

# Author Meets Critics: Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran by Nazanin Shahrokni (2019, University of California Press)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper presented at IV ISA Forum of Sociology-Virtual Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 23-28 2021

Ayşe Saktanber

Middle East Technical University

[ORCID: 0000-0001-8524-5653](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8524-5653)

[sakta@metu.edu.tr](mailto:sakta@metu.edu.tr)

First of all, I must say that I am very pleased to be a part of this author meets critics session and discuss on Nazanin Shahrokni's book called *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* came out from University of California Press in 2019. I have met both with the very first pieces of this seminal work and Nazanin in 2010 at a time when we were in Gothenburg at the Seventeenth ISA World Congress of Sociology.

There in a very interesting panel Nazanin and my then PhD student, now Dr. Selda Tuncer presented highly original papers on the topic of what I can call in short "space, place and gender", a topic which was only getting popular at that time since a decade ago or so.

When I first hold Nazanin's book in my hand published in one of those depressive days of pandemic, I remember how I was excited at that moment for I was like finally it would be possible for me to enjoy the fruit of this work that I was waiting almost ever since its seeds were soiled.

To begin with, in a nutshell, I can say that this book tells us a story about the everlasting struggle of women to participate into public sphere. Actually, we can say that the entire history of women can be read through the lenses of women's struggles to participate into public life. This book

<http://federgi.ankara.edu.tr>

tells us one particular section of this history which takes place in the Islamic Republic of Iran in between the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup>. This story has also another important peculiarity because it is not a story of a participation of women into public sphere as such, but it tells us an endeavor to accessing male's public place under the strict rules of gender segregation regime of an Islamic state.

Nazanin Shahrokni does not examine the struggle of women's participation into public sphere in the sense of participation to the labor force, education or political life and the like, but she takes into account the women in motion in the public space. To this end, she chooses public transportations, parks and stadiums as the major sites of gender segregation in the urban spaces of Tehran, and she does it, as she suggests, within the "state-women-space nexus". As we know it very well this is a state which aims to create a thoroughly Islamic society in which Islamism would be embodied in every sense of the term and more important, it is a state which is so eager to show its success to the entire world and take the pride of its ability of regulating not only the morality but also the every single public image and movement of women according to what it is assumed to be Islamic rules in its Islamic regime. Here, in this book we observe that in so doing how things are getting too much complicated depending on the different phases of state building, structural adjustments of the local governments and reshaping of the citizens' subjecthood or in other words citizens' new honor codes.

So, throughout the book we see that each and every steps that were taken by women to gain more space to expand the boundaries of their public activities they always created what Shahrokni calls a "boundary crisis" which had to be accommodated by the polity and society. However, Shahrokni also argues that this is a process of shaping and reshaping of not only the place of women in the society but also the reshaping of the state itself. That's what Shahrokni puts in front of us as the major argument of the book. This point also constitutes the very first question to be posed to this study; to what extent the state allows itself to be reshaped and how sustainable it is

Shahrokni challenges the static view of all repressive power exercised by an Islamic state over women to keep them in their gender segregated places. On the contrary, in a Foucauldian sense, she tries to show how power exercise can be quite generative and hence how through different ideological, socio-political, cultural and economic mechanisms gender segregated spaces are produced, consumed and transformed.

It should be underlined that one of the most powerful characteris-

tics of this book is its ability to hold the hand of the reader while heading on the way of different phases of those different layers of gender segregation that the author takes up as her focuses of examination. When we are reading Chapter 2 called "Boundaries in Motion: Sisters, Citizens and Consumers Get on the Bus", Chapter 3 "Happy and Healthy in Mother's Paradise: Women-only-Parks and Expansion of the State", and Chapter 4 "Soccer Goals and Political Points: The Gendered Politics of Stadium Access" we observe that the author explores all these three cases within their historical and ongoing contexts by analyzing the effects of ideology, religion, market, culture and the types leadership all of which served to draw the boundaries of women's gender segregated places.

In the very beginning of the book we are also informed that we should read all of these cases within the framework of changing gender segregation regime of the state as a consequence of some historical conditions such as formative years of state building, 8 year Iran-Iraq War, reformism, intrusions of neoliberalism, imperatives of vertical and horizontal market oriented urban renewal as well as the effects of globalization.

And throughout all of these processes we also observe a never-ending tag of war between conservative and reformist political forces in addition to the contentions and controversies within different factions of those two groups regarding the determination of women's gender segregated places and in all of these processes how so many layers intersect with one another.

