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**Friendship and Intimacy Among Older Women in Iran:
A Case of Social Welfare**

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Introduction

There is an enormous gap in the amount of literature surrounding women's contributions to common interest associations (Haviland; 2002). Further, there is an even greater gap surrounding women and friendship circles that have developed over many years. It seems unusual that there does not appear to be much formal information (in the form of studies) that focuses on this particular phenomenon. The friendship circle has existed for women for centuries. According to William Haviland (2002: 304),

For a long time, women's contributions to common-interest associations were dismissed by scholars as less developed than men's. The reason was that men's associations attracted more notice around the world than did women's.

The importance of this issue cannot be underestimated since it seems even more crucial to develop an understanding of this phenomenon in the context of aging because the life expectancy is greater for women than it is for men.

There are many studies that focus on gender. There are many studies that focus on later life issues. There are studies that focus on gender and later life (Arbor and Ginn; 1992; Glasse and Hendricks; 1990; Johnson; 1990; Rossi, 1985; 1986); on older women and poverty (Baruch; 1994; Morgan; 1990; Hess and Markson; 1990); on older women and health (Grau and Susser; 1989; Herzog, Holden, and Seltzer (Eds.); 1989; National Institute on Aging; 1988; Verbugge; 1989); on celebrating older women (the closest to examining the friendship circle) (Thone; 1992); on empowering older women (Chaney; 1990); and on older women and public policy (Barusch; 1994) to name a few. Still, the subject of friendship circles and for what purposes they exist seems very limited. There is little information available about OLDER women and friendship circles. For example, there are newspaper articles on the Red Hatters and there is one video called the "Ya Ya Sisterhood". The friendship circle does exist for women in American society, just as it does in other societies (see for example, Cool and McCabe (1987), but there seems to be little evidence of this in the research. These friendship circles are necessarily aged-based. However, how they are conducted and who appears to be major figures are usually older women.

Depending upon the definition of a friendship circle, there appear too many varieties of friendship circles in the United States: whether the circle consists of women who support each other after a divorce, support each other during good times, as well as bad times, etc. Women in the United States may belong to a variety of circles for a variety of reasons all at the same time. It is different in other cultures as will be discussed later in this paper.

The research gap does not stop there, there also seems to a lack of research on how women, especially older women, have developed an informal system of welfare created along with the circle of friendship. What research has been done

is generally on women and public policy (see Barusch, for example). Certainly, this type of informal welfare system does exist as well, and the reality of this system appears much more obvious in countries in which the welfare system is not as highly developed as it is in the United States. It is the researcher's contention that this welfare system exists universally among women and that it has just not seemed like an important enough issue to look into. For the purposes of this research I have examined, through participant observation, observation, and interviews, older women of Iran and their system of friendships (both within the family and outside the family). I use this particular culture because I have ready access to a wealth of data, including, but not limited to participation observation. Interviews have also been conducted, as well as, literature reviews of Persian literature. One other contention of this paper is that these welfare friendship circles increase the older women's power in all aspects of society.

Background – Welfare System

Of the industrial nations, the United States ranks last (37th) (Kerbo, 2003;38) in terms of it's donation to those at the bottom of the social classes. But, even then, the welfare system is more sophisticated than that of developing countries. In those countries the system is more informal and relies heavily on religious beliefs and family ties – a major part of the cultural core.

Religious beliefs in most countries have been shaped by and have shaped the culture that they are part of. Laws are created for religious reasons. For example, in the United States, there are laws against sodomy and incest. In most societies, acts that people believe to be sinful are illegal. For example, in Iran, it is illegal to drink alcohol or take drugs. In Iran, it is the religious values that shape much of the welfare system. This also shapes the friendship circles of older women.

