

### Challenges for gender equality: women's religious circles in post-revolutionary Iran

Chavoshian, Sana

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:  
Verlag Barbara Budrich

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Chavoshian, S. (2017). Challenges for gender equality: women's religious circles in post-revolutionary Iran. *GENDER - Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, 9(3), 117-132. <https://doi.org/10.3224/gender.v9i3.09>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-SA Lizenz (Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-SA Licence (Attribution-ShareAlike). For more Information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

## Challenges for gender equality: Women's religious circles in post-revolutionary Iran

### Zusammenfassung

Herausforderung für Geschlechtergleichheit: religiöse Frauenzirkel im postrevolutionären Iran

Die Handlungsmacht von Frauen im postrevolutionären Iran ist in hohem Maße mit religiösen Frauenzirkeln und deren spezifischen Ritualen verbunden. Aktuelle wissenschaftliche Arbeiten attestieren neuen Formen religiös basierter Präsenz von Frauen in der Öffentlichkeit eine hohe Bedeutung. Im Fall des Iran ist die drängende Frage, in welchem Ausmaß religiöses Handeln in weiblichen Pietätszirkeln – lange vor der Revolution 1978/79 gegründet und mit wachsender Relevanz danach – über diese Zirkel hinaus zivilgesellschaftliche Bedeutung zukommt. Diese Studie widmet sich den inneren Dynamiken unter Frauen innerhalb der Zirkel aus der Perspektive struktureller Machtbeziehungen. Im Mittelpunkt steht der Prozess der „Selbst-Spiritualisierung“ von Frauen, und zwar als eine Form der Selbstermächtigung und Selbstautorisierung, und weiterhin als Modus einer spirituell legitimierten Hierarchiebildung innerhalb der Zirkel. Es wird argumentiert, dass diese Art des religiösen Wettbewerbs unter Frauen Geschlechtersegregation reproduziert und die Unterordnung unter institutionalisierte Strukturen männlicher, religiöser Macht verstärkt. Die Wirkungen der „Selbst-Spiritualisierung“ in Form von Selbstermächtigung, Selbstautorisierung können aber auch als Ausdruck von Selbstbestimmung gelesen werden: über das Aushandeln von neuen Geschlechterrollen und politischen Lebenshaltungen, inklusive nichtreligiöser Bewegungen.

### Schlüsselwörter

Weibliche Pietätszirkel, Selbst-Spiritualisierung, islamische Pietät, Stärkung der Frauen, Märtyrertum, Träume

### Summary

The agency of women in Islamicate societies is largely anchored in ideas over pious circles and gender-specific rituals. Recent studies attest religious modes of women's presence in the public space a high significance. Taking the case of Iran, the urging question is how and to which extent religious agency within female pious circles – which were formed before the 1978/9 Revolution and fashioned after it – has been able to attain broader civil significance beyond these circles. This study explores the inner dynamics of female pious circles among women as related to structural power relations. It spells out the process of “self-spiritualization” to characterize interactions within the circles that act as a tool for self-elevation and self-authorization and as a mode of spiritually legitimated construction of hierarchies within the circles' spiritual empowerment. It is argued that a type of pious competition between the women unfolds leading to an affirmation of gender segregation and concomitantly, of submission to institutionalized structures of masculine hierarchy and power. Finally, it pursues the effects of unfolding “self-spiritualization” through elevation, authenticity and self-authorization that might achieve a considerable degree of self-empowerment for negotiating gender roles and political life attitudes.

### Keywords

women's religious circle, self-spiritualization, Muslim's piety, female empowerment, mothers of martyrs, dreams

## 1 Introduction: Female religious agency?<sup>1</sup>

Over the last two decades, Muslim women's religious practices have provided a favored "problem-space" to reassess the virtues and lacks of feminism and secularism. We became acquainted with a new domain of "religious agency" – female in the forefront – which has broadened the field of gender studies by discussing rituals, piety and codes of modesty of women in the wider perspective of Islamization and secularization (Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; Torab 2007; Jouili/Amir-Moazami 2006; Schulz 2012; Van Nieuwkerk 2013). My starting point in this paper is the particularity of women's religious practices, aligning it to the broader issue of "self-spiritualization". As it was formerly raised by Spencer Trimingham, who ambiguously initiated the concept of "female religion" (Trimingham 1971: 14, 18, 115, 232) in Islam – mostly related to Sufism and Sufi shrines – women developed a separate field of religious activities overpassing the borderline of strict Islamic gender segregation. Taking Trimingham into account it is to say that the "piety movement" of women, in this regard, is only one historical configuration within a wider variety of fields of "female religion" built upon women's conventional drives for self-education, elevation and spiritualization in Islam (Trimingham 1971: 14, 18, 115, 232).

