Passionate uprisings: Young people, sexuality and politics in post-revolutionary Iran

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Abstract
This paper examines the sexual and social practices of young people in contemporary Iran. Young people in urban areas live under the rubric of a fundamentalist, Islamist regime which restricts social freedoms such as premarital heterosexual contact, homosexual encounters, dancing, alcohol consumption and large group gatherings. Drawing on close focus research and individual and group interviews, this paper seeks to analyse young people’s responses to these constraints. Findings suggest that many young adults use their ‘rebellious’ social behaviour to make political statements against a regime that dissatisfies them; saying, in their own words, that they are enacting and bringing about a ‘sexual revolution’.

Résumé
Cet article examine les pratiques sociales et sexuelles des jeunes dans l’Iran contemporain. Dans ce pays, les jeunes des villes vivent sous un régime islamique fondamentaliste qui restreint les libertés sociales telles que les contacts hétérosexuels prémariaux, les rencontres homosexuelles, la danse, la consommation d’alcool et les rassemblements de masse. Sur la base d’une recherche ciblée et d’entretiens individuels et en groupe, cet article cherche à analyser les réponses des jeunes à ces contraintes. Les résultats suggèrent qu’à travers leurs comportements sociaux ‘rebelles’, beaucoup de jeunes adultes lancent des messages politiques contre un régime qui leur déplait ; en utilisant leurs propres mots, ils décrètent et promeuvent une ‘révolution sexuelle’.

Resumen
En este artículo analizamos las prácticas sexuales y sociales de los jóvenes en el Irán contemporáneo. Los jóvenes de zonas urbanas viven bajo la rúbrica de un régimen fundamentalista islámico que limita libertades sociales tales como el contacto heterosexual prematrimonial, los encuentros homosexuales, el baile, el consumo de alcohol y la reunión de grupos numerosos. Basándonos en un análisis minucioso de investigación y entrevistas individuales y en grupo, en este ensayo queremos examinar cómo reaccionan los jóvenes a estas restricciones. Los resultados indican que muchos jóvenes adultos se rebelan socialmente lanzando proclamas políticas contra un régimen que les disgusta y expresando con sus propias palabras que ellos están creando una “revolución sexual” a la que representan.

Keywords: Iran, young people, sexual behaviour, Islam
Introduction

’Over the past several decades, so it is said, a sexual revolution has occurred; and revolutionary hopes have been pinned to sexuality by many thinkers for whom it represents a potential realm of freedom, unassailed by the limits of present day civilization.’ (Giddens 1993: 1)

’In Iran, all things related to sex had doors, closed ones. Now we, this generation, are opening them one by one. Pregnancy outside of marriage? Open it. Teenage sexual feelings? Open that door. Masturbation? Open it. Now the young people are trying to figure out what to do with all these opening doors.’ (Khodi, male, 23)

’In Iran, sex is in fashion. Luxury is in style. How do we live our lives in the Islamic Republic? We go out to a party, go for drinks at someone’s house, order some food, drink a little, dance a little, go have sex. Then get up and repeat your routine the next day!’ (Ladan, female, 25)

This is an account of the children of the Islamic Revolution who now occupy a particular social, cultural, political and sexual space in urban Tehran. The study, conducted over the past six years, focused on the emerging Iranian young adult culture in Tehran, describing and analysing the meaning and significance of young Tehranis ‘transgressive’ sexual and social behaviour in relation to Iran’s current socio-political climate. The study focuses on sexual and social practices, as well as the daily experiences of young people (aged 18–25) in contemporary Iran. How do young adults understand and enact their erotic and sexual lives within the laws and restrictions of the Islamic Republic? Findings suggest that urban young adults in Tehran are constructing and embodying what they call a sexual revolution in response to social and political changes.

Iran has experienced major economic, demographic, political and social changes in the last 30 years. The young people that this study focuses on are literally ‘children of the revolution’ as they were born to a nation in the throes of revolution (Islamic), war (with Iraq) and shifts in economic power (oil boom followed by sanctions). According to scholars such as Afary (2006) or Basmenji (2005), the nation’s younger generation has been affected by the Islamic Republic’s free education policies and its successful national literacy campaign. Ironically, these education policies have created an educated and highly politicised youth with voting rights (currently age 16) many of whom are ready and willing to express their dissent. The body has become a major battleground in the Islamic Republic, seen in legislation and heavy punishment regulating Islamic dress and death sentences for ‘sexual deviants’ (those convicted of adultery or homosexuality). Many young adults argue that they are now using their bodies and sexualities to speak back to what they view as a repressive regime; they refer to their behaviour as a sexual revolution (englab-e-jensi). Consequently, a new sexual culture is emerging among Iranian young adults that requires further investigation.

