GENDER AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN IRAN

MICROENTERPRISE AND THE INFORMAL SECTOR

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Introduction

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It was a warm spring afternoon when two research assistants and I arrived at a focus group being held in the Molavi neighborhood of Tehran, close to Darvazeh Ghar. Molavi is a part of old Tehran, close to the main bazaar. It is a place with well established, if checkered, social networks, and since the time of the last shah (r. 1941–79), it has been a favorite haunt of drug traffickers and prostitutes. The neighborhood is dominated by migrants from Iranian Azerbaijan, who settled there as entire extended families or even several families from the same villages. They are proud of their heritage, and by living in the vicinity of kin and friends from Azerbaijan, they continue to maintain the strong ties of their premigration pasts. Women play a major role in maintaining these social networks—in fact, they have a vested interest in maintaining them. There are traditional sources of female power—a topic that will be discussed later in relation to female-sphere theory.

Our host received me with great hospitality and she was generous with her time. One of the more exceptional invitees was Fatimah, a woman in her early forties. Fatimah had never married, and she worked out of her house as a hairdresser, a skill that she learned through apprenticeship. She was the eldest daughter of a highly religious and traditional family. She kept her hejab on throughout the meeting even though we were all women. Fatimah had been working in the neighborhood since she was 15 years old and over time had become the sole income earner in the family. With her elderly parents ailing, Fatimah is the only breadwinner and has had to take responsibility for the care of her younger brothers and sister. She financed her brothers’ weddings. She prepared her sister’s jahizieh, the household
furniture that each bride takes to her new home, the value of which depends on the wealth of her natal family. Fatimah’s current responsibilities include making sure her siblings are handling their finances properly by helping them apply for mortgages and providing emergency loans in times of need.

Fatimah is not only the pillar of her family; she is also, according to the other women at the focus group, a major pillar of the community. Many female members of the community expressed their deepest respect for Fatimah for having turned her hair salon into a place where women could come together. Women in crisis with family or personal problems come to Fatimah’s salon to find consolation and support. Fatimah’s house is where a woman can flee from an abusive husband even late at night. Her house is not just a hair salon but also a shelter. Fatimah has also organized a whole array of community activities. She is in charge of group pilgrimages to Mashhad and Qom. Her reputation as a highly trustworthy, female community leader, despite her relatively young age, has helped many women to persuade their husbands to allow them to go on these pilgrimages. For those familiar with organized female pilgrimages in Iran, it is no secret that they are a great deal of fun, with a lot of shopping, festivities, and bonding away from the daily domestic chores. The women doubtlessly engage in many religious and spiritual activities, but they also exercise a great deal of freedom in an all-female space where they pray, sing, tell jokes, dance, or cry together, and above all build solidarity.

Fatimah, similar to many other women whom I met in my research, raises charity funds through her neighborhood network. These funds act as an emergency resource for members of the community in need; cases range from funds to enable young couples to marry to funds to help those who suddenly find themselves unemployed, injured, or ill. Fatimah’s salon, similar to many other salons I observed (this includes both formal as well as informal salons), is a place where many women engage in a highly sophisticated network. These networks operate extremely efficiently and serve as gatekeepers of highly important economic functions. This simple research observation and focus group inspired my research for many years to come, part of which is included in this book.

One method of research was, as a participant-observer, to drop questions while pretending to be a single woman in need of a rental apartment. A simple question about rentals, irrespective of the neighborhood, would receive a huge response from those in attendance (although in lower-income neighborhoods women were far more engaged in these types of networks than in high- and middle-income
neighborhoods). Research in low-income neighborhoods has been a joy, as women were very generous with their time. For example, their welcoming help, regardless of the neighborhood, when I said I was searching for a rental, operated through their powerful networks often by just going to a hairdressing salon. In some cases, the available rental would be in return for a monetary reward, while in other instances it simply would be found as women offering help to a fellow woman. These networks operated both as part of social safety nets and as part of an invisible, parallel, or shadow economy—effectively an informal economy run by women for women. This book is part of a larger project to shed light on this invisible economy that is spreading a massive social safety net among low-income women by way of mutual help and community development/sustainment.