In this paper, I will limit my analysis to the realm of female pious circles in Iran. Iran has faced a wide expansion of female religious circles after the 1978/79 Revolution under the rubric of the establishment of the Islamic Republic. However, the formation of such circles can be traced back to the 1930s when the waves of state-planned secularism, particularly the decree of 1936 by which women were obliged to appear unveiled in public, provided a ground for household-concentrated activities especially among those who remained veiled.<sup>2</sup> Here, I will focus on individual aspects of inner power struggles from within the groups as well as viewing them with respect to their entanglement with wider social configurations outside the groups. Finally, I will show the shifting matrix of gender roles, religious themes and public representation as interplaying with power practices that stem from female religious circles. My analysis is based on participant observation and Geertzian thick description in Tehran where I spent part of my fieldwork with five female religious circles in two periods between 2013 and 2015. I observed spiritual practices, aspirations, forms of making authority and authenticity that are counterpoised to the institutions of Islamic authority but remain also deeply encircled by it if not overtly dependent on it. It must be taken into account that these groups witnessed over the past decades a variety of female religious leaders, namely the first Mujtahidahs<sup>3</sup>, interlocutors and more recently, as I will show, the "mothers of martyrs", who have played a tremendous role in the social movements (Bano/Kalmbach

1 Acknowledgment: I am thankful to PD Dr. Markus Dreßler and Prof. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr from the Humanities Center "Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities" for their most valid suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper; I owe special thanks to Prof. Heidemarie Winkel (Bielefeld University) as well.

2 Najmabadi (2008) elaborates lucidly the relation of secularism in Iran with various feminist and Islamist groups. For an example of a female pious model and interlocutor who established a religious circle in her house in the 1930s, see Rutner (2015).

3 Nosrat Beygom Amin (1886–1983, Isfahan) seems to be the first woman in Iran who elevated to the rank of a Mujtahidah by Islamic clerics of Najaf (Künkler/Fazaeli 2012; Rutner 2015).

2012). One fundamental aspect in this respect are the symbolic and synesthetic effects of female religious figures in staging the impacts of resistance and martyrdom during the movements as well as new institutional frameworks within the unfolding process of civil society development. Concomitantly, one can see that the modes and themes of authority and elevation in religious groups regardless of their “religious agency” open their ways to another public realm of practices of power, in this article the street protests.

Admittedly, the continuity of the pious female circles based upon revolutionary action<sup>4</sup> takes shape in different forms in the after-revolution period and contributes to determine social restructuring in quite different ways. It should be noted that the argument of this paper is settled around an affirmed post-revolutionary Islamic power structure enmeshing the social dynamics of female pious circles in Iran. Whether these circles have developed appropriated modes of authentication and authorization which might find use for voicing women beyond the context of the gatherings in the civil movements raises daunting questions that Iran is confronted with and which this article seeks to elucidate.

## 2 Piety politics and religious action: From agency to spiritualization of the self

The course of female religious circles in Iran, since their outset in 1930s, can be generally delineated in the framework of “piety politics”. The aim of “piety politics”, as Hirschkind elaborates, lies in “revealing and realizing Islamic ideas of moral life through persuasion, exhortation and deliberation” (Hirschkind 2006: 117). It also encompasses an alternative to the general lack of educational facilities for women, the will for religious knowledge circulation as well as circumventing the prohibition of formal Islamic education of women in the seminaries due to the male-dominated religious orthodoxy<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the major task of religious circles has always been integrating a) a female-devoted space of religious practice and b) the authentication of religious education by formal, semi-formal and informally educated interlocutors (*khanoom*). These two points are addressed by Saba Mahmood in her pioneering study on female pious circles in Egypt as “ethical cultivation”. As discussed by Mahmood, the rubric of “ethical cultivation” embraces the agency of the religious subjects of the circles by gearing in their bodily dispositions (Mahmood 2005: 29–31; also Turner 2012) and “knowledge diffusion” (Amir-Moazami/Jouili 2006: 620) on the one hand, and urges the political aspect of their activities owing to the discrepancy of pious practices on the other hand. Yet, piety politics of this type do not explain the complications and controversies raised from the amalgamation of power relations inside groups with Islamist ideology and political changes outside the groups.

4 While various urban political groups and associations are marked as playing a key role for the 1979 Revolution due to their contribution to the increasing range of religious activities the largest impacts of female religious circles are perhaps related to their continuation even at the time all the other groups were banned or temporarily dropped by the regime (Yazdi 2010: 200).

5 Other than very few exceptions this condition continued until the establishment of Qum's female Islamic Seminary, *Jameat al-Zahra* in the 1980s.

In other words, pious women circles show an ambiguous pattern of power relations: the coincidence of political action and affirmed submissiveness. There is an ambivalent negligence toward the inner dynamics of power and politics as well as the more public role of the attendees of the circles, and Saba Mahmood in discussing the female religious subject has barely let us know whether the women attendees of pious gatherings are submissive modest supporters of Islamist regimes, pawned in a grand patriarchal plan, and brought to the fore as an “innocent” or self-geared part in the clan of ruling powers or not. However, more than Mahmood’s sketch of a female pious movement as a tolerable “religious agency” and the counter-subject of liberal would allow for, the women attendees have from the start been well related to radical Islamic fundamentalism, and due to their inventive modes of elevation, authentication and authorization haven taken a great role in the restructuration process of the education system as well as with respect to the governmental institutions at large. This, given my fieldwork in Tehran among various gatherings of this type, will be revealed in the following.

In a stance of rare exception, tracing an absence of analysis of formal politics and power relations in this regard, Amina Jamal (2009) attempts to provide an account to reinforce the tangible relationship that she observes between pious women gatherings and radical political Islam in Pakistan. Concomitantly, she stands in controversy to the mainstream female piety studies by describing them as conveying “an arbitrary divide between politics and Politics” (Jamal 2009: 9), which means religious gatherings of women could be, as she states, merely seen as “refrains from exploring the relation between the sphere of local and national political activities related to the nation-state” (Jamal 2008: 123), a fact largely negated by Mahmood (2005), Torab (2007) and Deeb (2006) who, as Jamal adds “all decide not to examine what happens when or if the alternative subject and agents traverse the space from informal to formal politics as a new type of citizen-subject” (Jamal 2008: 123).

