggests that she held different values from those Iranians who were organizing the art show, who were seemingly more conservative. She related this experience to cultural values originating in Iran, which she found restrictive and were the primary reason for her move to Vancouver: "it's exactly like hell... [y]ou know, especially for women."<sup>34</sup> This instance illustrates how new divisions occurred in the context of Vancouver, as in Iran exhibiting paintings with nudity in them would have been prohibited by law. In Vancouver, in contrast, Roya's art was not illegal, but it was still viewed as inappropriate by other Iranians.

Roya also related a second experience, which further demonstrated how her behaviour was seen as inappropriate and contributed to her sense of alienation and distrust of other Iranian women. She recalled how another Iranian woman in Vancouver reacted when she told her that she was living with her Canadian boyfriend notwithstanding that, at the time of the interview, she was in her mid-thirties.

Some...people [Iranians]... I can't deal with them... You know, they think different. Because I [was] dating a Canadian guy...Last year, when I went to school, some [Iranian] lady, you know older lady, middle aged lady. Forty or something. She told me, "okay what are you doing? Are you living with your parents?" I go "no, I'm living with myself." "Oh

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<sup>33</sup> Interview #8, Vancouver, B.C., (May 23, 2007), 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

who are you living with?” “I’m living with my boyfriend.” “Who’s your boyfriend?” She kept asking me. “He’s, he’s Canadian.” “He’s not Muslim?”... [I]t’s so stupid...I can’t talk to them about my private life and they always...judge you and tell you what to do ... I think that...mostly it’s...cultural.<sup>35</sup>

This instance provides yet another example of how the new context of Vancouver gave rise to divisions due to women negotiating circumstances that would have otherwise been prohibited by law in Iran. In Iran, it would have been illegal for Roya to live with her boyfriend, and although in Canada unmarried cohabitation has become quite common, the Iranian woman she refers to in the above anecdote did not see her lifestyle and behaviour as acceptable. Although she noted that she has met a few Iranians in Vancouver who share her values and have been accepting of her, she explained this as the exception to the rule: “I have met [a] couple of Iranian good people you know, they understand...For example [friend’s name], she’s really nice. She’s totally different.”<sup>36</sup> Her friend was a political exile in her fifties who left Iran over twenty years ago and despite their difference in age and the time they left Iran, Roya explained that they shared similar values. Her experiences suggest that multiple sets of gender expectations exist for Iranian women living in Vancouver that originated both from among Iranians and from Canadian society. Her experiences confirm the suggestion put forth by Shahnaz Khan: migrant women from Muslim societies face competing discourses regarding gender roles and appropriate behaviour within Canadian society.

Disapproval towards overt expressions of sexuality surfaced in the narratives of both younger and older Iranian women of varying religious backgrounds in this study. A Muslim woman in her mid-forties, Homa, explained in her interview, “Iranian women

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<sup>35</sup> Interview #8, Vancouver, B.C., (May 23, 2007), 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

change when they come here.”<sup>37</sup> She cited this as the reason for her difficulty in establishing friendships with other Iranian women in Vancouver. When asked to provide an example of exactly how she perceived the change that occurred in Iranian women, Homa explained:

[W]hen they come here they change. They change maybe they wear very short skirts, or very short...shorts (laughs), things like that.<sup>38</sup>

She felt that this behaviour was inappropriate, and she mentioned that she resisted forming friendships with Iranian women in Vancouver on the basis of this disapproval. Similarly, a Baha’i woman in her early twenties, Azar, also expressed this sentiment in her interview when she stated:

if you go to some of the Persian events [in Vancouver], you know, you see that, some woman are very much concerned or... I think, many of them, they’re more concerned about their appearance, of how stylish they look, of how pretty they look.<sup>39</sup>

She suggested that these women were materialistic and she disapproved of the values that were associated with this. Another woman, Zahra, explained the reason that she did not have many Iranian friends was because

when they go to parties they have to have the BCBG dress, like every single time it’s gotta be a different one. You can’t wear the same thing twice, you’ve gotta make it to every single event, be careful who you’re seen with, like you have to have the right clique, the right this, the right that.<sup>40</sup>

Although Azar was an active member of the Baha’i community and Zahra was a practicing Muslim, they both shared similar values in regards to what constituted appropriate behaviour for Iranian women living in Vancouver. As such, one can see how

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<sup>37</sup> Interview #2, Vancouver, B.C., (December, 30, 2006), 14.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Interview #1, Vancouver, B.C., (December 29, 2006), 35.