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The central aim of this book is to shed light on this invisible economy and to examine whether low-income women who operate in the informal sector as micro-entrepreneurs are in fact empowered (primarily monetarily) or, as the majority of the literature on the topic tends to suggest, are exploited. It has been difficult to write this book, because much of the written research on the topic primarily has been, and continues to be, done in South Asia, Latin America, and Africa (in the context of the developing world). It is indeed important to shed light on the intellectual lacuna of gender and the informal sector in Iran and to relate the topic to the literature in the field. One could argue that the topic is underresearched not just in the case of Iran but also in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. To examine why the topic has become an academic blind spot, we need to overcome many degrees of separation. The first degree of separation feeds on the way discourses about economic development in Third World countries are born and articulated. The second degree of separation is the domination of mainstream economics and how development prescriptions are formulated and imposed by international development actors. Third is implicit and explicit Orientalism (to be elaborated in Chapter 1) and a tendency to overlook the Muslim world when it comes to issues related to economic development. Fourth are some of the shortcomings of how gender and development discourse have been formulated. The fifth degree of separation involves how one can actually examine the issue of gender among the low income without the distortion of academic bias of Western-educated researchers. And the last degree of separation involves how to overcome the challenges of carrying out fieldwork in Iran.
My use of six degrees of separation is not accidental but refers to an important empirical work on the structure of social networks by Michael Gurevich published in 1961. My book, as we shall see later, utilizes some of Gurevich’s discussion of social network theories based on his research at Harvard University. His theory later became relevant for the notion of social capital, which also will be discussed later in this book. Interestingly, the theory initially argued, based on study results, that all people in the United States seemed to be connected by approximately three friendship links. Stanley Milgram later popularized the idea of links in an article published in *Psychology Today*. Milgram conducted an experiment that may be considered as the origin of the notion of six degrees: that everyone is separated from one another by only six other people (1967). This book will later discuss theories of social networks and social capital and their relationship to the social safety net and poverty alleviation.

This introductory chapter will deal with issues related to development and how it has been criticized as well as the implicit and explicit Orientalism of the discourse, especially with regard to the Muslim world. Other topics such as gender and development, as well as the problem of academic bias in Western-educated research, will be discussed. Following this theoretical background, Chapter 1 provides readers with contextualization for theories of social capital (social network), micro-entrepreneurship, and microcredit as they relate to gender. Chapter 2 examines gender and micro-entrepreneurship and the informal sector. It could be argued that an essential part of the book has been to bring to Iran specifically, and the broader MENA region generally, some of the theoretical discussion around the topic of gender and micro-entrepreneurship, which is very rich for other regions of the world. Chapter 3 focuses on women’s employment in Iran. Chapters 4 and 5 are based on fieldwork and present the results of 180 interviews with men and women from low-income households in Tehran as well as material from my participant observation.

**Mainstream Development Discourse and Its Critique**

The concept of development can be traced to the rise of industrial society, itself a social transformation of unprecedented increases in productive capacity leading to urban migration, impoverishment, and unemployment (Polanyi 1957; Wallerstein 1974; Braudel 1975; Hobsbawm 1999; and Arrighi 2007). In the first phase of development theory, the topic is concerned with understanding the origins of
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capitalism, an upheaval that was painful for European societies and created momentous social disruption and chaos (Edelman and Haugerud 2005). On the one hand, it brought wealth, prosperity, and improved standards of living for the rich and powerful in European countries, who depended on the ideological underpinnings of the Enlightenment. The ideas of the Enlightenment itself were found only among academics and a small minority of the elite educated intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, Orientalism glorified the heritage of the West to justify colonialism. On the other hand, in Europe by the nineteenth century the situation of the masses was deplorable, and it led to more than 25 million poor Europeans immigrating to North America between 1880 and 1914. This mass migration was very important socially, for it reduced surplus cheap labor and finally empowered workers through unions in Western Europe. It also led to the intellectual countermovement of Marxism, an ideology drawn from the same principles of the Enlightenment.

The origins of today’s development literature are rooted in the history of intellectual thought in Britain, France, Holland, and other European countries. It began as an attempt to increase productivity in the colonies to levels prevailing in Europe as the ability to keep colonies became more difficult in the early twentieth century. Although the terms developed and underdeveloped were coined before the Second World War, it was in 1944 with the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions that the modern “Three Worlds” era began. Postwar development was no longer a European colonial domination crisis, but an American concern. It was President Harry Truman in his 1949 inaugural speech that announced that his mission, as the most powerful man in the most powerful nation, was to bring growth and improved standards of living to “underdeveloped areas.” The issue of newly decolonized countries and their economic fate became central to American and Western European policy. As the Cold War unfolded, the United States in particular became preoccupied with economic development as a means to prevent the emergence of revolutionary movements, such as the ones in Cuba and Vietnam, and to prevent countries from falling under the political influence of their ideological rivals: the Soviet Union and its allies. The developed world, together with international aid agencies, aimed to address “underdevelopment” defined in purely economic terms such as gross national product (GNP).