Culture and Welfare

Many religions have as one of their tenets – tithing, or giving to the poor. Islam is no exception. According to Lincoln Keiser (2003; 248), there are five pillars of faith in all denominations of Islam, one of which is tithing to the poor. That is an informal form of welfare system in which all people take care of each other. The major religion of Iran is Islam. People in Iran, as in other Islamic countries take the pillars seriously. From observations in selected areas of Iran, it appears that the poor are taken care of through contributions from those who are more fortunate. This observation is in no way meant to represent all of Iran and the Iranian people and, it cannot be generalized to all of Iran or any other Islamic countries. People in Iran are as different as people in the United States are, and, it is therefore, very difficult to generalize observations without systematic random sampling of the observations. However, one thing can be stated about the pillars of faith, and, that is, that tithing is a form of social welfare. This form of social welfare, as part of faith, is done so in the name of Allah (God) and is therefore one of the most important actions that a person can take. This means that the more fortunate take part in taking care of those who less fortunate.

The purpose of explaining this at the outset of this paper is to put a context around the different types of friendship circles that exist in Iran. This paper is not a paper on religion, rather, it is an attempt to show that it is the women, through their friendship circles, that take care of others less fortunate than they are. I will also attempt to demonstrate that it is older women, in their friendship circles that take care of the young and old. Further, older women gain and maintain power from this association in the private sphere in particular, even though the lines between the public and private sphere are blurred.

Public Sphere Versus Private Sphere

The importance of this division cannot be overstated. It is a major distinction from which many distinct statuses for men and women are arrived at. This separation, for western societies such as the United States denotes a separation in statuses (high and low). According to Rosaldo (1974: 36),

Women's status will be the lowest in those societies where there is a firm differentiation between domestic and public spheres of activity and where women are isolated from one another and placed under a single man's authority, in the home.

The division between the public and private sphere spills over into many aspects of life. According to Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker, when examining the historical division of American society as this division relates to community organization and the organizing activities that male and female have, males organize differently; they also choose only one leader per term. There are many leaders of women's organizing groups at the same time. As an example of the above phenomenon, Marie Weil notes that (1986; 192).

Despite the rich and proud heritage of female organizers and movement leaders, the field of community organization, in both its teaching models and its major exponents, has been a male-dominated preserve, where, even though values are expressed in terms of participatory democracy, much of the focus within the dominant practice methods has been non-supportive or antithetical to feminism. Strategies have largely been based on "macho-power" models, manipulateness, and zero-sum gamesmanship.

For the individual in the United States, it is not uncommon to hear "just a housewife" as a response to the question: what is your occupation. It is also not uncommon to call older women who assert themselves as "old hags". "Just" seems to be emphasized in the occupational situation in which people are responding to this question in that way are involved in the domestic-private sphere. Also, in asserting themselves, older women bring attention to areas that make people feel uncomfortable, even though the experience of many older

women may be beneficial to the situation. The translation of this in western terms suggests that low status is equal to powerlessness. This has further spilled over into the public sphere in terms of sex-segregated jobs. It is called a dual system (Lorber, 1998, p. 34) in which the status of one domain is transferred to all other domains. In the United States, it represents the degree of inequality in the society to some extent since the spheres do overlap. However, it might be noted that the more fully one is immersed in the domestic sphere the group is, whether male or female, the more likely it is that they lack political power.

This is not necessarily the case in other cultures. Cynthia Nelson (1973), when studying nomad families, has suggested that to look at the public and private spheres as two separate domains really only examines part of the picture at best. She implies that to do this is really a distortion of the realities of power and influence. To apply this to Iran appears to make more sense because, while most women do stay at home (Shojaie, 1998, p. 10), they nevertheless do wield a lot of power and influence within and outside the family. In Iran's case, whether in the public or private sphere, women are in a position to influence men in many different ways. They do so by using many structural means. It is the women who keep kinship ties by keeping up on the latest information in the extended family. The women in these cases also know what is going on in the community within which the men are involved. Through their contacts in the friendship circles, they are able to attain information that might be helpful or detrimental to business dealings that men in the family are involved in. Inviting and visiting family members and friends, dinner parties are ways that this information is gathered. It is not uncommon to have 70-100 dinner guests (family members) at one time. Further, it is not uncommon to visit others to find out the latest about the family and community to keep the information flowing among the relatives in the other direction as well. What business decisions should be made ultimately rest with the women in the family by choosing to divulge or withhold information that they have gathered. These decisions are

weighed heavily among the women as to the viability or lack of viability of giving up this information to the men.