<sup>40</sup> Interview #11, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007), 37.

the competing values and differing standards of what constitutes appropriate behaviour in terms of clothing and appearance have created divisions between some Iranian women living in Vancouver. These values are informed by the religious beliefs and cultural background of these women, and in some cases they cut across these divides. The perception of change among some women and the maintenance of tradition by others with regards to expressions of gender identity and sexuality, demonstrate some of the tensions that have arisen amongst Iranian women. And yet, it is important to acknowledge that what are believed to constitute traditional values amongst these women are neither static nor universal, but have evolved in response to migration and the cultural context of Vancouver. The existence of these divisions suggests that some Iranian women resisted the gender identities prescribed for them by their families and the larger Iranian population in Vancouver, but others continued to embrace them.

Samira, who migrated to Vancouver with her family at the age of two, attributed the tension arising out of differing notions of appropriate behaviour to the point at which women came to Canada. She explained that there “is a difference between Iranians [who came] when the revolution happened and there’s a difference with the ones that just came now, like a few years ago... I just find the girls are different.”<sup>41</sup> Undoubtedly this difference can partially be explained in that women who grew up under the regime of the Islamic Republic and women who grew up in Canada developed under different social contexts: while women growing up under the regime of the Islamic Republic had their gender identity and behaviour within the public sphere proscribed to them through legislation, women growing up in Canada had not dealt with the same overt government

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<sup>41</sup> Interview #9, Vancouver, B.C., (May 24, 2007), 18.



regulated gender roles. Samira compares newcomers to her Iranian friends who arrived in Vancouver immediately after the revolution and grew up there, as she did:

I have some friends that came basically the same time as, as my family. And they are Iranian as well and we speak English to each other, it's like as if I'm going out with you [interviewer]... But then if like an Iranian girl comes just now, I find like we have to be a lot more like, polite, just more like, traditional.<sup>42</sup>

Yet she hesitates to attribute this solely to the fact that these girls grew up under the regime of the Islamic Republic.

I don't know if the women there some of the younger ones have grown up and have been told "men are better" this and that. Maybe they don't have as much confidence as growing up here and saying like "yeah, we're the same"... But not all of them.<sup>43</sup>

Samira also identified another important factor shaping cultural identity and notions of what constituted appropriate behaviour: "It depends on what part of Iran you grew up in, if it was a rural village or a city, it's different."<sup>44</sup> Due in part to geographical obstacles, the educational and employment levels amongst rural Iranian women have historically been lower than that of urban women.<sup>45</sup> Rural Iranians have also been thought to be more religious, "conservative," and holding "peasant values."<sup>46</sup> Therefore, practical considerations such as limited access to educational and employment opportunities can be seen as impacting the values and beliefs of rural Iranian women. However, the perception that Iranians from rural areas are uneducated and "conservative," has likely

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<sup>42</sup> Interview #9, Vancouver, B.C., (May 24, 2007), 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Hammed Shahidian, *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 230-239. The fact that rural Iran is so sparsely populated and so difficult to access, in terms of poor roads and high mountains has meant that uniform public education systems have been slow to develop in these regions.

<sup>46</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (London: Westview Press, 1988), 112.

also served to perpetuate a sense of difference amongst Iranians in Vancouver. Consequently, the length of time that migrants had lived in Vancouver, and the region they were from in Iran were undoubtedly factors affecting their relationships with other Iranian women in Vancouver, but a number of other factors also impacted their personal values and ideas of gender roles. It is worth noting that gender roles are not in fact Canadian or Iranian in and of themselves, although they were identified as such by some women in their interviews. Gender roles are shaped by a number of socio-economic, political and religious factors within any given society: therefore, they are neither stable nor uniform within any given social context. Moreover, the experience of migration has introduced a new social context for Iranian women, which has led many to re-negotiate their gender roles.

### **Class, Status and Changing Gender Dynamics in Iranian Families**

Class and gender also intersect to produce standards and expectations amongst Iranian women in Vancouver, and have important ramifications in terms of divisions among Iranians. The class or social status of an individual is generally tied to their personal familial heritage, the prestige and wealth attached to their career, and their financial resources. For Iranian women in Vancouver, these factors were also tied to social signifiers such as clothing and the location of one's home, and also to their level of education.

Many Iranians who immigrated to Canada experienced a dramatic change in their personal economic status and stability, thus leading to shifts in gender roles and gendered expectations for Iranian women in Vancouver. Scholars such as Haideh Moghissi and

Janet Bauer have discussed the ramifications of this in terms of gender roles. Moghissi explains the changes in gender roles and social status for Iranians in Canada using both psychological and sociological theories to explain how Iranian women are more able to “cope with displacement” than Iranian men.<sup>47</sup> She explains that Iranian women are more likely than men to take advantage of and benefit from social services and programs designed to assist immigrants in Canada. Moghissi also notes how migration has changed gender roles within families: women who had previously not worked outside the home in Iran have taken on jobs in Canada in order to contribute financially to their family income, while those who worked as professionals in Iran have often become “the sole wage-earner for the family” in Canada.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, Iranian men in Canada tend to experience difficulty in obtaining employment in their field of expertise and they are often “reluctant to work in lowpaid, part-time, dead-end jobs –typically the domain of female workers.”<sup>49</sup> As such, some Iranian women gained a critical new role in the financial well being of their families, a position previously occupied by men.