The goal of development became transformation of the economy from “traditional” to “modern.” Among academics, the issue of development was rooted in the Enlightenment notion of progress. It
dominated the work of sociologists such as Max Weber, who saw the rise of modern society as a development characterized by individualism, rationality, and economic progress, whereas he viewed traditional society as based on community, religion, and nonindustrial modes of production. Modernization theory as a normative discourse relies on several assumptions, such as economic progress being ideal, unidirectional, and only possible if the Western path is replicated. To be or to become modern, modernization theory argues that the path is transformation from a traditional society, meaning non-Western, to one that is similar to those of Western countries. A modern society/country is one that has freed itself from its own cultural heritage and has adapted one resembling those of Western Europe. In effect, Max Weber’s pioneering work on the “Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” has dominated development discourse. Weber argues that the rise of modern capitalism was because of ethics embedded in Protestant Christianity and that the modern world characterized by rationalization and intellectualization is a world of disenchantment.

The rise of the new industrial society as being unidirectional has been criticized by famous anthropologists such as James Ferguson in *Expectations of Modernity*, where he argues that such assumptions about urbanization and industrialization in academia and popular understandings of modernization are misleading (Ferguson 1999). The process of industrialization caused upheaval in Europe and created even more traumatic conditions for the colonized world. It was in the work of John Hobson that the notion of imperialism was elaborated. In Latin America, Raul Prebisch founded the United Nations’ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean by the late 1940s and developed the “center/core-periphery” framework. Fernando Cardoso, who later would become Brazilian president, wrote about the dependency of the ex-colonies on the developed world. Two theories critical of post–World War II development were formulated: dependency and world systems theory, particularly after the 1973 Chilean coup (Wallerstein 1974; Frank 1971). These critiques argued that developed countries continued to dominate “underdeveloped” countries economically through unequal terms of trade and various social and political mechanisms that ensure subservience of the underdeveloped/periphery to the developed/core countries.

The lack of economic progress in “undeveloped” countries has been explained away in mainstream literature, by scholars such as Talcott Parsons (Moss and Savchenko 2006), Marion Levy (1972), and Alex Inkeles (1969), along the same lines as Kipling’s “white man’s burden.” In essence, the problem of underdevelopment is ascribed to
backward behavior. In order to develop, underdeveloped countries have to adapt Western values and practices to achieve greater material prosperity (Woolcock 1998, p. 153). In the context of Official Development Assistance and the Bretton Woods institutions, funds first began to flow into developing-state coffers to be distributed in line with a Keynesian model of full employment, which at that time was prevalent in the West. Mainstream development, which is based on modernization, was articulated in the work of W. W. Rostow, who argued that there are four stages of development, starting from pre-development and traditional, where through aid an underdeveloped country could be assisted and reach a take-off stage from which it would drive to maturity and, finally, high levels of consumption. This was a linear model based on Western experience and was adopted by US foreign policy as well as the Bretton Woods institutions.

However, the postwar developed world faced its first major economic crisis in the early 1970s. This has been blamed variously on the OPEC price spike, the US abandonment of the gold standard, the post-Fordist industrial landscape, and the declining profitability of capital in the face of strong labor. This crisis led to a rightward shift away from Keynesianism, especially among politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, who became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1979, and Ronald Reagan, who became President of the United States in 1981.

Neoliberalism became mainstream economics; it was critical of Keynes, thus seeking to limit the role of the state in the economy, freeing transnational capital flows, and prescribing a reduction of the size of the welfare state. Its proponents argued that in countries where economic growth and development had happened—defined as the Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong—free markets and free trade were the driving force. At this point discourse transformed from development to globalization.

Neoliberal economics has been criticized by a variety of developmental state theorists such as Alice Amsden (1985); Theda Skocpol (1985); Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (1985); Robert Wade (1988); Manuel Castells (1992); and R. P. Appelbaum and J. Henderson (1992). They argued that, rather than the invisible hand, increases in the GNPs of NICs were due to the role of the state. They argued that prosperity was the result of the heavy hand of a developmentalist state and that embracing liberalized markets and deregulation is anathema to development. Indeed the financial crisis of 2007 can be taken as Exhibit A that economic
deregulation can lead to economic meltdown. Those working in the area of women and development also have argued against mainstream economists. In my first book, I documented how NICs prospered not only because of the role of a developmentalist state but also because of the way women were used as a flexible source of cheap labor for making cheap consumer export goods (Bahramitash 2005). This idea will be explored later in this section.