Urban young adults who comprise the majority of Iran’s population (70% of Iran’s population is under the age of 30) (Esposito 2001) are highly mobile, highly educated (84% of young Tehranis are currently enrolled in university or are university graduates, with 65% of these graduates being women) and underemployed (there is a 45% unemployment rate amongst this age group) (Basmanji 2006). Many are also highly dissatisfied with the current regime. Journalistic accounts and memoirs and novels such as Azadeh Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad (2005), Marjane Satrapi’s Embroideries (2006) or Afshin Molavi’s The Soul of Iran: A nation’s journey to freedom (2002) have touched on these themes of a changing young adult sexual culture in modern Iran and have explored potential changes in sexual discourse. However, none of these books or journalistic pieces has
approached questions of sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran with an ethnographic lens, nor have they sought to grapple with changing sexual and social discourses through anthropological research. Through in-depth research that looks at often-overlooked elements such as style (Hebdige 1991), daily lives, sexual practices and health and education infrastructure, it may be possible to illuminate the ways in which young people in Tehran interact with their social, political and economic environment and express their dissatisfaction with their current situation. Can current changes in sexual behaviour among the young people of Iran be seen as an alternative form of substitution for the forbidden political activism?

**Backdrop to the sexual revolution**

In 1978 and 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran overthrew the Shah and monarchical system and introduced Islamic Law (sharia). After the British-American coup of 1953, some of Iran's younger generation, having witnessed the elimination of non-violent dissidents, chose the path of armed rebellion against the dictatorial monarchy (the Shah's regime). In 1979, a revolution ousted the monarchy. In the aftermath, the clergy took control of the state; this theocratic rule has fundamentally changed the worlds of everyone remaining in Iran, making everyday life more centred on Islam and establishing greater state monitoring and control over personal life (Abrahimian 1982).

Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a country in transition. This transition is as much political and socioeconomic as it is demographic. Iran is theoretically a democratic theocracy, governed by sharia. Sharia law, as interpreted by the clerics in power, mandates among other things, that women and men should interact minimally before marriage and that women should be covered in 'proper' Islamic dress (ideally a cloak from head to toe, hiding any bodily shape). Much of Islamic law also seeks to legislate on social, sexual and familial behaviours through the language of morality. Ideas of mahram/na-mahram referring to those who are potential marriage partners (mahram) and those who are not (na-mahram) are part of state rhetoric (Haeri 1989) and have been discussed in religious spaces, public gatherings (at mosques) and in private settings such as the home. Some of the religious and moral rhetoric coming from the state is also reproduced by the family (for religious young people) while other families (most usually of the non-religious middle class) often contradict the harsh rules imposed by sharia law. In accordance with sharia, heterosocial interactions between unmarried or unrelated men and women are forbidden and punishable by lashings and imprisonment; sex before marriage and, for women, extramarital sex, is punishable by death. The morality police patrol the streets of Iran looking for people who are in violation of these Islamic moral values to arrest and punish them (Basmenji 2005).

The Islamic authorities demand sexual and social modesty and dedication to living an Islamist lifestyle. This entails the strict enforcement of Islamic performative rituals (including prayer five times a day, Koran recitation and observance of the holy months of Ramadan) as well as refraining from alcohol consumption, contact with members of the opposite sex prior to marriage, social gatherings and dancing. 'They tell us 'go pray, five times a day, go visit the shrine of the prophets, observe your fasts,' noted one 23-year-old man from Tehran, 'but they don’t tell us why. They teach us how to prepare for prayer over and over, but never for practical daily interaction! Why?' Many urban young adults
throughout the social landscape increasingly reject Islamist social restrictions as they feel that religion has been forced upon them without choice, and see their social behaviour (including style of dress, sociality and interactions) as political statements. Among some young people in Iran (mostly from the secular middle and upper middle classes as described below), youthful rebellion represents counter discourses to revolutionary ideas about sexual purity, the good Islamic body and gender segregation, as well as the expression of dissidence.