Likewise, we should take into account that even when studying the inner struggles of the circles, there is little notion given to capture the sensibilities of inherent processes of competition and of power building related to the spirit and exercises of transgression and self-elevation from within female pious circles.

Instead, the mainstream of the studies is prompted to invoke an essentialization of gendered performances, unorthodox trajectories of purification and moral dispositions (Mahmood 2005: 51–53; Deeb 2006: 15; Kamalkhani 1998: 177). Their ramifications can paradoxically reconstruct the fundamentalist religious being or as Georg Stauth puts it: “reinvent the physical religion, interlocking it with strategic geopolitics over rejection or integration of Islam” (Stauth 2012: 136). In this respect, Jeremy Carrette teaches us that working on the “bodily dispositions”, in the way Foucault sought to relate them to religious beliefs in his path to modes of subjectification, is a two-edged sword, for it encounters a) “the relation of power” and b) “the relation of meaning”. Foucault had failed to establish the interconnection of the two, nor could he suspend spirituality by prioritizing one of them, namely, the power (Carrette 2000: 136–137). Similarly, Mahmood’s Foucauldian methodology for defining religious agency circumvents this ambivalence by anchoring it solely in the relation of meaning. This is very well reflected in her elaboration of “ethical formation” as well as “habitualization”, which she

describes as the process of a specific conception of the self through which it requires a different kind of bodily capacities (Mahmood 2005: 139).

Yet, a closer look at what happens inside the circles and at the effects on the level of their relations to the outside conditions goes beyond Mahmood's inter-linkage between piety and agency of religious women. Her study excludes any view on power and resistance, for she deliberately replaces the resistance-core of the agency with "habitualization". Concomitantly, the field of interactions of these circles, i.e. their developing tools of competitive self-spiritualization, searching for devices of self-elevation, their submission to hierarchy and power outside the group are generally ignored. These factors make the return to the "relation to power" inevitable.

What I suggest stems from a favorably earlier Foucauldian definition of spirituality that addresses rather his surrealist penchants than an entanglement with "political spirituality". Here, spirituality conveys any gestalt of mind outside the traditional rationality, a reality beyond conscious thought that involves "dreams, madness, folly, repetition, return and rapture" (Foucault 1999 [1964]: 72). Self-spiritualization, in the same vein, addresses a "technique of the self" that operates on body and soul by means of any of the above criteria to endorse one's transcendence. So what is at stake in emphasizing the inner relations among the women in these circles in my analysis? Can we show to where it would lead, if one takes seriously the effects of these interactions on broader social surroundings such as determined by the communities, the religious institutions and the state? Is it the agency of female pious groups or rather the reflection and appropriation of and the submission to male-oriented religious hegemony? My preliminary answer is that the types of "pious" competition and silent self-spiritualization would rather lead to a "modest" and ambiguous attitude of affirming both "segregative" patterns of action as much as reflecting given power relations as offered through the broader structural power settings. Notwithstanding, we should remind that the circles might achieve by way of spiritualization a considerable degree of self-empowerment and flexible "identity" in a field of negotiating gender roles and political life attitudes (*life conduct* in sense of Weber's term) and symbolic representations of the unfolding pious civility within society<sup>6</sup>.

6 It is irritating to see how the characteristics of piety grow to generate a general pattern of religion wherein "forms of piety shape the cultural values of the life-world of various societies" (Turner 2011: 284). Paradoxically enough in this approach, pious activity of women is implicitly a global mode of mass religion (Turner 2011: 274–277), in Weber's terms of use, and thus appears as being impoverished from a sacred core.

If we wish to privilege the emerging dichotomy between "the pious" and "the secular", the "self" perhaps is, in my view, the open space of constitution and reconstitution of religion and modernity. Rather than generalization, it follows sophisticated intertwining patterns of the religious/non-religious dichotomy. According to Stauth this entwinement maintains and its inner constitution evinces "practical forms of integration of the extreme poles" (for us between the secular and the pious) where "the sacred remains an inner operative force in modern life" (Stauth 2005: 537).

### 3 Female pious circles in Iran: Spiritualization, sublimation, subversion

In the following, three cases of female religious circles of north, north-east and south Tehran private houses are presented. Researching these circles, I started with participant observation as well as interviews with women who attended regular household sessions. Further to collective open discussions with the attendees in the circles, I had informal encounters which took place during and after the circles as well as during pilgrimages, visits to cemeteries for the celebration of the martyrs, schools and universities. Speculating about their political concerns in this context prompted my assumptions about their civic roles outside the circle as university lecturer, charity holders and political campaigns' preachers.

The data involved here are part of a wider discourse analysis of female pious circles in Iran<sup>7</sup>. It entails an ethnographic thick description of saying and doing of individual cases as well as narrative research wherein the stories of experiences with the religious circles, meanings of certain events and the way they related it to their participation in the circles were recorded. These data were then sequentially analyzed to identify recurrent and regular forms of elevation and hierarchy in the circles. As I elaborate, the circles transform themselves into a far reaching micro-power field of female politics, of self-elevation emanating from private meetings to exchanging experiences of dreams, of cherishing the martyrs and venerating their places and graves, exchanges of charities, organizing common pilgrimages, designing attitudes of Islamic modesty codes and correct attire.