Definitions

In order to develop this paper further, it is necessary to define the terms to be used in connection with the friendship circles of older women of Iran. The definitions that I use in this paper are definitions that pertain to this particular paper and subject; in other words, they are peculiar to this paper. For a lack of better definitions, these definitions came about through participant observation. They will be used with reference to two types of friendship circles that exist for older women in Iran. It must be noted here that the friendship circle in Iran is not necessarily age based; it is usually an elder that heads this circle (see below).

Leadership style among the women of Iran is similar to that of women in America. Although there are differences in the line between public and private spheres in Iran, the leadership style appears to be democratic, just as it is in America. The only time that there is one leader is when society (male-based) says that they need one person to answer for everyone. Other than those particular times, most women's groups appear to be democratic in that all people are equal in discussion and all are equal in deciding what is discussed. Based on participant observations that I have collected, I have developed a typology of leadership among women. The one patterned difference that I have been able to see is that there is no leadership (leadership meaning a number of women) chosen by the women. In other words, there are no formal elections, women just go to visit. If they happen to be there at the same time, many issues are discussed. The only time that a meeting is called among the women is when there is an urgent need for help. What makes this different than a formal meeting is that it seems that the women really do not have to call a particular meeting for a particular reasons. Of course, there are exceptions as I stated previously. It appears that women gather in the later morning or early

afternoon, either before lunch, or after it. The pattern of meeting is when they are not extremely busy taking care of family matters.

The matriarch of the family is the ONE female that has power (for a lack of a better term) over all of the relatives (including the males). If there is a need to call a meeting, she is the person who will gather all of the families within families together. For example, even those that are not directly related to the family of origin are considered part of this family. It is not uncommon for 70 to 100 people to be at a family gathering, whether it is for a social event such as a birth, death, to give support to one of the members of this particular family, or just getting together. It is up to the matriarch to decide whether to call upon the members. It is also her responsibility to decide when and where this event is to take place.

The matriarch of the neighborhood or community is the ONE female that has the respect and hence the prestige and power to ensure that the neighborhood is secure and that people are not in need. Here it should be prefaced that the males have no stake in this because they are in the public sphere (discussed in the previous section) exclusively. The tithing that takes place for males usually comes in the form of public donations to the poor (whether the particular people are singled out is up to the person who is tithing). This is not done as it is in many cases in the United States, i.e., for publicity, tax breaks, or such things as that. It is truly done because it is the right thing to do. Whenever there appears to be need, the need is automatically taken care of in the public sphere. In the private sphere, where needs are concerned, usually the matriarch of one of the families is the matriarch of the neighborhood. She calls together members to discuss and decide what to do. It is this matriarch that sets the stage for the friendship circle or "tea groups" that exist in the late mornings or early afternoons. Both of these friendship circles are social and utilitarian, as they provide an informal support group for each other, as well as an informal welfare system. One other function that they serve is informational (see private versus public).

The matriarch of the family (family in terms of a very broad definition) is informally chosen by gravitation to a particular female in the family. She does not necessarily have to be the oldest member of the group, but is considered an elder of the group in that her children are grown up and gone. Generally, she is a grandmother. She may be widowed, but she does not have to be. Her husband is or was usually a respected member of the community. However, he does not participate in the private sphere. This is probably so, because in that particular society, men usually do not retire from the public sector early unless their health is bad.

The circle generally changes meeting places to other relatives if the matriarch requests it. However, it is only rare that she requests moving it from her home. There is a practical reason: she usually has the most resources at her disposal. Because of her age, she is probably more well off than other members of the group in that she has the dishes, food such as fruits and candy, drinks such as tea and coffee. She also may have more room in her house for such gatherings. When people are young, they generally start out with much less in every way, even though they are given everything they need (including a lot of gold) to start out.