Janet Bauer notes a similar trend with respect to Iranian refugees in particular. She discusses the effects that life as a refugee or exile has had on Iranian gender relations, given that “[m]en often suffered depressing loss of their political and social status vis-à-vis their host country.”<sup>50</sup> She explains that this has led to a nostalgic restructuring of gender roles amongst leftist Iranians who espoused egalitarian ideals before coming to Canada. She argues that for these men, Iranian values, such as the idea of traditional

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<sup>47</sup> Moghissi, “Iranian women, displacement, cultural resistance and change,” 210.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Janet Bauer, “Desiring Place: Iranian ‘Refugee’ Women and the Cultural Politics of Self and Community in the Diaspora,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* XX, Nos. 1&2 (2000), 184.

gender roles, became symbolic of what they had lost and longed for in Canada.<sup>51</sup> The overall conclusions drawn from these studies have been that Iranian women are more likely to move into the Canadian workforce prior to men. Changes in status and economic resources have made it necessary for these women to move into the workforce, but they have also had ramifications on gender roles within families.

Some Iranians in Vancouver have attempted to reconstruct hierarchies of class and gender in Vancouver in the same way they existed in Iran. For example, some Iranian parents attempt to cement the superior status of their family by dictating with whom their children associate. One woman explained how these class identities were more actively cultivated amongst Iranians in Vancouver than in Iran itself.

[W]hen they come here...suddenly they start showing off, like everything they have, like their money...and the power and the status and the parents who are the doctor and the parents who are the lawyer, like it has to be mentioned... And some of the kids I know are like, their parents are very strict of who they hang out with? They have to hang out with other kids whose parents are surgeons as well.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, indicators of high status in Iran, such as occupation and education have been explicated in the new environment of Vancouver. Azar explained that she believed that the materialistic attitude of young Iranian women was tied to Iranian notions of status and also shaped by the experience of migration. She asserted that for Iranian women living “outside Iran, it’s too much about how you present yourself, how you show your family’s wealth and how you carry yourself pretty in front of others.”<sup>53</sup> Ron Kelley

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<sup>51</sup> Bauer, “Desiring Place: Iranian ‘Refugee’ Women,” 184.

<sup>52</sup> Interview #11, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007), 37.

<sup>53</sup> Interview #1, Vancouver, B.C., (December 29, 2006), 35.

argues that it's a "cultural imperative" for Iranians to "maintain a façade of success."<sup>54</sup> Because of this, he states, "[Iranians] are extraordinarily secretive, and reluctant to expose personal or familial vulnerabilities for fear that these will be exploited and their status...subverted."<sup>55</sup> Although Kelley's argument partially explains the class divisions that have emerged among Iranians in Vancouver, these social divides should not be reduced to simplistic explanations of Iranian culture, but rather, they should be understood within the broader context of migration. The social position an individual occupied in Iran, in other words, can no longer be taken for granted and must be more proactively cultivated due to the uncertainty and changes that have resulted from migration. This may in part be due to the increased social interaction amongst Iranians of different classes and backgrounds in Vancouver, making it more difficult for Iranians to maintain social hierarchies in Vancouver than in Iran.

Nasrin's narrative illustrates how changes in class and status impacted her marriage and also her relationships with other Iranians in Vancouver. She described how migration to Vancouver altered her social status in comparison to Iran, and also changed the dynamic between her and her husband, who had been a successful engineer in Iran. Further, she explained how this drop in social status also impacted the way she perceived herself relative to other Iranians in Vancouver. In Iran, Nasrin worked as a guidance counsellor at a university, but upon moving to Vancouver she obtained her first job as a waitress at an Iranian-owned restaurant. She had difficulty obtaining employment in her

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<sup>54</sup> Ron Kelley, "Wealth and Illusions of Wealth in the Los Angeles Iranian Community," in *Irangleles: Iranians in Los Angeles*, ed. Ron Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 249-250.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

chosen profession due to a lack of Canadian employment experience, so she sought out a job at an Iranian owned and run restaurant. She recalled,

it was really hard for me because it was my first time, that I take this kind of job?... And the first day, I saw one of my students [from Iran] and [he] told me “what are you doing here?” ... When I came back to my house, I couldn’t sleep. During the night, believe me, because...I can’t explain. It was [a] really bad feeling. It was [a] bad kind of weird feeling.<sup>56</sup>

Her loss of status made her uncomfortable in dealings with other Iranians in Vancouver, particularly those who had known her in Iran. Nasrin recalled feeling as though she had left behind a good life in Iran, and feared that she would not be able to regain this same quality of life in Vancouver: “I felt, okay, what happened about me? I had my work, I had my job, I had my social position.”<sup>57</sup> She also explained how her new role as a breadwinner impacted her relationship with her husband. Nasrin recalled that in the first months following their move to Vancouver,