#### 3.1 State of exception, modes of self-elevation

The household religious circles are informal female gatherings wherein Qur'anic recitation is an inseparable part. The session includes the seclusion of furniture from the room, preparation of food and the organization for the presence of the female interlocutor by the circle holder and female family members who join earlier to give a hand. It continues with a speech by the interlocutor, and concludes with a feast-styled meal as well as collective praying.

In my first field experience the specificity of the setting started while observing the preparation of a biweekly session in a renovated modern house in north-east of the city. The sofas and the 12-seat-dining table were drawn to a corner and the parquet floor and silk rugs were replaced with nearly wall-to-wall carpets, framed with tied layers of blankets and rough pillows as backrests. The luxurious crystal dish of fruits evaded in the kitchen and plastic dishes were serving the guests with per-person style of food and fruits. Among the women who were entering and kneeling calmly on the floor charmingly greeting one another, there were, to my surprise, the elderlies whose sitting against the cold walls was not without physical hinders and hesitations. On this occasion there was only one chair in the whole room reserved for the interlocutor, the *khanoom*. If there was no chair, her place was marked by the many cushions, a microphone and tied rugs that situate her in a higher position than the listeners.

<sup>7</sup> The whole work will be presented as a chapter in my dissertation.

In addition to her distinguished place, the respect towards the *khanoom* is expressed by: First, wearing a hijab in her presence<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the informality of household sessions assimilates them to friendly parties among a religious sect. Women undress their black veils and sit in nice afternoon dresses or light floral chadors on their shoulders, also in case of religious celebrations they put some makeup on. However, with the entrance of the *khanoom*, they mostly wear their veils.

Second, this higher status is undergirded by the utmost seriousness of the session during her preaching or inciting, which consists of lesson-by-lesson format or lunar calendar event-based narrations, Islamic ethics as well as general hints over proper codes of conducts for a Muslim woman, recitations from prayer books and Qur'an plus occasional interpretations.

The women do not talk neither eat from their plates; they also send their kids whom they brought with to assemble in a separate room not to distract or disrupt the session. The youngsters take note in calendars they adjust on their knees to write and some record the speech for their later use. The weekly gathering's aim is Qur'anic recitation and interpretation. This fact distinguishes it from occasional rituals or ceremonies where one Surah of the Qur'an or *ad'eiye* (prayer book) is read, and interlocutors are not a vital necessity.

These remarks might be interpreted as abiding by a discourse of patriarchy and traditional education, one through which respect and sublimation is asserted toward masculinization or overstressing the codes of modesty. As the jargon of these religious women goes in Iran, they are characterized as "over-sacred" or *khanoom-tab* (feverishly spiritualized). I would like to propose an alternative reading, however, that draws upon a set of debates taking place during the gatherings that express concerns quite distinct from this discourse. In my alternative reading, the exceptional treatment through the *khanoom* and the atmosphere within the sessions can be understood rather as a pattern of self-elevation that aligns to the longing for self-spiritualization and more significantly to decent and unconventional modes of authority-making amongst the members. In the eyes of the attendees these codes of conducts are mere representations (*neshan*) of spiritualization conquering their heart and a sign for attaining a tinge of Godly attention and a hue of Holy presence (*nazar-kardeh*) in the *khanoom's* personality. They want to reinforce and attain this atmosphere (*fazay-e rouhani* in their own words) through the cultivation of those bodily aptitudes, virtues, habits and desires that in their consideration serve to ground their sublime experience of spiritualization. While the recitation of Qur'an provides them the requisite training and atmosphere, the sideline virtues and interactions play a major role in the construction of "self-spiritualization".

The rubric of the modes of self-elevation includes the authenticity of dreams to claims of consanguinity with the martyrs, and the reverent elevation of humble tolerance and submissive patience against hardships in everyday life. Notably, each of the named criteria can support or evince the other as well. Furthermore, the field of expressing

8 Azar Torab relates this to the semi-masculine performative identity of the interlocutor: "They do so in front of Ms. Omid not only because it is their way of showing respect, but also implicitly, because in their view Mrs. Omid possesses attributes which Islamic legal discourses masculinizes in this case, authority over women" (Torab 1996: 244).



oneself about dreams is not decided upon by the hierarchical setting, i.e. any member of the group can take the role if she wishes.

I distinguish between three modes of self-elevation which illustrate the broad-based character of female religious gatherings and the transformations within the scope and shapes of these circles as related to power issues, aptitude for authority and sensitivity toward timely political stance within which functions, application and processes of spiritualization have changed.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.1.1 Dreams as sources of authenticity and life conduct

An important aspect of authentication and elevation in the women's religious circles focuses on how dreams anchor a blessing and a form of spiritual connection for the dreamer<sup>10</sup>. The attendees argue that the validity of dreaming, particularly earnest dreaming is a prophetic tradition and belongs to an inspirational life conduct. According to them, dreams are doors to the "other world" that bring blessing, guidance, and admission of the honesty and faithfulness of the dreamer<sup>11</sup>. The significance of dreams is to the extent that narrating them among the closer circle and discussing their function in a very immediate sense has become a major part of the gathering, specifically for the *khanoom*. In this context, dreams function as a console to the hardships like death of the beloved, as advice or warning to the attendees, and also as an affirmation of their elevation to a higher level of spiritualization.<sup>12</sup>