Their behaviour, seemingly found on a lesser scale in young adult cultures in many countries, is understood and described by informants as rebellious or dissident. It is vital to look at the many layers of what young people are challenging, including what they perceive as tradition versus their perceptions of modernity, their parents, the authorities, sharia law or the regime. Employing the notion that modernity is increasingly expressed in the transformation of gender relations (Hirsch 2003) or in the transformation of intimacy (Giddens 1993) in modernising societies, some young Iranians seem to find it easier to negotiate their everyday interactions and intimate relations than to negotiate changes in the state. For some of these young people, gender and social relations are a place to talk about citizenship. Many may be reacting to questions of citizenship through intimacy and intimate relations. In this way, young people perceive themselves acting out a sexual and social revolution in their daily lives on the streets of Tehran.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, famously said, ‘The Islamic Revolution is not about fun, it is about morality, in fact there is no fun to be had in the Islamic Republic.’ This quote is found on posters and walls in many parts of Tehran where one can also find young adults spray painting over it, talking and laughing, and defiantly wearing ‘bad’ Islamic dress (for women, form-fitting overcoats, open-toed shoes, rolled up pants to reveal ankles and loose head coverings with strands of hair flowing from their scarves; for men, t-shirts without collars, shorts and hair gel on long locks of hair). Young people often smile at these Islamist slogans which dot the busy Tehran city streets on their way to parties where they drink alcohol and dance to the background of satellite TV broadcasting in MTV, to sex parties, to one of the many popular dance classes (though dancing is strictly illegal) or perhaps to an underground CD store where they can purchase many of the CDs and movies outlawed by the Islamic Republic (Moaveni 2005).

Because the bulk of the young adult population are either students at one of the universities or graduates who are unemployed or employed only part-time, young people in Tehran have a lot of free time to spend roaming the streets and attending social gatherings. Informants indicated that daily lives that would otherwise be monotonous and filled with the frustration of not having employment are, instead, filled with group activities such as hiking, attending dance classes, going to beauty salons, spending time with friends at coffee shops or internet cafes, joining clubs and organizations or sometimes just walking or driving through the busy Tehran streets looking for potential partners. In the evenings, young adults keep themselves occupied by attending elaborate parties or small gatherings at the homes of friends or, often, family members. Other informants indicated that they spent their evenings in the company of their partners or potential partners.

In Iran, the punishment for pre-marital or extra-marital sex is death by stoning; drinking and dancing call for jail accompanied by up to 70 lashes. An unmarried or unrelated young man and woman if caught in the company of one another, even in a car or public park, might receive no less than 84 lashes each. Yet many of the young adults I spoke with were unapologetic about their behaviour, even brash: ‘We know that if we get caught we go to
jail,’ began one 18-year-old young woman, ‘we recognize the consequences of our partying, but we do it anyway. It’s sort of an F-you to the system, if you know what I mean, it’s our way of protesting.’ She calls her partying a kind of laj, a word that in English can be loosely translated to ‘rebellion out of frustration’. ‘That’s half the reason we party so hard and engage in such sneaky and risky behaviour’ she adds. Perhaps there is no place in the world where the stakes of partying are so high.

Methods

Most of the ethnographic fieldwork for this study took place during the summers of 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2005. The first two visits were more journalistic in nature and served as an entrée into the young adult culture that I later studied in my doctoral work. The bulk of the ethnography took place when I moved to Tehran for much of 2004 and part of 2005. During this time, I sought to participate fully in the lives of informants. Ethnographic fieldwork included on participant observation, focus group and in-depth interviews. Participant observation was conducted in cafes, public parks, malls, parties, gyms, dance classes and local squares where young people tended to gather. I also worked as a volunteer in two drop-in centres and one needle exchange, served on the board of an anthropology journal at Tehran University and conducted archival work at the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and several other government agencies (such as the State Welfare Organization). Participant observation was used to gain a deeper understanding about the daily lives of young people, perspectives on sexuality, young adults’ relationship to politics and religion and their perception of their social environments. Conversations and behaviour were observed, as well as social interaction and style. The aim was to assess the social environment of urban young adults, as well as the challenges they face in their daily lives.