He was terrible! Because I went to work, earlier than him. He was at home. He hadn’t any job. He blamed me every time, you know? He told me “Oh! Why [do] you think you are very important?” And I told him “No, I’m not.”... But, you know, for Iranian men it’s really hard here. Because they can’t accept every job like a woman.<sup>58</sup>

She explained that he was resentful because “I went to restaurant and got a job, and he went after me... Because he wanted to find a job that he has, that he had in Iran! Because he was [an] engineer. You know?”<sup>59</sup> In short, their drop in social status and economic class impacted the way that Nasrin and her husband interacted with one another, as she became the sole wage-earner for them until he moved into the Canadian workforce. Her experience affirms the argument that changes in class and status inform gender roles

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<sup>56</sup> Interview #7, Vancouver, B.C., (May 13, 2007), 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

amongst Iranian women in Vancouver, and in some cases have created divisions within families.

Both Afsaneh and Farah reiterated the view that changes in gender roles have led to divisions in Iranian families in Vancouver. These women attributed their perception of the rising divorce rate amongst Iranians in Vancouver to the shifting gender dynamics that occurred in Iranian families due to migration to Canada.<sup>60</sup> A study conducted amongst Iranian migrants in the United States confirms the suggestion put forth by these women, that divorce rates have increased amongst Iranians following their migration due to changing attitudes towards gender roles between Iranian men and women.<sup>61</sup> Afsaneh described how this has functioned for Iranian families in Vancouver.

If you look at...the families. Persian families. The number of divorces got very high. Why? Because...back home [women] don't get a chance to go to work, they don't have their income, they don't have the support of government. Nothing...basically they have to live with their husband. Otherwise they end up on the street, back to their parents house...[a]nd if they have kids they don't want to take their kids back to their mom. They come here, they get a chance to go back to school. Um, they get a chance to work.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The actual increase in divorce rates amongst Iranians living in Vancouver is difficult to quantify, as British Columbia does not maintain court records based on ethnicity or last country of residence. Therefore any statistical data would be purely speculative and based on surnames, which appear to be of Iranian origin. As such, the following discussion relies on the *perception* of increasing divorce rates, as articulated by Iranian women. For the purposes of discussing divisions amongst the Iranian population in Vancouver, perception is of equal if not greater importance than statistical data, as divisions within communities are largely based on how members of that community perceive itself.

<sup>61</sup> This study suggests that Iranian women in the United States are more likely to adapt to the cultural values of the host society than Iranian men. This study attributes the rising divorce rate amongst Iranian migrants in the United States to this disparity in attitudes towards gender roles. Mohammadreza Hojat, Reza Shapurian, Danesh Foroughi, Habib Nayerahmadi, Mitra Farzaneh, Mahmood Shafieyan, and Mohin Parsi, "Divorce and Iranian Immigrants' Attitudes about Gender Roles and Marriage," in *Contemporary Ethnic Families in the United States*, ed. Nijole V. Benokraitis (New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2002), 310-317.

<sup>62</sup> Interview #4, Vancouver, B.C., (May 4, 2007), 13.

She also asserted that Iranian women were more successful in adapting to life in Vancouver, while men had more difficulty in dealing with changes that occurred in regards to family gender roles.

[Men] have to adapt to a new lifestyle here. If your wife...goes to work, they come, no dinner, nothing is done. They have to cook, that's not in their culture. [In Iran] they come home, everything is ready. But here...the whole thing's upside down...between their families, between the parents, the kids. So everything, all the relationships are just gone out of the ordinary.<sup>63</sup>

Farah reiterated this proposition: namely, that divorce amongst Iranians has increased as a result of changing gender roles and expectations due to their migration to Vancouver. She attributed this less to issues of class specifically, but to the increase in social services available to women and the different ideas of individual rights that Iranian women encountered in Vancouver.

women come here, they learn basically, gradually that they have some rights, right? ... And that's why divorce happens in many Iranian families right now. Women learn about their rights here, in Canada. In Iran, they knew something, they were suspicious that they had some rights, [but] they couldn't ask for their rights because of the laws against them, because of the sexism, the oppression we have. But here...they say "okay, yeah, I have some rights, you cannot tell me anymore, what to do."<sup>64</sup>

The rights Farah referred to in this context appear to go beyond specific rights under the law. Her statement "they were suspicious that they had some rights, [but] they couldn't ask for their rights because of the laws against them," invoked the idea that these "rights" are something universal that Iranian women were denied in Iran. Farah's narrative also suggested that government funded services, egalitarian legislation in terms of access to and the outcome of divorce, and increased opportunities for women in Vancouver

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<sup>63</sup> Interview #4, Vancouver, B.C., (May 4, 2007), 14.