Shahrokni argues that within those processes if one thing was certain that was the transformation of state policies from "prohibition" to "provision". Within this framework, she determines two distinct Gender Segregation Regimes one of which emerged in 1980s and the other in 2000s. The first one regulated gender segregation by prohibition while also treating women as moral subjects within an Islamic discourse and its gender domination is based on exclusion. However, the other one which started to develop depending on a series of structural and political changes that I briefly mentioned above, relied on provision rather than prohibition and sought women no more as mere moral subjects but citizens and thus developed much more inclusive policies which were wrapped up in a rather secular discourse. Then the other important question to be asked emerges from this proposition that in the face of state's prohibitive provisions on gender segregation that we come across for many times in the book, particularly in the case of Freedom Stadium for instance, to what extent and how it is possible to draw clear cut boundaries between those two gender segregation regimes that the author identifies for different time periods.

I think the answer lies in the analyses of three cases that the author dwells on and under which conditions they emerged as consecutive significant social phenomena. When women started participating into labor force in increasing numbers particularly as war widows, one of its consequences appeared as the increasing number of women who needed to ride the city buses in almost every direction of the city which according to Shahrokni transformed not only public transportation to a new site to be regulated to maintain gender segregation but also gave way to the emergence of a new notion of femininity. Shahrokni delineates the hair breaking details of those efforts to implement different provisions to organize the entrance doors and interior designs and even the types of buses in the name of protecting women from unwanted physical contact with unrelated men and provide their so-called comfort. For her ethnography shows that, as she puts it, with the "Islamization" of buses many women who had been hesitant to ride the buses started using them. Also illustrating with pictures, Shahrokni argues that women did not only start using those buses but at the same time had to fight to gain more space in the buses and opposed to small sections that were separated usually with a metal bar to keep women away from men, but never gave up to claim their space in public transportation.

In the following chapters we observe that in the Islamic Republic of Iran women had other demands too related with their well beings. As a consequence of mandatory veiling, national and international experts determined many health problems specific to women such as depression, joint diseases, vitamin D deficiency and obesity all of which required to be taken care of by the "protective state". So, the establishment of women-only-parks came out as a consequence of such concerns despite the fact that leisure activities such as outdoor exercises and sport facilities of women had been evaluated as a matter of "Western cultural invasion" particularly in the formative years of the Republic. Again, after long lasting disputes, frictions, debates and negotiations between reformist and conservative policy makers, women finally manage to gain the parks of their own mainly drawing upon the medical discourse of the modern world. One of those parks in Tehran which takes place on a hill to secure the visual visibility of women inside the park, in addition to its high walls which surrounded it, called Mother's Paradise constitutes the second urban space that Shahrokni takes up to explore the gender segregated spaces in Tehran. Her ethnography reflects different approaches and attitudes of different women towards this woman-only-park. Therefore, at the different corners of the park it becomes common to come across with totally different types of women ranging from women activists who treat the park as their meeting points, to young students who organize cheerful picnics to listen to the music and dance as well as some housewives

who complete some of their families' meal preparations while enjoying the fresh air. Finally accepting the needs of women for leisure activities as a result of long-lasting discussions and disputes the state itself lowers its walls to let some fresh air getting into the inside of its power blocs at least to a certain degree.

However, in the book one of the best examples of coming to the end of the "criminalization of public displays of happiness" that governed the whole atmosphere of the country in 1980s shows itself before the FIFA World Cup in 1998. It's beyond my abilities to convey the joy and pride of a whole nation as vivid as Nazanin Shahrokni does after winning the football match (or the soccer game) between Iran and Australia played in Melbourne on November 29, 1997, the winner of which would be able to take the last spot on the list, ensuring its place in the tournament at Paris. But then we learn that when almost all nation wanted to celebrate their soccer players so eagerly at the Freedom Stadium upon their return from Melbourne, whether women would be a part of this nation or not erupted as a big social and political problem. Thereafter the access of women to the so-called Freedom Stadium particularly to watch soccer games and wrestling competitions both of which are thought to be exclusively masculine activities replaced provision with prohibition again in the name of protecting women from men's vulgarity and extravagancy. Despite all the efforts of women protestors like White Scarf Girls, reformists and some political leaders coming from different factions of conservatives, this time discourse of exclusion knocks the discourse of inclusion out.