I conducted 80 in-depth qualitative interviews (digitally recorded) with urban young Iranians (aged 18–25) both men and women of varying socioeconomic classes, but with an emphasis on young people living in certain parts of town. Most informants were students and the remaining few had either just graduated or were women who self-identified as khanedar or ‘ladies of the house’ whose parents or husbands had prohibited them from studying or working. A large portion of the sample was drawn from the venues in which I conducted participant observation (targeted sampling) in addition to some snowball sampling. In interviews, which took the form of dard-e-dil (speaking from the heart), I asked young adults about their social lives, interactions with the opposite sex, gendered experiences, sexual histories, their understanding and opinion of the political climate, their level of knowledge about sexuality, what information they would like to have and their perceptions of the social and political climate and the current regime. Additionally, I interviewed and observed 20 service providers including doctors, nurses, counsellors and teachers.

Throughout this process, I was acutely aware that my position as a single, Iranian-American young woman, close to their age, did shape my interactions with informants. Some felt that because I was from oon taraf e ab (the other side of the water) that I was not likely to judge them and would be less apt to ‘tattle tail’ or tell someone who might know them. Others were fascinated by me, feeling that my status as an Iranian-American was something that allowed me deeper insight and this fascination proved to be mutually beneficial.
Sample and context

It is important to re-emphasize that the sample described in the paper comes from Tehran (thus they are all urban young adults) and are mostly part of a culture who are middle and upper middle class and, for the most part, would consider themselves secular. For this reason, I will refer to them as members of the ‘non-religious middle class’. This notion of class is complicated, however, given the shifting class structure during and post-revolution.

I am interested in this particular group of young people (non-religious middle class) because it is known that, historically, social movements start amongst certain groups in certain classes and then spread to other groups in a trickle-down effect. In Tehran (and also in cities such as Mashad and Shiraz) we can see some evidence of this trickle-down effect as the young people have physically changed their appearances and social stance. It is interesting to ask, however, both why this class is rebelling so hard, and why the government is so interested and yet threatened by them. During the last election, it was this group of young people to whom presidential candidate and former president Rafsanjani was appealing in order to help run his campaign. He solicited young people, specifically members of this group to advocate for him. Whether it is the Islamists who are interested in appealing to them or other young people throughout the city and country who are looking to imitate them, the non-religious middle class are an interesting group, with their own style of sexual, social and cultural revolution who may be trendsetters for youth throughout the nation.

Results

To the eye of a United Nations (UN) official, a cabinet minister, a mullah or a member of the government-funded civil society, the streets of Iran are full of obedient, modest youth. Young girls with down cast eyes and carefully placed scarves walk past men, pretending to blush when accidentally bumping into one another. Upon my return from Iran in September of 2002, I interviewed a UN official who said: ‘Boys and girls (in Iran) have no need for reproductive healthcare services until they are engaged as no one engages in sexual relations prior to that moment’. I recognized that, as a member of the UN, the officer was prohibited from openly criticising the regime but I thought to myself, if she could put on a veil that would turn her into a young Iranian partygoer, the following is what she might find:

Her face flushed, Yasaman Houtri,¹⁹ looks around the crowded Tehran apartment that at the moment resembles a cross between a US fraternity party and a curtained bordello. She takes a sip of her Russian vodka martini. ‘The difference between you young people in the West and us here in Iran is really very simple: when you want to have fun you go out and when you want to pray and be spiritual you stay in. In Iran, when we want to pray and be spiritual we go out, when we want to have fun we go in.’ Persian pop music blares from large speakers and everywhere there are pairs of flirting, drinking teenagers. Yasaman glances over at her best friend who is tucked away neatly under a boy on a nearby couch. The dimly-lit room is filled with other young couples who are occupied in the same activity. As she sits down, Yasaman’s purple miniskirt is pushed up so high that she catches the attention of a boy across the way. She shrugs and nonchalantly lights a cigarette after handing one to me.

Soon, Yasaman will leave her friend’s house party. Like the other girls, most of whom she goes to school with, she will carefully don a navy blue hejab to cover her hair, and wrap a
long flowing coat over her skirt and sweater. On the street, accompanied by a male friend, she will keep her eyes lowered, carefully blending into the streams of modestly dressed women moving along Tehran’s busy city streets in the centre of town. Like thousands of urban young people in Iran, Yasaman’s public and private worlds could not be more different. But she wonders how long her dual life can exist before she is discovered.