The matriarch of the neighborhood or community traditionally will not have regular social gatherings. These gatherings are not formal, but informal and may happen at any time. Unlike the friendship circle that consists of family members only, this friendship circle includes any women who choose to come to visit. There is no set time for any social meeting, however, there appears to be time set when the women all get together for utilitarian reasons.

The FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE of the family consists of all females of the family of origin, their in-laws, children, and the children's children. In this circle, the matriarch will make arrangements for all of the abovementioned people to gather. It may include the whole family, it may not. This depends upon the reason for the gathering. If it is to celebrate a birth, someone coming

home from a long journey (from America, from Mecca, etc.), buying something big, a wedding, just to see each other, or a death in the family, etc., then everyone will be attendance. Usually it is the women who do all of the work. This makes it easier to talk about what is going on with that a particular family. It also allows discussion of the latest information that a particular male may need in his business or occupation. This type of gathering lasts for at least a whole day, may be two days. It does depend upon what the occasion is. Some of the males leave after the last meal and tea (which is about 12:00 a.m. or later). Many of the females stay to help clean up and prepare for the next day (if there is a next day).

The FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE of the neighborhood or community is composed of females who live in the neighborhood. They congregate at the matriarch's house whenever there appears to be a free moment for these women. They may come alone or as a group. They come from all social classes and none of the women distinguish between the classes at all. They are always welcome, and are served tea and fruits, sometimes candies are also provided. This depends on whether the matriarch has had time to go shopping. It also depends upon the season and just what good fruit there is. They share both funny and serious stories, they laugh, they cry, they talk about serious issues that need to be discussed, and, most importantly, they make sure that everyone in the neighborhood is taken care financially and emotionally. When one person is in the need, they either pool their resources or, if one person has enough money, they take care of whatever they need. They also donate anything, whether it is clothes, food, and shelter. In other words, the women of the family take care of and see to it that all needs are met. They are the unofficial welfare system.

Participation and Observations

Using the above definitions, I will attempt to share some observations and experiences that I have had through participation in these friendship circles. My

family and I travel to Iran every other summer to visit my husband's relatives. I have been observing for two and one/half months every other summer. While my field notes are sketchy in some places, I will relate the patterns that I have experienced in the last ten years (6 times).

When we arrive in Teheran, we are usually met by at least one member of the immediate family. One reason for this is that we have enough luggage for the member's car, as well as a taxi. If more than one person came, we would need more transportation. Once we arrive at the house (very early in the morning - usually around 4:00 a.m.), all of the relatives who have traveled to Teheran, arise and there is a lot of hugging and kissing. Tea and fruit are served, even this early in the morning. This has all been arranged ahead of time by the women of the family in preparation for our visit to Iran. The friendship circle of women in the family met earlier to determine not only what was to be served, but also, who was to sleep where and when we should go to my husband's hometown. The women have also discussed what particular area of the country and even if we should go tour some ancient site in Iran since this country has many wonderful historical sites to tour. They have also arranged for the finances to be taken care of by the family. The women, prior to our arrival, do all of this. This must be determined because not all of the relatives will be returning with us to my in-laws in Kermanshah. This is the time when the immediate family comes from all over the country to visit.

Before and during the time that we are there, the matriarch of the family in conjunction with the rest of the female relatives, organizes all aspects of hospitality (meal, visits from other relatives, etc.). This is also the time when the women are updating each other as to what is and has happened since the last time that they had a family gathering. They are also updating me about what has happened since our last visit (births, deaths, etc.) Further, this is also the time when the women find out what resources other family members need. For example, this is when the informal welfare system kicks in for the friendship

circle of family. The women will discuss what their immediate family needs (including what the males need) are, in monetary needs, emotional needs, etc. Whoever appears to be in need defers to the matriarch of the family to discuss the issues with all of the females in that circle and even determine what that particular family needs and what help will be given. This is not a formal type of discussion nor would a formal organization work in the friendship circle. All of the women are on equal footing in terms of their input.