For me this chapter is the saddest one among others, among the three cases of gender segregation not because all of this prohibition story which goes back and forth in years seems so absurd, but because it reveals how the hopes and dreams of women have been curtailed and sacrificed for the consolidation of state power and the othering of its national and international opponents.

Shahrokni identifies the overall situation embodied in those three cases as *differential exclusion and inclusion* by arguing that "the interplay of power and resistance is riddled with ambivalence as women are able to be both in and out of place at once and in multiple contexts". In short women have to navigate within those ambivalences which may signify different things for different women to find out their correct places.

Regarding these three cases of production of gender segregated places what is most striking for me is to observe that as long as women are the targets of modern Islamic state's techniques of biopower, their wellbeing and needs of participating into male's public sphere are taken into acco-

unt only if they attempt to take part in the labor force or have to survive as healthy subjects of biological reproduction and the like, but when they demand their rights of self-realization and freedom of *joie de vivre* (or say joy of life if you like), they are left out of that game of fostering the life of the population . This situation leaves us with the question of objectification of women by the state that this book seems to position itself about it in an optimistic rather than a pessimistic realism. Certainly, regarding the struggles of women we can say that, the book shows very well that women are not the passive recipients of state sanctions, however it seems that this only happens about the expansion of their place in the public space but not about the eradication of that segregation in all of the open public places. Or in other words, the author does not evaluate on this situation probably in order not to stray away from the focus of the book which is based on three specific cases that they definitely needed implementation of specific public policies by the participation of different actors of the polity and society.

As my final comments on this seminal work, I would like to say that although its research depends on both a series of ethnographic research and meticulous analyses of the discourses of state authorities, policy makers and opinion leaders, while reading the book, one expects to hear more of a voices of women in the field who constitute the actual targets of those gender segregation policies as opposed to male politicians. Although Shahrokni clarifies her ethnographic strategy in the first chapter of the book in a short methodology subsection titled "At Home in the Field" trough which we understand her sensibilities about the issues of reflexivity and her high level of awareness about her position in the field both as an insider and outsider as well as her efforts for not to fall into the trap of, to recall Abu-Ludgod's words "romance of resistance" when analyzing the struggle of women to gain more public place, I'll close my exposé here, saying while displaying the protectionist policies of the state it seems that the author herself also embraces a similar kind of protective attitude which hinders her to let the voices of women to be heard as much lauder as one would expect that I think if otherwise this could have done much more justice to this extremely well conducted and written research. First of all, I must say that I am very pleased to be a part of this author meets critics session and discuss on Nazanin Shahrokni's book called *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* came out from University of California Press in 2019.

I have met both with the very first pieces of this seminal work and Nazanin in 2010 at a time when we were in Gothenburg at the Seventeenth ISA World Congress of Sociology.

There in a very interesting panel Nazanin and my then PhD student, now Dr. Selda Tuncer presented highly original papers on the topic of what I can call in short "space, place and gender", a topic which was only getting popular at that time since a decade ago or so.

When I first hold Nazanin's book in my hand published in one of those depressive days of pandemic, I remember how I was excited at that moment for I was like finally it would be possible for me to enjoy the fruit of this work that I was waiting almost ever since its seeds were soiled.

To begin with, in a nutshell, I can say that this book tells us a story about the everlasting struggle of women to participate into public sphere. Actually, we can say that the entire history of women can be read through the lenses of women's struggles to participate into public life. This book tells us one particular section of this history which takes place in the Islamic Republic of Iran in between the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup>. This story has also another important peculiarity because it is not a story of a participation of women into public sphere as such, but it tells us an endeavor to accessing male's public place under the strict rules of gender segregation regime of an Islamic state.

Nazanin Shahrokni does not examine the struggle of women's participation into public sphere in the sense of participation to the labor force, education or political life and the like, but she takes into account the women in motion in the public space. To this end, she chooses public transportations, parks and stadiums as the major sites of gender segregation in the urban spaces of Tehran, and she does it, as she suggests, within the "state-women-space nexus". As we know it very well this is a state which aims to create a thoroughly Islamic society in which Islamism would be embodied in every sense of the term and more important, it is a state which is so eager to show its success to the entire world and take the pride of its ability of regulating not only the morality but also the every single public image and movement of women according to what it is assumed to be Islamic rules in its Islamic regime. Here, in this book we observe that in so doing how things are getting too much complicated depending on the different phases of state building, structural adjustments of the local governments and reshaping of the citizens' subjecthood or in other words citizens' new honor codes.