Hundreds of miles away from the capital, a group of girls and boys gather in Mashad, one of the holiest cities in Islam. Everyone piles into the car of a young man named Siamak, who turns up the latest single from Usher that he has bootlegged from the US. He starts driving and everyone is talking and laughing and explaining to me that our destination is one of the hottest spots in Mashad for people to meet each other. As Siamak rounds a corner, he spots some members of the komiteh (the Iranian morality police) and shouts for everyone to duck as he drives past them. He turns the music down, and we dive beneath the seats so that only the boys remain seen. The girls giggle and scream and take another puff of the miniature hookah that holds remnants of opium, hash and marijuana.

As these stories demonstrate, public and private lifestyles could not be more different. The public dress code of long, flowing coats complemented by headscarves covers curves, hair and skin (though in recent years the coats or monteaus are becoming increasingly tight and the head scarves smaller and pushed further back). Private apparel usually consists of bikinis as they lounge by the poolside during the day, complemented by evening wear consisting of skimpy skirts and tank tops which expose midriff, thigh and generally as much as possible. Public discussion centres on academia and talk of prayers and religion. Private discussion at parties begins with talk of controversial politics, which serves as a kind of foreplay and then moves to sexual positions and the art of the erotic. Private discussion amongst women in the beauty salons centres on feminism and using sexuality to promote women’s power. Public demeanour and aura sometimes projects shy, embarrassed and modest girls. Private demeanour suggests women in control of their needs, wants and sexualities.

On the surface it may seem to casual observers that boys and girls do not interact much or talk about sex before marriage. However, most of the young people I interviewed were unmarried and were either engaged in sexual relations or had been at one time or another with a boyfriend/girlfriend or acquaintance. The majority of informants have been sexually active prior to marriage (some described their sexual activities primarily in terms of casual sex, while others indicated long-term monogamous sexual relationships, but it is important to note that even premarital sex with a long term partner is still illegal and thus would still be considered an act of rebellion). Of the twenty married young adults whom I interviewed, more than half were engaged in sexual relations outside of their marriage. It is interesting to note that, according to anthropologists at Tehran University, the average age of marriage in Tehran is 26 for women and 29 for men (in recent years, ideals of companionate marriage have become popular amongst many urban Iranian couples, though some continue to marry at the suggestion of parents or family members), while the average age of first intercourse amongst this population is 16 for women and 15 for men. Therefore, there exists a ten-year period in which women and men are engaging in sexual relations illegally (before marriage) without access to information or treatment for potential risks they may incur while being sexually active.

According to my informants, their sexual relations and experiences are not limited to members of the opposite sex as many of the young adults indicated that they engage in same-sex sexual activity (both men and women). Some of this is attributed to the construction of homosociality in a gender segregated context as very few of these young
adults identified as gay or lesbian (Najmabadi 2005). Most of the young adults noted that they were not heterosexual or homosexual but, rather, sexual. They noted that their sexual interaction with members of the same sex was just an extension of same sex love and friendship and a different level of intimacy (Halperin 1990, Katz 1995). Notions of romantic love in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships were present and often discussed, as several informants were involved in long-term relationships with people who they were ‘in love’ with. There were also significant amounts of group sex occurring amongst this population as I witnessed many ‘orgies’ at private homes, where couples and singles would attend to engage in a group dynamic. In this study, the average number of partners for women prior to marriage was three and for men seven (this however excluded members of the same sex). Some of the male informants admitted having up to 12 partners a month; however, very few indicated contraceptive or condom usage.

Discussion

The prevailing social and political system may have produced the sexual and social underworld of the Iranian youth in many ways and, indeed, informants indicated different reasons for engaging in what they called the ‘sexual revolution’. Some informants indicated that they were mobilising a sexual and social revolution to speak back to a regime they were unhappy with; many noted that, because the regime was so overly focused on their bodies, physical appearance, moral code and sexualities, they were using these very tools to speak back to their oppressors (although this would not be considered revolutionary in a Foucauldian context, the young adults defined it this way for themselves). Others admitted to being frustrated with tradition and cultural norms that mandated that they live constricted lives while their counterparts in the West were able to progress. Still others indicated that the return of ‘Westoxication’ (Al-Ahmad 1982) and their exposure to the West through globalisation may have an impact on the young adults; in other words, the regime condemning all things ‘Western’, by default makes it such that these self-proclaimed revolutionaries love the ‘West’ and seek to emulate it.