Consider for example, how Minoo, an active member of the pious gatherings, articulates her experience with entering her first circle. Attested by a variety of sources and informants, Minoo was a middle-aged housewife whose mere suffering over a sick child and telling extra-worldly stories to the women of the neighborhood brought her into contact with a pious circle in west Tehran. In her first experience of the circle, which was arranged by her neighbor who had been attending the circle, Minoo sat with her daughter in a distant corner of the room:

9 It should be noted that the forms of authentication and authority construction are built upon "mediating religious knowledge to local audiences by popular means" (Kamalkhani 1998: 181) and problematize the criteria of "negotiability" among pious women, namely the fact that "(they) see themselves as more virtuous than women who" do not follow pious codes of modesty (Mahmood 2005: 43) and the necessity of a "proof that they were always earnest believers" (Kamalkhani 1998: 182).

10 Also Amira Mittermaier states that narrating dream visions "is an established mode of argumentation and dream stories can consciously be told to establish authority" (Mittermaier 2008: 52). In her idea, dream spaces are not universal, but are shaped by historical contexts and beliefs concerning the nature of the dreams (Mittermaier 2008: 50).

11 Here, dreams are treated as a mode of perception and an order of reality.

12 Certainly, Michel Foucault relates the interpretation of dreams to an important technique of the self, i.e. of examination of the self. It would be going far beyond the scope of this paper to give justice to this Foucauldian interpretation in relation to female gatherings. However, as mentioned in his summary of it as a Stoic exercise, an attitude of interpreting dreams, relating to both, the teaching of the ability to interpret dreams as well as being able to interpret one's own dreams (Foucault 1988: 42-43), it stems from what follows that this resumes similarly an established attitude in the female gatherings, specifically in relation to the elevated positions of the *khanoom* (teacher) and of the able self-interpreter.

"My daughter, Pari, was under my chador in my arm. I was a bit worried whether she will stay silent until the end of the session. The content of the speech sounded highly bewildering to me. It was filled with philosophical terms I was helpless with. My real engagement with the group sparked only after the pilgrimage we had together to Qom, wherein I narrated the dream I had."

The dream was about her vision of being invited together with her friends to visit the saint. As she explained it to the group due to the urge of her neighbor it was taken as a direct invitation of the saint: a message which raised their expectation of the visit and was celebrated for the real success of the group as a whole.

Being part of the inner dynamics of a group, Minoo from there on was constantly invited to join the group at various occasions. Here, we can see how these procedures in the organization of meetings and the inner ranking among these women and the formation of authority within this emerging institution of power is influenced by the communication about dreams. As far as the inner struggle of these gatherings matters, dreams together with healing powers and the fulfilling of vows form a framework for the new legitimate power for pious circles of women. The social communication is based on a form of ranking that originates in the status that one achieves through various forms of suffering, rites and dreams that approve her position.

In the process of Minoo's integration to the group, it happened that she had another dream in which the saint recited verses of a prayer book to her which, as she said, she was able to recite by heart in the morning. So, she kept the memory and when asked, recited it to the group as well. This event indeed brought her a new status in the group of having the extraordinary abilities to listen to saintly whispers and to memorize them.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding, Minoo's dreams have never led her to head for the interlocutor position. But her case is echoed wider as a form of authorizing oneself among pious women especially for *khanooms*. Undergirding Minoo's treatment is an inauguration of a new dimension of social-knitting among pious women that is part of a larger interplay of saints, dreams and the spiritual stance in the entity of their life influenced by female gatherings. So far, the interplay of saintliness and earnest dreams as an established pattern within the pious circles inhabits an in-betweenness that, in Mittermaier's words, "disrupt[s] the antagonisms that provide both liberal secularist and Salafi-oriented Muslim reformist discourse" (Mittermaier 2008: 48). Accordingly, one can imagine the female pious religious actor not as a radically authenticated agency, as privileged in Mahmood's representation of it, but rather as one whose inventive power of self-formation relies on founding new spaces for her elevation.

### 3.1.2 My son is martyred, I am

A number of scholars of Islamic feminism would have noted that the formation of religious female gatherings is a recent issue epitomized in the highly ideological context after the 1979 Revolution and its anti-imperial, anti-western, self-affirming patterns (Torab 1996, 2007). Similarly, figures like Ayatollah Khomeini became centralized in the developments of the scope of these circles (Deeb 2006, 2009). It is generally be-

13 As I was informed by Professor Wohlrab-Sahr, in the charismatic Christian context this would be one of the Charismata (Geistesgaben).

lieved that the circles mainly shape among middle class, lower middle class and less educated women in low income families (Kamalkhani 1998; Torab 1996, 2007).

Despite the inevitable role of the revolution in prompting and widely extending these circles, this observation abstained from the dynamics from within the circles influenced by the amalgamation of different cultural habitus as well as socio-economical strata. Furthermore, the transformations in the values of the pious women due to impactful historical events are of importance; Iran's Revolution is only one of them.