This type of meeting is not called, but rather just happens when in the kitchen or in the hyatt (courtyard). There are times that the women will just go and sit in a large bedroom to be together for laughing, crying, and other such phenomena. There are many examples that stick out in my mind. I think that the best example is the one in which the women gathered in a large bedroom after all of the meals and dishes were taken care of. Girls of all ages are and were included in this circle. Although any issues may come up and be discussed, from how to mend something to how to find enough resources to help a family out, the particular gathering that I will give as an example deals with one of the mother's-in-law and the death of her husband. We were all laughing and talking about nonsense to lighten up the work that everyone had done in preparation for the meals, etc., when this women began to sob first and then cry very hard. Everyone immediately stopped laughing and let the women cry and talk to us all. The matriarch knew exactly what to do. She began to pray and everyone prayed and cried with the woman. As an only one example, this shows the closeness and support of the friendship and love that these women have for each other. There are many other examples of this type that I could go into, however, there are many other examples that are utilitarian in nature. The welfare system kicks in immediately when anyone of them needs assistance.

Even before the gathering, some of the females call upon the matriarch to organize people to bring food such as dry goods (rice, bread), fruit and sweets. In my observation it is the matriarch that brings most resources (at least in my

husband's family). They are much better off than most of the rest of the relatives. In observations at other gatherings that are not family, I was able to observe the same pattern of relationships among the females of the friendship circle. When someone is in need, financially in particular, they will contact the matriarch of the family and everyone will come to visit at this time if they can at this time. If they cannot, they will either be on the Internet, or using the telephone to keep everyone up to date on what is going on and what they can do to help. Two examples that I would like to use here involve one with money and one in which the son of one of the family members in the circle was having surgery.

The utilitarian aspect of the friendship circle of the family and the closeness with which the family supports each may be shown when the issue turns to money and other physically necessary resources that are needed to survive. The female who is in need will contact the matriarch of the family. If she has the money or other resources, she will not contact the other members of the circle. She will give the money to the person or family in need. However, if she does not have the money, she will find the resources necessary by contacting the rest of the members without saying who is in need. Unless another member is having trouble financially or in another way physically, the members will see to it that the needy member who has asked for help will receive it. Unlike formal agencies like banks, nobody signs a note, nobody commits to paying anyone back. The philosophy is that another person or family might have trouble. It is eventually paid back in other ways, it will be equal in the end.

Another example that I mentioned above that is support during times of crisis. When my sister's-in-law son had to have surgery to correct a birth defect in his nose (cartilage had closed off one of his nasal passages totally and the other one partially), few relatives in this circle traveled to Teheran for the surgery because the woman did not need extra guests at this time. Rather, people kept in contact through the use of cell phones to support the family and to relate to the rest of the family the latest information about the progress of the surgery. Only

one relative came without her family to cook and take care of the other children during this time so that their would not be an extra burden of entertaining. It was the matriarch who arranged for the one person to come.

The friendship circle of the neighborhood or community is very different than the family friendship circle. Women just drop in at any time. They usually have unofficially decided to visit the same house, i.e., the house of the matriarch of the neighborhood. As previously indicated, it is usually later morning or early afternoon, after all of the family responsibilities are taken care of. Usually, the women have not been called to come, but just show up for tea and fruit. Even when there is something important that needs to be discussed, women will come at these particular times to discuss. This is because that they have an idea that this person is having problems and they want to help. They also know that the best time for them to go is after other duties are done. In this case, almost all of them will show up at the same time to discuss options, etc. Just as it is in the family circle, there are both social and utilitarian issues that are dealt with when the women meet. There are many times when they congregate just to socialize and talk about the latest information in the neighborhood. This aids them all in deciding whether or not to relate what they talk about to their husbands in business. Whether this will help the husband or not is determined by each woman alone. When one person is in need, the woman, just as in the circle of the family, call upon one person – the matriarch of the neighborhood circle and talk to her. The matriarch will then call upon each member to ask for help for the anonymous person and/or family if she does not have the resources at her disposal. It must be noted here that if her resources are necessary for other business such as the friendship of the family, she will most certainly retain those resources for her family and rely on other women in the neighborhood for the aid necessary to help one of their number.