However, young people’s image of the West is a product of the globalised media that they are exposed to and constructed by scrappy clips of MTV and satellite TV as well as TV programmes such as the newly translated ‘Sex and the City’. Thus, many urban young Iranians find that ‘changes in (their) understanding of and attitudes towards sexuality are both affected by and reflect(ive of) the larger changes in globalisation’ (Altman 2001: 1). Many of my informants equate sex and drugs with the West, due to the Western media to which they are exposed and thus they believe that engaging in certain sexual behaviours or using certain substances is more ‘Western’ and perhaps more in style.

While external sources and exposure to a larger globalised youth culture may have an effect on the construction of sexual discourses, most informants in this study were careful to note that the idea of their sexual revolution, while influenced by sexual revolutions in other parts of the world (USA, France, Weimar Germany), was still somewhat organic. Many young people with whom I spoke indicated that the environment of the Islamic Republic was so unique that they felt that they could not and should not be compared with other young people around the world, even though globalised media sources were a large part of their lives.

Leila Somagh, a 19-year-old Iranian girl living in Tehran, pointed out what she considers to be one of the most obvious flaws of the system and an issue that is unique to the Islamic
Republic: ‘We are not supposed to be seen in public with a man, otherwise we go to jail. That means no dinner dates, no walks in the park and no movie theatres. So what do we do? We go straight to his house, and what do we do there? I’ll let you figure that one out; there is a room and a bed and not much more. Do you see the problem?’ According to Leila, and several other young women, because men and women cannot be seen in public, they skip the ‘normal’ procedures of a few dinner dates before intimacy. Therefore, boys and girls become intimate more quickly and often more carelessly. Additionally, there is the problem that Leila alludes to of space. Many young people live with their parents and thus resort to engaging in sexual relations while their parents are away at work, visiting relatives or friends or out of town. According to many of the men with whom I spoke, often one member of a group of male friends has a private apartment and this space is then shared amongst friends who ‘sign-up’ for one- to two-hour blocks with their sexual partners. Still other young people utilise abandoned warehouses and back alleys for various sexual encounters.

Other girls, like Sepideh, 22, have been overly cocooned by their parents and this is a source of frustration for them. Iranian parents and the family structure are often fairly strict. Distinctions made between boys and girls in the home frustrate girls whose brothers are allowed more freedom, while they are confined to the home. Sepideh reveals to me that she uses sexual mischief as a way of getting back at her parents: ‘I get so mad at them! They let my brother do anything he wants and I’m supposed to sit at home and do the chores. I can’t go out with anyone nor do anything, so, when my mother goes out to market, I sneak across the way to the neighbour’s house where my boyfriend lives and we do everything we’re not supposed to. I feel like I’m getting revenge’.

Boys have also been raised to be hypersensitive to girls. Reza Amiri, a 27-year-old Iranian man, describes his frustration at the authorities for turning the Iranian men into ‘sex-starved animals’. He thinks that the Islamists in the regime deserve to be betrayed: ‘They are so sick you know. They want us not to even think about girls, and what does that result in? Incessant planning and scheming about how to get girls! See in London or Paris, you go to a pub and girls are all around and no one pays them that much attention. In Tehran, a girl brushes past you at the park and you go crazy! Desire fills the two of you and you can’t wait to go somewhere secretly and just get it out!’ Reza is ashamed of his peers because he says that sometimes their judgment is clouded with desire. When asked if he feels that he is going against his religion by engaging in pre-marital sexual activity in extreme forms, his reply is a firm negative. He looks at me and quotes one of the holiest imams of Shiite Islam: ‘Way back when, someone asked Imam Hossien if it is bad to take off a woman’s clothes and just stare at her. The Imam told him that in fact he would be honouring the prophet if he partook in this activity. The man then pushed further and further, asking if petting was bad, then oral sex and finally coitus. The imam continued to tell the man that these thing were in fact very ba hall (Farsi slang term roughly translating as cool).’ Reza smiles at me, ‘You see, in fact we are honouring the Imam!’ he says sarcastically.