<sup>64</sup> Interview #5, Vancouver, B.C., (May 5, 2007), 18.



impacted gender dynamics within Iranian families. Within the new cultural context of Vancouver, Iranian women were able to assert a greater degree of independence, both economically and because of the different way that divorce was perceived within Canadian society. She also suggested that the reason divorce is becoming more prevalent amongst Iranians in Vancouver is due to women having increased access to divorce. Women's ability to obtain a divorce, though not impossible, is severely limited in Iran.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the perceived increase in divorce rates amongst Iranians in Vancouver may be due both to practical considerations such as legislation, and also to disruptions in the gender dynamics within family units upon their migration to Vancouver.

### **Religious & Political Affiliations Shaping Divisions and Engendering Distrust**

Religion and political affiliation are also important factors producing the divisions that Iranian migrant women identified in their interviews. Migrating from a country governed by religious principles to a country governed by a secular ideology has impacted the way these women view religion and the role it plays in their day-to-day lives. While some women have resisted incorporating religion, mostly Islam, into their lives in Vancouver in what may be a reaction to life in the Islamic Republic in Iran, others have maintained their religious convictions. Similarly, for many Iranian migrants their political affiliations and/or ideologies were at least part of the reason they left Iran

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<sup>65</sup> While men enjoy the right to unilateral divorce under the Iranian Civil Code, women may only obtain a divorce if her husband consents; if she has the right to divorce drawn into her marriage contract, or if she can prove that her husband is unable to support her financially or is causing her "undue hardship" by applying to a Special Civil Tribunal. A translated summary of the issues relating to divorce rights of men and women as it appears in the Iranian Civil Code is provided in Sima Pakzad's "Appendix I: The Legal Status of Women in the Family in Iran," in *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), 177-178.

and still cannot return. Therefore, issues relating to politics in Iran still have resonance for many women migrants. Due to the interconnectedness of religion and politics in Iran, it is important to address how these issues informed one another in the context of Vancouver. The complexity of these dynamics within the migrant population can best be demonstrated by analyzing specific examples.

In order to explain how issues of religion interacted with class and gender for these Iranian women it must first be stated that the Iranian population in Vancouver is comprised of Muslims, Christians, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians, as well as those who do not affiliate themselves with any religion. Only one out the twelve women who participated in interviews for this study regularly attended a *Shi'ite* Muslim mosque and occasionally wore the *hijab* (veil). Four out of twelve women self-identified as practicing Muslims, one woman identified as Catholic, one woman as Baha'i and the remaining six women either stated that they were not religious or that they were Muslim only by birth.<sup>66</sup> That only one woman who participated in this study actively observed Muslim traditions and attended mosque regularly, corresponds with the results of a study conducted by Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Georges Sabah, and Claudia Der-Martirosian regarding religion and ethnicity amongst Iranian migrants in Los Angeles. This study found that in comparison to other Iranian religious groups in Los Angeles (specifically Baha'is, Jews and Armenians), Iranian Muslims were the least observant of religious traditions and practices.<sup>67</sup> In fact, while nearly 80 percent of Muslims were non-observant, less than 10

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<sup>66</sup> As explained on page 33 of Chapter One, in Iran individuals are presumed to be Muslim unless they are born into another religion or convert.

<sup>67</sup> Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Georges Sabah, and Claudia Der-Martirosian, "Beyond Nationality: Religio-Ethnic Diversity," in *Irangenes: Iranians in Los Angeles*, ed. Ron Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 76.

percent of Jews, Baha'is and Armenians were non-observant.<sup>68</sup> Although it would be problematic to attempt to compare the statistics in the aforementioned study with the women in these interviews, the fact that only four women identified themselves as Muslim and only one woman regularly attended a mosque is consistent with these other stories. Although Iran is an Islamic Republic and even prior to the establishment of this Islamic Republic the population in Iran was 98 percent *Shi'ite* Muslim, it appears that Iranian Muslim migrants outside Iran are mostly secular and non-observant.<sup>69</sup>

Many Iranian migrants left Iran due to restrictive policies and legislation in Iran, which were justified through religious rhetoric by the regime of the Islamic Republic. The regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran made the *hijab* mandatory for Iranian women in 1981, in effect imposing a particularly Islamic gender identity upon all Iranian women, regardless of their religious belief.<sup>70</sup> As a result, the *hijab* has become a highly politicized symbol for many Iranian women, representing the regime of the Islamic republic. Consequently, some Iranian Muslim women in Vancouver who have chosen to wear the *hijab* have expressed feeling ostracized by secular Iranians who associate this gendered expression of religiosity with its political affiliation in Iran. Zahra, a young

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<sup>68</sup> Bozorgmehr, Sabah, and Der-Martirosian, "Beyond Nationality: Religio-Ethnic Diversity," 76.