Examples of both social and utilitarian functions include the support that they give each other in laughing and crying together and when someone is in

need of a resource of some kind. A social, and, at the same time, utilitarian example that I will relate is a very sad example. One of the families in the neighborhood had a son that was a hemophiliac (bleeder). When the woman was out shopping for the day, her 15-year-old son fell down the stairs outside of the house and bled to death before the women returned from her daily grocery shopping.

Immediately, the women of the neighborhood gathered at the matriarch's home and began discussing what happened and how they could help. After deciding the appropriate response and how to help, the matriarch and others of the friendship circle gathered resources that would be needed during this time in which they would cook food, take dishware and serving dishes to the family. Then they served the family and prayed with them. The men were also called to support the neighbors in their time of need. They closed their shops and places of business, draped black flags around the windows (signifies that a death of someone close has happened), and went to be with their neighbor. The men gathered in one area of the house to talk, cry, and pray. The women would gather in another area doing the same thing. However, the women would take turns seeing that the food kept coming to both men and women. For the women, this can and did go on for one month. For the men, most stayed with the males for at least 40 hours. This number seems to have significance in all religions of "The Book" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism).

In this case the friendship circle is important in emotional ways, as well as in social and utilitarian ways. The coming together of a whole neighborhood is significant in many ways. A funeral such as the one described is one way of uniting the community together. It is also a way in which people renew support for each during crisis. This is particularly true in the case of males since they do not necessarily have the support system that women have with each other. It is also social in that men as well as women share information about the families and about the business, etc. This is one of the few times that men are able to

share information about different things about things that might affect their business. This is because the public sphere is not conducive for such sharing of information.

One other example that I would like to elaborate on is when the needs of a particular member are monetary. Usually that member will confide in the matriarch. The matriarch will check her own and her family's resources. If there is enough for the person in need, she will just give it to her without a word about compensation. It is assumed that it will come back in one way or another, so there is no need to worry. If the matriarch does not have enough money at her disposal, she will then contact the other members of the circle, keeping the anonymity of the person in tact and gather enough money for the person in need. This is a form of welfare for everyone. The circle may at any time tithe whatever they feel necessary to aid others that they do not know, just as the men do in the public sphere. It is a part of culture to give and to share what one has. There go I but by the grace of God is basic to the culture. Therefore to give back to God is to give to the poor and to each other. This is, in a sense, a redistribution of the wealth. It is also a form of welfare system in a country that does not have a formalized welfare system except in the religious sense.

Empowerment of Women Through the Friendship Circle

Friendship circles have existed for centuries. It appears that one of the major reasons why these circles have existed for this extended period of time is that it does empower women in a number of ways in which they would not have power in other ways. First of all, there is something to the idea that there is power in numbers. It seems that women have been working around the system for that extended period of time to achieve what they feel is important. They have been able to do this because of the way the friendship circle has been organized (either circle). It is an informal structure in which all women have been given a voice in the decision-making processes. Different women add

different perspectives and information to the discussion. The shared knowledge among these women allows them to be able to have a base from which to accomplish whatever it is that they want to do. In many cases, as is the case of my experience and interviews, the shared knowledge is put together to form a coherent understanding of the issues at hand. Usually, the synthesis of the information is done by the matriarch (elder) of the group. It is because of her experiences that she may have knowledge and actually can relate the way the system works. The younger women may learn, as in many cases, from the matriarch. The matriarch is not so bold as to not acknowledge that she learns from them also. In describing a woman who had contributed a beautiful poem about aging women to her work, Cay Randall-May (2003;6) wrote:

She feels she has had the good fortune to meet and become friends with several remarkable women. "They are a source of wisdom and nourishment for me, as I am for them."