Some possible implications

Young adults such as those in this study are putting themselves at risk on many levels. As mentioned earlier, if they are caught in drinking, dancing or cavorting with members of the opposite sex, they will be arrested, taken to jail and punished (often by lashing). When discussing their relationship to the regime, most of the young people I spoke with referred
at least once or twice to the issue of being caught by the komiteh (morality police), arrested, detained and often whipped. Most of my informants had been caught and detained at least once, many several times and several of my informants had faced the whip at one time or another during their arrests. Experiences with the komiteh were a favourite topic amongst these young adults and they often traded ‘war stories’. It seemed that this was both the price of rebellion and social revolution and the marker of success. Being caught gained a person a reputation within the group and was a source of pride. Nearly all my informants had tales of encounters with the morality police. I too had my share of caught stories (as several of the parties I attended throughout my fieldwork were raided), though, luckily I never faced the whip and I managed to dodge detention and arrest on several occasions.

The level of risk that young people face with regards to the regime is high, but many of my informants indicated that this was a risk they were willing to take and a punishment that they were willing to face to advance their social causes. Other informants noted that, having grown up under the blanket of the current regime, they had developed a expertise in avoiding the komiteh, bribing their way out of situations (on rare occasions as, more often than not, the morality police loathe rich young kids and inflict harsher punishment on them if offered a bribe) or tackling them head on.

Many of the health risks that the young adults are exposing themselves to are unknown by them, as most reveal that they are uninformed about the consequences of unprotected sex, poly-drug use, multiple partners, abortion, self-administered contraceptive pills and other potential risk behaviours. Because pre-marital sex is forbidden under the current regime, efforts to disseminate information on family planning, harm reduction and sex education are minimal and reserved often for couples who are engaged to be married. Young adults who are not yet engaged (or who do not plan to be) do not have access to the information they need to make better informed decisions about their behaviours.

Very few informants reported using condoms or some form of contraception (not necessarily protection against STIs) and this condom usage was not 100% of the time. When asked about the reasons behind their lack of usage, most answered that they were embarrassed to go to a pharmacy for fear of being ‘found out’. Many women noted that as unmarried young adults they did not have access to oral contraceptives (such as birth control pills or the morning after pill which is occasionally dispensed at pharmacies without requiring a marriage license, though this is illegal) and, if they did, many indicated that they were fearful of purchasing these lest their parents or family members discover them. Many of the young women said that going to a pharmacy to purchase such items (which were often quite expensive) made them vulnerable to being seen in public procuring items that would indicate their sexual activity. Most informants were deterred by the social risks (and costs) of being caught attempting to purchase contraceptives like condoms or the morning after pill and thus did not feel that these were options available to them.

Additionally, several female informants revealed that, because they did not have access to birth control, they had to rely on abortion in the case that they did get pregnant before marriage. Some of these young women reported going to expensive doctors uptown and paying high prices to ‘get rid of their problem’. Other informants, who did not have the means to access these high priced doctors, relied on other methods such as purchasing animal abortion pills from the black market on Nasser Khosro Avenue. Many reported that their experiences taking these were horrifying and some of my older informants noted that they were now facing reproductive difficulties because of their histories using these unidentified medications.
When informants were asked about STIs, most could not even name one. Many knew about HIV (but knew of it only in its other form: AIDS) but felt that they were not at high risk for contracting the virus. Many indicated, however, that they were concerned about pregnancy and the potential for contracting other diseases, about which they felt uneasy but knew very little. Most noted that they felt high levels of anxiety about their sexual relations but did not know what avenues to turn to in order to procure support or information.

Currently, formal, codified knowledge about sexuality is transmitted only to women and girls through classes on puberty and menstruation provided at the elementary level, followed by a short course (only offered to women) about family planning at the university level and supplemented by prenuptial courses provided for men and women separately. These latter courses teach women about the importance of fulfilling their conjugal debt, being always available for their husbands and about always being ‘sexually prepared’. At one session of this course, which I attended in August 2004, the female instructor wanted to emphasise women’s sexual duties to their husbands: ‘Khanoumhah (ladies),’ she began, ‘you must always be ready for your husband’s sexual needs. If, perchance he is watching a football game on television, you should be resting to prepare yourself or else preparing your bed for the evening. If you should feel overcome by fatigue yourself, make sure to always ask your husband, ‘Is there anything else you need from me?’ or ‘Would you like to have me later?’ before retiring’.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork I did find several drop-in centres and areas where young people could receive free counselling about sex, drugs and harm reduction. Most of these were utilised by young, married couples who had taken their prenuptial counselling courses at these sites. Though the counsellors were very open minded and indicated that they were open to distributing information to unmarried young people, none of my unmarried informants knew about these centres or counsellors. There seemed to be a distinct gap between the service providers and the young people whom they were trying to serve. The young adults were sceptical of the providers or were uninformed of this option, whilst the providers were frustrated at interacting with the young people only when it was ‘too late’ according to them.