It should be acknowledged that the emergence of these groups over specific times was strongly knitted to the atmosphere they were living in. For example, the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) was a stage of widening the activities of the circles by means of giving priority to immediate needs of the war situation and combining it with ritual practices. Amidst, worshiping of the victims of the war as martyrs was the most obvious one. All this needed a catalyst that along the aspiration for self-spiritualization could facilitate the formation of a new group in a newly provided place whose household is marked by a distinctively spiritually elevating character and an integrating factor for the members. Here, it is worth recalling that Noora, the woman whose gatherings I described in the first section, was a retired school teacher, married to a medical practitioner with an affluent life style in a good region in Tehran. Rather than an exception in this field she was a representative of a bigger group of women in her age whose piousness interknitted with female religious gatherings after the declared martyrdom of her first husband during the war.

Notably, her middle daughter from the second marriage and also a university student of civil engineering, has told me how her mother's religious mission triggered after the speech she made among the women of their local mosque, the day she received the news over her husband's martyrdom in the second year of the war. The death of her husband and being alone in Tehran with a two-year-old daughter and a school job, facilitated her befriending with elder women whose sons were martyred and as a consolation to their pain and solitude were visiting one another, reciting Qur'an and doing collective praying, while voluntarily helping her with taking care of the baby when she was at work.

When I questioned Noora about the formation of gatherings at her home, she reiterated for me in her characteristically lucid style Minoo's argument about saintly dreams:

"I saw my house drawn in beams of light. My small daughter was sitting at the *Rahl* (the book-stand used for Qur'an) reciting Qur'an while I was kneeling on the floor and listening. In the corner of the room my husband was reclining against the wall wearing a smile and nodding with a sense of satisfaction. Since then I invited other women from the neighborhood, the mosque and work to gather monthly here. I think it was what my husband wanted. This way, I do my contribution to his martyrdom for Qur'an."

Noora's remark about her motive for forming a pious circle can be usefully compared to Minoo's dreaming authentication. The remarks of Noora and Minoo about their dreams indicate a difference that indexes a key line of relations between saints and martyrs. Namely, in reference to Noora's dream, her husband is being treated like the saintly figures of Minoos dreams. Besides, his sublimation as a result of martyrdom is elevating his wife's position spiritually, comparably now to Sayidah Zeynab's<sup>14</sup> position.

14 The sister of the third Shi'a Imams, Imam Hossein, who accompanied him in the battle of Karbala.

To my surprise was her main motive for the inauguration of a gathering on basis of this dream, which she particularly related to the spirit of time a decade after the war and the commonness of religious gathering among women who lost their men during the war. Also her younger daughter added with excitement that her mother's activities were not restricted to this but in the early stage of war she made an attempt to reach the war zones as a nursing volunteer in the camping hospitals but they had returned her as soon as they noticed she was pregnant.

Seemingly, having a martyred member in the close families is still served as a virtue for the pious women on the basis of which they have built *husseyniehs* (congregation halls for Shi'a commemoration ceremonies), shaped their own circles and even started their first lessons of piety as a Muslim woman.

### 3.1.3 The paradoxes of suffering

Noora's daughters' sympathy and respect for their mother's former marriage, sufferings and courageous attitude can be barely restricted to consanguinity, maternal and familial relations, in that it is a shared treatment towards her among the gathering members. Meanwhile, being compassionate about one another's hardships and building up virtues out of one's own suffering is a widespread pattern of interaction in pious women circles. In fact, the closer circle to the *khanoom* are not only marked by their long-durée attendance but recognized by their open approach to the personal hardships they discuss. In this respect, the close circle is assumed trustworthy to share a very private sphere of one's own life with. Particularly, the *khanoom* has become a counselor for finding a religious solution by performing bibliomancy. Remembering the example of Minoo and commencing her participation in the first gathering, one can see the interplay between her dreams in her dramatic case as a very young woman with a daughter of drastically poor health and the permission for attending the gathering. Moreover, one must take into account the role that the *khanoom* and her close circle played at different stages of her decisions, most importantly, whether to hospitalize her daughter, Pari, or not.

The character of the *khanoom* is not an exception to this rule. Faezeh, the charming interlocutor of the gathering was a self-trained woman who had held speeches at various gatherings for several years, and also teaches "Islamic Thought" at a private university. Like Minoo, she had two sick daughters one of whom already passed away when a baby. She used to be an assistant to her blind father when he was being trained by a renowned cleric in Mashad. Since then she had continued her inquiry in Qur'an and prayer books herself. What looms large in both Minoo and Noora's minds about her, beside the sympathy over what they formulate as "Godly examinations", is her humbleness over her knowledge. Vividly impressed by the fact herself, Minoo told me:

"In the funeral of her daughter, her husband mentions a part from *Mafatih* – a praying book – that might be of interest to her and a relief to the soul of the dead. Isn't it a parody that *khanoom* had been interpreting the same section for the circles for years and her husband even didn't know about his wife's *ilm* (knowledge)?"

She also admitted that Faezeh never complains about her situation or the tragic destiny of her children. "*Khanoom* always urges that my daughter is a gift to me from God to

find my path". Perhaps, suffering cannot stand as an independent factor in shaping authority and authenticity for the interlocutors or the participants. Yet, being stigmatized with a fate of suffering and death and the attitude they undertake toward it, namely the degree and quality of their humbleness, diligence and acceptance of their hardships could turn to be a condition of gradual strengthening of a charisma in the circle. In fact, one can say the ability to speak in sacred voice, whether in Minoo's dreams or in Faezeh's words, seems to be related to their growing sufferings.