As the circle implies, there is no beginning and no end – there is no leader and no follower. In many societies, Iran included, females are socialized to be much more cooperative and defer to each other as a sign of respect. Although, in Iran, age does matter, there is no actual leader in the friendship circle. Out of respect for age (assuming wisdom), the words of an elder carry a great deal of weight. This weight is not just among the females, it is also among the males in Iranian society. So, by virtue of age, older women are deferred to even among the males. These women are empowered, even without the circle. However, the circle adds much to their lives. It is a time for women to express themselves freely, without having to worry about what others may think or worry about any repercussions. It is a time to work out solutions for one person or many. It is a time to laugh, and even cry. The issues in Iran that I was exposed to not only deal with social events such as birth, death, and marriage, but also, issues such as spouse abuse, divorce, etc. In the United States, there are separate groups for each issue. In Iran, this is not the case. The two friendship circles are the support

groups in Iran. That is all that they need because, as members leave the support group for a variety of reasons, others enter the support group. As each person becomes involved, all know what the needs are of each individual member.

Everyone in the group is considered an individual. As individuals, each problem and its ultimate solution is unique, even if it appears to be the same. This empowers each woman through emotional support, financial support, shelter support, etc., thus allowing women to not only feel supported, but also be supported in any and all areas that they might need. This gives the woman enough confidence to do what needs to be done, or, to have help in doing the things that needs to be done.

How does the friendship circle empower all women? By joining forces, women gain the power to accomplish anything. As stated earlier, the information flow begins and ends with these women. In both circles (family and neighborhood), they relate to each other information about everything. They discuss the issues and whether rumors are really true or whether they are just that, that is rumors. They decide together whether to make something known to their spouses and whether the information would hurt or help the business or occupation of the spouses. There is a saying: knowledge is power. It truly appears to be, at least in the cases that I have described. People in the United States are given very distorted views of the women of Iran.

Women of Iran appear to be more empowered than women in the United States in a number of ways. First of all, women in the United States are more separated from each other than the women of Iran. This makes it much more difficult to discuss the issues. The friendship circles in the United States are very specific. There are a few, but very few that are general friendships. But the relationships are between few people in a group. Many of these small groups are scattered and may have nothing in common with other small groups of women. In Iran, these groups are larger. Because they are larger and more general, the women are stronger because there appears to be strength in numbers.

The second reason for the difference in empowerment is that of generality versus specificity. In Iran, the friendships (both) are more general and far more encompassing than in the United States. Certainly there are friendships among older women in the United States. However, most are for companionship, not for utilitarian and/or other social purposes. There are support groups for a variety of reasons in the United States – each one for a different reason. Certainly, an all-encompassing group for women would possibly not be practical in a society such as the United States just as a specific group for each issue would not be practical in Iran.

There is one last way women of Iran appear to be more empowered than women in the United States. The flow of information within the friendship circle in Iran begins and ends with the group. In the United States, information may be shared, but does not determine much in the rest of society. Women have power when they control the information flow.

One other point needs to be made here: respect comes with age to a certain extent in all societies. However, when youth is worshipped as it is in the United States, age, even though wisdom may be present, is a way to select people out of the flow of information. In Iran, it is the matriarch of either group who determines in which direction the information will flow.

Conclusion

Women of Iran are not as controlled as they look to be to the outside world. To paraphrase what Noam Chomsky has said on a number of different occasions: you can only be controlled when you don't believe that you are being controlled. Unlike women of the United States, women of Iran know that there are attempts to control them by virtue of dress, etc. However, they also know how to work around that system by virtue of the friendship circles that women share. These women are empowered through the information flow that blurs the line between the public and private spheres. It also empowers all women, but

aging women in particular those who become the matriarchs of the family or of the neighborhood, or both. All aging women are respected for their wisdom and their knowledge by both males and females.

In the United States, it is not this particular way. Women of age are not as respected for their wisdom and knowledge. Unless an aging woman has made the earth shake by inventing some technologically creative toy, the respect is lacking. They lack power as well. Calling someone an old hag is not that unusual in the United States. In Iran, to do this is calling for a fight or even worse. Women in the United States do not control the flow of information and there is not blurring of lines between the public and private spheres. Knowledge is power and women in the United States are denied access to the knowledge that would give them power.

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