<sup>69</sup> This is not necessarily the case for Iranian migrants from other religious groups. It is difficult to assess with accuracy the "observance" of other Iranian religious groups in Vancouver based on the lack of available data. However, the one Ba'hai woman who was interviewed stated that the Ba'hai community in Vancouver was active and big, with two centres for gatherings. She also explained that these Ba'hais were not necessarily all Iranian, this community was formed around a shared faith, not national background. Interview #1, Vancouver, B.C., (December 29, 2006), 8. Similarly, according to John Hinnells' study of the Zoroastrians in Vancouver, this community is quite active and formed one of the earliest Zoroastrian associations in North America. However, once again, this community is based on a shared religion and is comprised of both Indian and Iranian Zoroastrians. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 453.

<sup>70</sup> Minoo Derayeh, *Gender Equality in Iranian History: From Pre-Islamic Times to the Present* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 2006), 154-155.

Muslim woman, explained the tensions that existed for her in deciding to wear the *hijab* in Vancouver.

I'm planning to wear [the *hijab*] in the Fall, it's just so hard here. Like people really have a very different take on it... You get really dirty looks. (laughs) It's very intimidating... By everyone, not to say like you know, [only] Canadians, a lot of Persians are actually worse about it. They're very defensive, 'cause they think you have immediate political ties...<sup>71</sup>

The hostile reactions that Iranian women, such as Zahra, who do wear the *hijab* have encountered, complicates Shahnaz Khan's explanation of the third space described above.<sup>72</sup> Iranian women who choose to wear the *hijab* not only struggle with competing discourses of Islamism and Orientalism but also face discrimination from secular Iranians as well as from Canadian society. Zahra's experience wearing the *hijab* in Vancouver demonstrates how divisions amongst Iranian migrants are the result of interconnected notions of gender identity, religion, political ideologies and affiliations that existed in Iran. As such, in some contexts religion has become tied to political ideologies for some Iranians in Vancouver.

Divisions and distrust that existed between practicing Muslims in Vancouver, were also influenced by class and political affiliations. For example, one woman notes the divisions that exist between two Muslim mosques in North Vancouver. She explains that a new mosque was recently established "[t]hat we believe has political ties, but I mean this is totally not anything acknowledged at all. (laughs) So this is our speculation."<sup>73</sup> She also noted that some Iranians believe that this mosque was affiliated

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<sup>71</sup> Interview #11, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007), 7.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter Three, pages 86-87.

<sup>73</sup> Interview #11, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007), 12.

with the current regime of the Islamic Republic in Iran due to the money that it has at its disposal. She explained that the new mosque

hired him [the mullah] on a monthly salary. And that's why we're thinking that they may be connected to the government. Because you know...his position's very firm? ... And so, it looks a little bit strange... Cause the funding's coming from God knows where. Nobody knows right?<sup>74</sup>

The distrust that exists amongst Iranians in Vancouver is therefore not simply due to divisions between religious and secular Iranians, it is also due to the ties that religious groups are perceived to have with the regime of the Islamic Republic in Iran. As such, Zahra's statements illustrate the fact that Iranian Muslims do not necessarily agree with the politics of the regime of the Islamic republic of Iran simply by virtue of sharing the same religion.<sup>75</sup>

Another aspect of personal identity that was imported by Iranian migrants in Vancouver was of political ideologies and affiliations. Political affiliations Iranians had in Iran continued to resonate in Vancouver and hold meaning for them. These ideologies and affiliations also led to divisiveness and distrust amongst Iranians in Vancouver. As Samira explained,

[t]here is a lot of divide in the Iranian community between different groups and sects... some still side with the old monarchy in Iran, like they're monarchists. And then...there's a big groups of communists, there's other groups, so it's really fragmented. And there's always bickering among these groups. That's...why I think ...in the last twenty-

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<sup>74</sup> Interview #11, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007), 13.

<sup>75</sup> The vast majority of practicing Muslim Iranians in Vancouver are Shi'ite, but there are also a number of other Shi'ite groups in Vancouver. The one practicing Iranian Muslim who participated in an interview explained that she often visited the *al-Zahra* mosque of the *Khoja-Ithna Ashari* community in Richmond for special celebrations and lectures. She also explained that she sometimes visits *al-Qalsa* mosque of the Iraqi community in Surrey to hear speakers and visit friends. Interview #11, Vancouver, B.C., (June 18, 2007), 11-14.

seven years since the revolution that's why we haven't been able to, you know, come together.<sup>76</sup>

Samira's observation of the divides among Iranian immigrants parallels John Bodnar's broader description of immigrant groups in the U.S. who "were, in fact, badly fragmented into numerous enclaves arranged by internal status levels, ideology, and orientation."<sup>77</sup> In short, political ideologies and affiliations that Iranians ascribed to in Iran also played a large role in defining their identity in Vancouver. Moreover, the perceived political affiliations of Iranians appear to have had a large impact on the relationships that these individuals have or have resisted forming with one another. The impact that the perceived political affiliation of an individual had upon divisions between Iranians in Vancouver was illustrated in an anecdote shared by Afsaneh in her interview.