So, throughout the book we see that each and every steps that were taken by women to gain more space to expand the boundaries of their public activities they always created what Shahrokni calls a "boundary crisis" which had to be accommodated by the polity and society. However, Shahrokni also argues that this is a process of shaping and reshaping

of not only the place of women in the society but also the reshaping of the state itself. That's what Shahrokni puts in front of us as the major argument of the book. This point also constitutes the very first question to be posed to this study; to what extent the state allows itself to be reshaped and how sustainable it is

Shahrokni challenges the static view of all repressive power exercised by an Islamic state over women to keep them in their gender segregated places. On the contrary, in a Foucauldian sense, she tries to show how power exercise can be quite generative and hence how through different ideological, socio-political, cultural and economic mechanisms gender segregated spaces are produced, consumed and transformed.

It should be underlined that one of the most powerful characteristics of this book is its ability to hold the hand of the reader while heading on the way of different phases of those different layers of gender segregation that the author takes up as her focuses of examination. When we are reading Chapter 2 called "Boundaries in Motion: Sisters, Citizens and Consumers Get on the Bus", Chapter 3 "Happy and Healthy in Mother's Paradise: Women-only-Parks and Expansion of the State", and Chapter 4 "Soccer Goals and Political Points: The Gendered Politics of Stadium Access" we observe that the author explores all these three cases within their historical and ongoing contexts by analyzing the effects of ideology, religion, market, culture and the types leadership all of which served to draw the boundaries of women's gender segregated places.

In the very beginning of the book we are also informed that we should read all of these cases within the framework of changing gender segregation regime of the state as a consequence of some historical conditions such as formative years of state building, 8 year Iran-Iraq War, reformism, intrusions of neoliberalism, imperatives of vertical and horizontal market oriented urban renewal as well as the effects of globalization.

And throughout all of these processes we also observe a never-ending tag of war between conservative and reformist political forces in addition to the contentions and controversies within different factions of those two groups regarding the determination of women's gender segregated places and in all of these processes how so many layers intersect with one another.

Shahrokni argues that within those processes if one thing was certain that was the transformation of state policies from "prohibition" to "provision". Within this framework, she determines two distinct Gender Segregation Regimes one of which emerged in 1980s and the other in 2000s.



The first one regulated gender segregation by prohibition while also treating women as moral subjects within an Islamic discourse and its gender domination is based on exclusion. However, the other one which started to develop depending on a series of structural and political changes that I briefly mentioned above, relied on provision rather than prohibition and sought women no more as mere moral subjects but citizens and thus developed much more inclusive policies which were wrapped up in a rather secular discourse. Then the other important question to be asked emerges from this proposition that in the face of state's prohibitive provisions on gender segregation that we come across for many times in the book, particularly in the case of Freedom Stadium for instance, to what extent and how it is possible to draw clear cut boundaries between those two gender segregation regimes that the author identifies for different time periods.

I think the answer lies in the analyses of three cases that the author dwells on and under which conditions they emerged as consecutive significant social phenomena. When women started participating into labor force in increasing numbers particularly as war widows, one of its consequences appeared as the increasing number of women who needed to ride the city buses in almost every direction of the city which according to Shahrokni transformed not only public transportation to a new site to be regulated to maintain gender segregation but also gave way to the emergence of a new notion of femininity. Shahrokni delineates the hair breaking details of those efforts to implement different provisions to organize the entrance doors and interior designs and even the types of buses in the name of protecting women from unwanted physical contact with unrelated men and provide their so-called comfort. For her ethnography shows that, as she puts it, with the "Islamization" of buses many women who had been hesitant to ride the buses started using them. Also illustrating with pictures, Shahrokni argues that women did not only start using those buses but at the same time had to fight to gain more space in the buses and opposed to small sections that were separated usually with a metal bar to keep women away from men, but never gave up to claim their space in public transportation.