The turmoil of the 1970s also led to ideological shifts within international development organizations. In the initial post–World War II era, there was a concerted effort on the part of Western countries and the local elite to bring about industrialization and modernization (after the late 1970s, this term began to be used interchangeably with globalization). Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita levels for ex-colonies and much of the “underdeveloped” world did not rise as quickly as anticipated, and in some cases massive abject poverty became a glaring fact. The previously simple interpretation of development (solely in economic terms) was replaced under the guidance of Amartya Sen as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) instituted a Human Development Index incorporating indictors related to health, education, political participation, and, more recently, the position of women in society. However, Sen would prove unable to halt the changing tide of development practices; as with sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1970s and Latin America’s debt crises and lost decade of the 1980s, no country in the Muslim world became economically prosperous. On the contrary, urbanization and industrialization led to a rise in poverty and income inequality. It should be noted that the 1970s was not just a decade of crisis for Western countries; the Soviet bloc was also beginning to crumble. As socialism failed to become a real alternative ideology to Westernization/modernization, liberation theology replaced socialism in the case of Latin America. In the Muslim world, disappointment with Westernization/modernization led to a quest for an alternative based on indigenous cultural specificities. It was this quest that led to a surge in popularity of political Islam, a point that will be explored further in a later section.

It must be noted that since World War II successive mainstream economic models have succeeded in some respects, not least of which is in terms of global GNP growing from $1.3 trillion in 1960 to $30 trillion by the late 1990s. “Nonetheless, at the end of the 20th century, over 840 million people were undernourished, and close to 1.3 billion people [lived] on less than a dollar a day” (FAO 2003, 6; UNDP 2006, 22). There has been improvement in the lives of many
when measured by health and education, but perhaps the worst problem is economic inequality; in 1960 the wealthiest 20 percent had an income thirty times that of the poorest 20 percent, but by the end of the twentieth century, “the world’s 200 wealthiest individuals had assets equal to more than the combined income of 41 percent of the world’s population” (UNDP 2006, 38). Furthermore, the current economic model created the world’s worst crisis in generations, and it is unclear to what extent debt-laden economies such as those prevailing in the United States and the Eurozone will be able to recover. Worse, contemporary economic growth models come at a massive environmental cost, as the Gulf of Mexico oil spill of April 2011 bears witness to. In addition, in a recent article in The Economist, Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank, argued that the Third World is no more. The Economist states that, according to International Monetary Fund forecasts, public debt in rich countries will rise from 75 percent of GDP at the time of the crisis in 2007 to 110 percent by 2015 (Economist 2010).³

In closing this section, in the context of Iran’s post-2009 presidential election, many arguments of neoliberal economists indeed may be relevant; the state has clamped down on civil rights, has become highly bureaucratic—making it prone to corruption—and much of the economy is in the hands of the state and parasitical organizations (Krueger 1974; Bauer, Meier, and Seers 1984). Those in favor of market liberalization, as opponents of state intervention, argue that empowered state bureaucracies are more interested in corruption and rent-seeking behavior than in promoting economic development (Krueger 1974, p. 302). Others who are critical of state intervention include Jagdish Bhagwati and Anne Krueger, Harry Johnson, Deepak La, and Bela Belassa. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow that a market-driven economy would be the solution.

**Anthropological Critique: Spelling Out the Third Degree of Separation**

Development/modernization/Westernization has been criticized by some of the most highly respected sociologists and anthropologists. Chief among its opponents is Arturo Escobar, who was one of the first to argue that mainstream literature on development—and its dialogue—is ethnocentric and based on Western experiences and perspectives (Batterbury and Fernando 2004). Escobar asserts that development as a linear, universal model of economic and social development that can be applied objectively to diverse local cultures
and societies grouped together as a Third World is culturally biased: “To sum up, I propose to speak of development as historically singular experience, the creation of a domain of thought and action, by analyzing the characteristics and interrelations of the three aces that define it; the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice, theories, and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed and underdevelopment” (Escobar 1995, p. 10). Escobar cites Edward Said in his argument that development as a discourse shares much with other colonizing discourses such as Orientalism. According to Said, Orientalism “can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it, in short, Orientalism as a Western style for domination, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1979, p. 3). Development likewise defined abnormalities (the poor, the malnourished, the illiterate, the landless) and sought to address these problems by using the West as the point of reference.

Indeed, establishing a domain outside of the discourse is difficult, given the fact that the critique of development is within the very framework of development, and thus “[development’s] opponents [are] obliged to phrase their critiques in development terms: another development, participatory development, socialist development, and so on” (Peet and Hartwick 1999). Escobar contends that critical thought can raise social awareness about the power that discourse shapes and can assist communities to move away from development into a different domain, and he argues for alternatives to development and a rejection of the paradigm, preferring social movements as a place where alternative spaces can be formulated. Calderon, Piscitelli, and Reyna (1992), following Escobar, argue that collective action is nourished by the daily production of alternative frameworks for meaning, on which the networks themselves are founded and live from day to day. This line of argument has been taken further, and it has been argued that this is the space in which social movements seek democracy and have the potential of becoming counter hegemonic (St. Martin 2009).

Given development’s dependence on Western modernity and historicity, Escobar asks if the hegemonic discourse of development can be modified significantly (Escobar 1995, p. 343). In this book, a critique of mainstream development is based on Said’s Orientalism
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