The movement of all these [Iranian] newcomers is so huge right now. And these people, who are they? Some of them, they have a very good position in [the] government [in Iran]. But...they feel the threat, they want to be out. So they get all the money they can, [and] they bring it out. And Canada is *happy* (emphasis hers) to have...their money right? They bring millions in cash. They bring [it] here. They stay here. They buy brand new houses. They buy brand new cars. All cash. Because they got the money from [the] government. But they are in government. They [are] still in government. Right? They move here. They settle down with the nice houses, I know many of them, I'll show you if we get a chance, called "Westwood Plateau." That's a rich area in Coquitlam. And majority of the Persians, some of them are very new newcomers. How did they get that money? They come, they settle down, their kids are gone to school, their wife here, they go back [to Iran].<sup>78</sup>

This description of recent Iranian immigrants demonstrates a number of subtle factors informing distrust and divisions among Iranians in Vancouver. First, the implication that Iranian newcomers were associated with the government in Iran is far from a benign

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<sup>76</sup> Interview #9, Vancouver, B.C., (May 24, 2007), 8.

<sup>77</sup> Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, xvii.

<sup>78</sup> Interview #4, Vancouver, B.C., (May 4, 2007), 10.

statement. For Iranians who left Iran due to political repression in one form or another in Iran, these migrants were viewed with distrust and suspicion. Second, for those who saw the regime of the Islamic Republic as corrupt and unjust, the allegation that these newcomers derived their wealth from their position within the government of Iran suggested that their wealth was in some senses undeserved or ill-gotten. Farah's statement that people who were connected with the government "feel the threat," suggested that the regime of the Islamic Republic was unstable, or was at least perceived as such by Iranians abroad. Farah's discussion regarding recent Iranian immigrants demonstrates how indicators of wealth held different meanings when related to secular Iranians or Muslim Iranians. The way in which these Iranian women continued to associate hierarchies of class, status, religion and politics with one another demonstrates the complexity and interconnectedness of these factors in contributing to divisions in Vancouver.

## **Conclusion**

The heterogeneity of Iranians in Vancouver is due in part to their varying ideologies, personal backgrounds, and the multiple reasons that Iranians have come to Vancouver. Moreover, the conditions of Iranian immigrants upon arrival to Vancouver have differed enormously. The statement of one Iranian woman, "Iranian people are mixed here," succinctly explains the situation.<sup>79</sup> This study is not suggesting that distrust and divisiveness is a characteristic of Iranians in general. Rather, the divisions that have been described are the natural result of an extremely diverse population of migrants

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<sup>79</sup> Interview #7, Vancouver, B.C., (May 13, 2007), 7.

relocating to a particular geographic locale, where they have come into contact with one another with greater frequency and in new kinds of ways than they would have in Iran. The changes that have occurred due to the experience of migration have created new kinds of divisions that did not previously exist in Iran. The perceptions of difference identified in the interviews, however, did not follow a single historical pattern over time. Rather, they were influenced more by the particular values, backgrounds and belief systems of Iranian women than by their age or the period at which they came to Vancouver.

The narratives of Iranian women demonstrate the way that gender, religion, political ideology, class and status have interacted to inform their identities in Vancouver. Some of the factors influencing personal identity have been transformed due to migration, leading to divisions and in some cases distrust amongst Iranians in Vancouver, while other aspects of identity that have their basis in Iran have been perpetuated in Vancouver. These different factors can also be interrelated and function either to create or maintain divisions amongst Iranian women in Vancouver. Although a number of Iranian organizations and businesses have been established over time in Vancouver and events such as *Nowrooz* cut across religious and political divides, these interviews suggest that differences in personal backgrounds and ideologies still very much inform the relationships Iranian women form with one another in Vancouver. Class and status among Iranians in Vancouver serve as indicators of a number of differing affiliations, such as ties to the Pahlavi monarchy or the current Islamic regime. Similarly, the religious identity of Iranian women in Vancouver has sometimes been viewed by other Iranians with suspicion, based on the interconnectedness of politics and religion in Iran



following the revolution of 1978-1979. These differences have created a number of difficulties in the construction of a uniform sense of community based solely upon notions of a shared nationality or ethnicity amongst Iranians in Vancouver.