Conclusions

The sexual revolution described by many of my informants is not solely centred on casual sex, multiple partners or group sex. Rather, the sexual revolution they believe they are engaging in is also about changing sexual discourses, pushing the limits with regards to restrictions on social behaviours (such as style of dress, youth congregation, drinking and dancing) and attacking the fabric of morality under which the regime seeks to govern its citizens. This study aimed to assess and unpack the sexual and social revolution that young Tehranis claim to be enacting. Throughout my time in Iran, I heard hundreds of young people use the phrase ‘sexual revolution’ in reference to changes taking place in Tehran. Key informants reminded me that wearing tight monteaus and head scarves that revealed highlighted hair was more than a fashion statement and more than being a part of a globalised youth culture. They emphasised that changes in style were about codes and speaking to a regime that would only hear these signals. Their style and attempts to embody a sexual revolution, they told me, was their way of speaking back to the regime, to the morality police who had made them suffer for so long and to other potential members of the revolution.
During my time in the field, I struggled with the question of whether changes in fashion (which were the external indicators of the sexual revolution according to my informants) and sexuality could be revolutionary. I wondered if wearing a Gucci headscarf, drinking a martini and having lots of boyfriends was about opposing the Islamic Republic or about wanting to be like the girls on ‘Sex and the City’. Certainly, some of my informants purchased and displayed designer wear in order to ‘fit in’ with their friends or because they saw themselves as part of an affluent and stylish élite. Several informants told me that they wore make-up or highlighted their hair because they liked how it made them look; they emphasized that it made them more desirable. Most of my informants repeatedly told me, however, as they layered their make-up before going to class in order to outwit morality police who would insist on wiping down their faces before entering school grounds, that wearing make-up or certain types of Islamic dress was also about making a statement. Many of the goods that young Tehranis demanded were sold on the black market, which made them desirable. If these goods were openly sold and easily accessible, they would no longer be seen as symbolic of a changing young adult culture. One informant made reference to certain kinds of tennis shoes. She said that because running shoes like Nike or Reebok were only sold on the black market, these were amongst those most desirable. She emphasised that these sneakers were more eye catching to the morality police than the plain tennis shoes sold in bazaars across the city, ‘But,’ she added, ‘I don’t think they look that nice. Once they become copied and available everywhere, no one will want them.’ Thus the black market itself creates a certain economy, which is folded into young people’s social revolution.

Throughout my fieldwork I also struggled to understand the changes in sexual and social behaviour and their significance. After several years of field research, it became apparent that the changes taking place amongst young Tehranis are not ephemeral and that they have meaning and significance to both informants and to the members of the regime and morality police who obsessively patrol, police and punish them. Many key informants reminded me that because wearing a DKNY headscarf or being in a car with their boyfriend could get them arrested, this headscarf was more than a label and their boyfriend was more than a passing amusement; these behaviours are a threat to the social and moral order affecting all aspects of the Islamic Republic.

The results of my fieldwork raise a lot of questions. I continue to struggle with the impact, meaning and future of sexual revolution in Iran. The changes taking place amongst urban young adults in Iran are many. The young people seem to be using their bodies to make social and political statements against what they view as a repressive regime. However, although the young adults have made great strides in attaining greater social freedoms and more attention and respect from authorities, the battle between the young Tehranis and members of the Islamist regime still rages. Unfortunately, due to the risks that accompany their social behaviours, most of the casualties will be among the youth if education and information are not distributed and disseminated to them quickly. We must remember that the youth of today are the future of Iran tomorrow.

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Notes
1. Sexual revolution is defined by the young people as changes in sexual and social behaviors and discourse as a means of reaction to state controls. In other words, because the current regime exercises its powers through enforcing a certain type of morality, young people seek to attack the regime by attacking the fabric of morality through which the regime maintains its power. Young people feel that by engaging in what the regime terms ‘immoral’ activities, such as premarital sex, they are subversively attacking the regime and destabilising it on a daily basis.
2. Holy month of fasting.
3. Holy month of mourning.
5. Names have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewees.
6. It is important to note that an estimated seven million people (out of a population of 70 million throughout Iran) have home internet connections and it is thought that most of the online users are in Tehran (Alavi 2006).

References