In the following chapters we observe that in the Islamic Republic of Iran women had other demands too related with their well beings. As a consequence of mandatory veiling, national and international experts determined many health problems specific to women such as depression, joint diseases, vitamin D deficiency and obesity all of which required to be taken care of by the "protective state". So, the establishment of women-only-parks came out as a consequence of such concerns despite the fact that leisure activities such as outdoor exercises and sport facilities of women had been evaluated as a matter of "Western cultural invasion"

particularly in the formative years of the Republic. Again, after long lasting disputes, frictions, debates and negotiations between reformist and conservative policy makers, women finally manage to gain the parks of their own mainly drawing upon the medical discourse of the modern world. One of those parks in Tehran which takes place on a hill to secure the visual visibility of women inside the park, in addition to its high walls which surrounded it, called Mother's Paradise constitutes the second urban space that Shahrokni takes up to explore the gender segregated spaces in Tehran. Her ethnography reflects different approaches and attitudes of different women towards this woman-only-park. Therefore, at the different corners of the park it becomes common to come across with totally different types of women ranging from women activists who treat the park as their meeting points, to young students who organize cheerful picnics to listen to the music and dance as well as some housewives who complete some of their families' meal preparations while enjoying the fresh air. Finally accepting the needs of women for leisure activities as a result of long-lasting discussions and disputes the state itself lowers its walls to let some fresh air getting into the inside of its power blocs at least to a certain degree.

However, in the book one of the best examples of coming to the end of the "criminalization of public displays of happiness" that governed the whole atmosphere of the country in 1980s shows itself before the FIFA World Cup in 1998. It's beyond my abilities to convey the joy and pride of a whole nation as vivid as Nazanin Shahrokni does after winning the football match (or the soccer game) between Iran and Australia played in Melbourne on November 29, 1997, the winner of which would be able to take the last spot on the list, ensuring its place in the tournament at Paris. But then we learn that when almost all nation wanted to celebrate their soccer players so eagerly at the Freedom Stadium upon their return from Melbourne, whether women would be a part of this nation or not erupted as a big social and political problem. Thereafter the access of women to the so-called Freedom Stadium particularly to watch soccer games and wrestling competitions both of which are thought to be exclusively masculine activities replaced provision with prohibition again in the name of protecting women from men's vulgarity and extravagancy. Despite all the efforts of women protestors like White Scarf Girls, reformists and some political leaders coming from different factions of conservatives, this time discourse of exclusion knocks the discourse of inclusion out.

For me this chapter is the saddest one among others, among the three cases of gender segregation not because all of this prohibition story which goes back and forth in years seems so absurd, but because it reveals how the hopes and dreams of women have been curtailed and sacrificed

for the consolidation of state power and the othering of its national and international opponents.

Shahrokni identifies the overall situation embodied in those three cases as *differential exclusion and inclusion* by arguing that “the interplay of power and resistance is riddled with ambivalence as women are able to be both in and out of place at once and in multiple contexts”. In short women have to navigate within those ambivalences which may signify different things for different women to find out their correct places.

Regarding these three cases of production of gender segregated places what is most striking for me is to observe that as long as women are the targets of modern Islamic state’s techniques of biopower, their wellbeing and needs of participating into male’s public sphere are taken into account only if they attempt to take part in the labor force or have to survive as healthy subjects of biological reproduction and the like, but when they demand their rights of self-realization and freedom of *joie de vivre* (or say joy of life if you like), they are left out of that game of fostering the life of the population. This situation leaves us with the question of objectification of women by the state that this book seems to position itself about it in an optimistic rather than a pessimistic realism. Certainly, regarding the struggles of women we can say that, the book shows very well that women are not the passive recipients of state sanctions, however it seems that this only happens about the expansion of their place in the public space but not about the eradication of that segregation in all of the open public places. Or in other words, the author does not evaluate on this situation probably in order not to stray away from the focus of the book which is based on three specific cases that they definitely needed implementation of specific public policies by the participation of different actors of the polity and society.

As my final comments on this seminal work, I would like to say that although its research depends on both a series of ethnographic research and meticulous analyses of the discourses of state authorities, policy makers and opinion leaders, while reading the book, one expects to hear more of a voices of women in the field who constitute the actual targets of those gender segregation policies as opposed to male politicians. Although Shahrokni clarifies her ethnographic strategy in the first chapter of the book in a short methodology subsection titled “At Home in the Field” through which we understand her sensibilities about the issues of reflexivity and her high level of awareness about her position in the field both as an insider and outsider as well as her efforts for not to fall into the trap of, to recall Abu-Ludgod’s words “romance of resistance” when analyzing the struggle of women to gain more public place, I’ll close my

exposé here, saying while displaying the protectionist policies of the state it seems that the author herself also embraces a similar kind of protective attitude which hinders her to let the voices of women to be heard as much lauder as one would expect that I think if otherwise this could have done much more justice to this extremely well conducted and written research.