### 3.2 Governmental intervention, political submissiveness

In order to begin tugging at the multiple power relations that hold this object called self-spiritualization in its stable position with the ruling power, I will start with an ethnographic vignette that focuses on one of the most divulging moments of internal and external power relations in pious circles: the presidential election.

Open political activity, according to the participants I have interviewed, has never played a major role in pious gatherings. Notwithstanding, one can show the resurgence of these groups in the 1978/9 Revolution, with the help of political figures' wives in their houses. Besides, the modification in tasks and scopes during the war were inevitably entwined with the political attitudes in the circles. Another intriguing factor in this respect is how male politicians in various epochs have instrumentalized pious circles to attain more votes.

In the course of my fieldwork, I had come to spend time with one of the interlocutors, Faezeh, who was giving speeches in Minoo's and Noora's houses. In addition to attending her circle lessons, I accompanied Faezeh to her university lectures as well as to her own home gathering. It was in May 2013 in the heat of the first presidential election after the large unrest in 2009. Faezeh was actively reading the newspapers of the *osul-gara* party (the conservatives). She told me about the bulletins and newsletters she was receiving weekly from the official cultural services of the government. Meanwhile, her lectures were based to a great extent on the books provided by the regime which have been obligatory nationwide for all university students since 2005. In the short periods after teaching, she was discussing with her students the vitality of participation in the election while openly taking side in her conversations. Given the stringent demand that her desire to abide by high standards of piety and belief in the "Muhammadan Islamic government" placed on her, she often had to struggle against other attitudes raised in her course. Her cellphone was often receiving a plethora of messages, compounded by her long sitting and collecting or summarizing the messages received from the offices of various high-ranked Mullahs or lower-ranked related cultural associations to the attendees of the circles.

Inside her religious group this atmosphere of submissiveness toward the official male clerics was even stronger because the main concern and way of political presence was limited to the discovery of the vote of high-ranked male clerics of the conservative party. In this vein, unlike her university course, she roughly impinged on the participants whom to vote, the reasons were not discussed. Seemingly, in the circle, following the "moral obligation" to vote and to remain submissive to the hegemonic male clerics was more important than a liberal, active discussion over the candidates and their potentials.

Furthermore, Faezeh's being in contact with these clerics to direct their votes was recognized as a privilege and a code of spiritual degree.

### 3.3 Transgressive agency: uncoupling self-spiritualization

In what follows I would like to push further in the direction opened by discussing modes of elevation for women's empowerment in the religious circles. In particular, my argument for uncoupling the notion of self-spiritualization from its religious implications within the circles and relating it to the "power relations" is indebted to self-spiritualization's regeneration for performing female power and resistance in political discourse. As it became clear in the previous section the track of self-spiritualization within the circles has moved toward a political submissiveness to male-centered religious hegemony. Yet, questioning the cores of micro-power marked by appropriation of spirituality within the circles, one points out how hardship, dream logic or being a "mother of martyrs" have turned to self-standing factors for portraying women empowerment in politically tense situations like elections or protests. Namely, in the course of the Arab Spring uprisings the issue of "mothers of martyrs" has been creatively and literally reinserted into spaces of protest. One can sort this affiliation as a way of enabling the victims' families to attain recognition for their loss. Notwithstanding to this fact, the rave to which this "quintessential mourning subject" (Mittermaier 2015: 595) has led is inevitably related to the "sacred" imagination of it which can delegitimize any rivalry power.

Similarly, in Iran, in the framework of religious circles, families of victims of the 2009 unrest, the Green movement, have conducted a symbolic battle over "martyrdom" with the state. The struggle galvanized as they faced ironically the veto of the state over the title of "martyr" for the victims and its attempts to restrict it to those victims who were killed on the side of pro-regime forces. In this context, a maternal mourning subject appeared who empowered and staged herself in the protest through the label of "mothers of martyrs". Their befriending shaped in the central cemetery of Tehran where their sons were buried in the new section side by side. Their circle initiated its activity as a mourning cult in the houses of the victims' families but expanded to a political education arena for women and a core of resistance that inspired the protest in its later phase. Along the theme of martyrdom, it is the attribution to the hardship and suffering, i.e. the loss of their sons that again plays a profound role among the female members as well as in their public figure. Notwithstanding their age, which could have prevented them from cyber activities, the circle has facilitated their portrayal as the heroines of digital social networks as "the mothers of the Green martyrs", with pictures of normal middle-aged women, black-veiled or not, carrying the pictures of their sons with red caption titling them as "martyrs" in the streets, or spreading tears on their gravestones.

Here, we can see, on the one hand, how the exercises and motifs of empowerment of female religious circles were brought into a context of protest in order to delegitimize the religious authority of the state. On the other hand, the distinctive character of the label of "mothers of martyrs" is due to the sacred connotation that the state tries to possess and allocate to itself.

## 4 Conclusion

I explored the conceptual challenge that the relocation of female pious activities in the context of power relations poses to the literature of piety circles in particular and to the study of the public sphere in the post-revolutionary society in Iran, a society in which the state claims to be grounded in religious, revolutionary principles and concomitantly delegitimizes all social movements as “secularist” or “anti-religious”.