## CONCLUSION

Migration is influenced by a multitude of factors in both sending and receiving countries, and the history of Iranian women in Vancouver is no exception. While the 1978-1979 Iranian revolution was undoubtedly a factor influencing the emigration of many Iranians, Canadian immigration policy also played an important role in shaping patterns of Iranian migration to Canada, both in terms of numbers and of social composition, including financial resources and education level. An examination of the personal narratives of Iranian women in Vancouver provides a more nuanced understanding of their various reasons for emigration, migration and settlement, as well as of the Iranian community itself. Oral interviews painted a complex picture of the numerous factors leading to the emigration of the Iranian women interviewed, ranging from the growing pollution in Tehran, to arranged marriages with men living abroad, their difficulty accessing divorce in Iran and the inequality and stigma attached to it there, and the lack of freedom of artistic expression in Iran. Incentives for migration to Vancouver included the geographical familiarity of Vancouver's landscape; access to social services and education; the lack of racist or xenophobic attitudes, particularly in comparison to Europe; and recommendations from family and friends were cited by Iranian women as important reasons for their migration and settlement in Vancouver. The many reasons these women gave for leaving Iran and eventually settling in

Vancouver demonstrate both the heterogeneity of the Iranian population in Vancouver and the complexity of their migration.

The internal diversity of these women and their varying reasons for migrating were also identified in turn by the women interviewed in this study as the cause of divisions and distrust. These divisions are in part the result of pre-existing hierarchies and value systems imported from Iran to Vancouver. They are also due to the fact that migration has in some cases altered attitudes towards gender roles and cultural values of Iranians living in Vancouver. Simply put, Iranians of varying social strata migrated to Vancouver, and the differing experiences and ideologies of these individuals complicated their attempts to identify with one another on the basis of national identity alone. This was further exacerbated by the reality that migration shifted class and status boundaries, and necessitated changes in gender roles for many Iranians. As noted above, Iranian women have increasingly gained a vital role in the economic survival of their families and Iranian men are often no longer the sole financial provider for their families.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the experience of migration holds different implications for women than for men, creating divisions within Iranian families that did not exist prior to their migration.

The divisions that were articulated by Iranian women in their interviews also relate to the broader population. In some senses the tensions that were expressed by these women are indicative of the struggle that has been identified by Shahnaz Khan in regards to Muslim women in Canada.<sup>2</sup> Her suggestion that Muslim women in Canada are caught

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<sup>1</sup> Haideh Moghissi, "Away from home: Iranian women, displacement, cultural resistance and change," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 30, Iss. 2 (Spring, 1999), 210.

<sup>2</sup> Shahnaz Khan, "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space," *Signs* 23, No. 2. (Winter, 1998), 463-494.

between competing discourses of Orientalism and Islamism is an important observation, and yet the case of Iranian women migrants complicates her theory. As this study has demonstrated, Iranian women confronted discourses of “modernity” and “tradition” long before migrating to Vancouver, under both the modernizing regime of the Shah and the regime of the Islamic Republic, which claimed to embody a more authentic Iranian identity, based on Islamic traditions. As such, Iranian women in Vancouver have dealt with competing value systems from their families and the broader society both in Iran and in Canada. These competing discourses, however, are far more complex than allowed for by the simpler dichotomy of Orientalism versus Islamism. The competing discourses that Iranian women have confronted are informed by the broader history of Iran, the Iranian revolution and the history of their migration to Canada, all of which have had distinct implications in regards to gender.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The migration of Iranians to Vancouver is still a recent occurrence, with significant numbers migrating only within the last thirty years. It is likely that this is the reason there has been a lack of scholarly historical research conducted regarding this population to date. Although a significant body of literature exists regarding the Iranian population in the United States, it is important not to conflate these two groups of migrants. This study has explained that the migration of Iranian women to Vancouver is distinct from that of Iranian migrants to the United States, and is due to a multitude of factors in both Iran and Canada. Although the literature that exists regarding Iranian

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migrants in the United States may be useful in creating a broader understanding of Iranian migration as a whole, it must be read with an awareness of the different histories of each destination country. While it is beyond the scope of this study to provide an in-depth comparison of these two groups of migrants, this would certainly prove an interesting topic for future research.

The history of Iranians in Vancouver is a subject that still requires a great deal more study. This research, however, contributes to a greater understanding of the history of Iranian women migrants in Vancouver. Oral history interviews conducted with Iranian women provided meaningful explanations of historical events and experiences such as their migration and their perceptions of distrust and divisions amongst Iranians in Vancouver. Through sharing their personal narratives, Iranian women were able to actively participate in the construction of their own history. While the undeniably subjective nature of oral history may be criticized for this reason, it also serves to empower groups who would otherwise be marginalized or ignored in larger historical narratives. That said, further histories of Iranian migrants would benefit greatly from the compilation of empirical data through surveys and questionnaires. At present, speculation of the statistical composition of this population relies largely on data from broad surveys such as the Canada Census and Citizenship and Immigrations Canada, which do not provide specific enough information for researchers of Iranian immigration history and communities. Further research specifically on the history of Iranian men in Canada would undoubtedly provide a fascinating comparison for the handful of studies, albeit largely sociological, that already exist regarding Iranian women. This history of

Iranian women in Vancouver represents just one view of this dynamic and growing population, but offers the potential to initiate dialogue and further enquiry.

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