

## 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

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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).