Contrary to the mainstream of the study of female religious circles, I drew attention to the micro issue of inner-circle struggles for elevation and spiritualization, as well as its decisive relation to the state management of religion. I gave special attention to the case of interlocutors (*khanoom*) whose patterns of empowerment include dreaming and enduring of hardship. Here, spirituality exceeds the general field of religious experience; it rather implies dispositions over conscious reality of mind and techniques of power. One of the questions I raised is how core elements of micro-power construction are centering not only in the religious field but even transpose into symbolic motifs of non-religious movements and politics at large. The example I mentioned was the notion of “mothers of martyrs” which first was applied in the female religious circles.

Finally, as I suggested, the Mahmoodian idea of an “innocent”, “veiled” “agency” of female religious piety, viewing it merely as an apologetic devise of its “liberal” functioning in a new broader framework of female cultural “creativity”, rather contributes to extending the blind spot of female religious self-empowerment, namely that in its last instance it is largely dependent on submission to male-controlled power areas: a) the area of public religious knowledge construction, and b) its functioning as a factor of affirming religious conservatism by creating an atmosphere of strict submission to pre-conditions of power processes beyond the reach of the circles and of female activities.

## References

- Carrette, Jeremy R. (2000). *Foucault and Religion. Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*. London, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203457818>
- Deeb, Lara (2006). *An Enchanted Modern. Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Deeb, Lara (2009). Piety Politics and the Role of a Transnational Feminist Analysis. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, 112–126. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444324402.ch7>
- Foucault, Michel (1988). *Technologies of the Self*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1999 [1964]). The debate on the novel. In Jeremy R. Carrette (ed.), *Religion and culture. Michel Foucault* (pp. 72–74). New York: Routledge.
- Hirschkind, Charles (2006). *The Ethical Soundscape. Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublic*. New York: Columbia.
- Jamal, Amina (2008). Saba Mahmood: Politics of Piety, Lara Deeb: An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon, Azam Torab: Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual

- in Iran. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 4(3), 121–128. <https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2008.4.3.121>
- Jamal, Amina (2009). Gendered Islam and Modernity in the Nation-Space: Women's Modernism in the Jamaat-e Islami of Pakistan. *Feminist Review*, 91, 9–28. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.43>
- Jouili, Jeanette & Amir-Moazami, Schirin (2006). Knowledge, Empowerment & Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany. *The Muslim World*, 96, 617–642. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2006.00150.x>
- Kamalkhani, Zahra (1998). Reconstruction of Islamic Knowledge and Knowing. A Case of Islamic Practices among Women in Iran. In Karin Ask & Marin Tjomsland (eds.), *Woman and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations* (pp.177–195). Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Künkler, Mirjam & Fazaeli, Roja (2012). The Life of Two Mojtabahs: Female Religious Authority in Twenties Century Iran. In Masooda Bano & Hilary Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (pp. 127–160). Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1884209>
- Mahmood, Saba (2005). *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mittermaier, Amira (2008). Re-Imagining Space. Dreams and Saintly Shrines in Egypt. In Georg Stauth & Samuli Schielke (eds.), *Dimensions of Locality: Muslim Saints, Their Place and Space* (pp. 47–65). Bielefeld: transcript.
- Mittermaier, Amira (2015). Death and Martyrdom in the Arab Uprising. An Introduction. *Ethnos*, 80(5), 583–604. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.938090>
- Najmabadi, Afsaneh (2008). Feminism Unveiled. In Janet Jakobson & Ann Pellegrini (eds.), *Secularism* (pp. 39–57). New York: Duke University Press.
- Rutner, Maryam (2015). Religious Authority, Gendered Recognition, and Instrumentalization of Nusrat Amin in Life and After Death. *Journal of Middle Eastern Women Studies*, 11(1), 24–41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-2832331>
- Schulz, Dorothea (2012). A Fractured Soundscape of the Devine. Female 'Preachers', Radio Sermons and Place-making in Urban Mali. In Patrick Desplat & Dorothea E. Schulz (eds.), *Prayer in the City: The Making of Muslim Sacred Places and Urban Life* (pp. 239–265). Bielefeld: transcript.
- Stauth, Georg (2005). Afterword: Holism, Individualism, Secularism. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 33(3), 529–543. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853105775013643>
- Stauth, Georg (2012). The Axial Age and Islam. In Oliver Koslerek, Jörn Rüsen & Ernst Wolff (eds.), *Shaping a Human World: Civilization – Axial Times– Modernities – Humanisms* (pp. 111–147). Bielefeld: transcript.
- Torab, Azam (1996). Piety as Gendered Agency. A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighborhood in Iran. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2(2), 235–252. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034094>
- Torab, Azam (2007). *Performing Islam. Gender and Ritual in Iran*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004152953.i-301>
- Trimingham, Spencer (1971). *The Sufi Orders in Islam*. Oxford: Claredon.
- Turner, Bryan S. (2011). *Religion and Modern Society. Citizenship, Secularization and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Van Nieuwkerk, Karin (2013). *Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt's Islamic Revival*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Yazdi, Ebrahim (2010). *Sixty Years of Patience and Gratefulness: A Memories*. Tehran: Kavir.

### Author's details

*Sana Chavoshian*, PhD candidate of Cultural Sociology at Leipzig University and junior research fellow at the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies "Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities". Research focus: secularity, sociology of Islam, civility and politics of civic society, martyrdom, affect and atmosphere, space and locality.

E-mail: [sana.chavoshian@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:sana.chavoshian@uni-leipzig.de)