(A Month of Debate over Personal Narratives of Body and Sex)

Leva Ahmadi
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Afshin Marashi

Abstract

The first Iranian blog launched in 2001; very soon it became a phenomenon where many among the young Iranian middle class could talk openly about their society and its political, cultural, and social issues. This paper analyzes an April 2008 debate in the Iranian blogosphere (or Weblogestan) over female body image and sexuality. Considering gender and residence, this study suggests that despite what first looks liberating in many of these writings, the majority of women who contributed to this debate respected determined social norms. Avoiding writing about themselves, they tried to convince others of the necessity of such writings.

From the beginning of Iran’s documented literary history, male authors have talked about male and female bodies and their sexual relationships. As Keddie (2008) states, historians of women’s sexuality have not found many pre-modern sources written directly by women and they have until now “had to base their work on what male historians, philosophers, theologians, clerics, Sufi and unorthodox religious writers and others had to say about women and sexuality” (7). Iranian classic and modern literatures are not exceptions. If there were objections to these stories, it was not about male authors being open in public about sexual relationships, but about women reading the stories. Nejam od-Din Obeyde Zákâni, Persian poet and satirist of the fourteenth century, stated that there is no chastity in a woman who reads Vis and Ramin, an ancient Persian love story. Women are also forbidden to read Sure Yousof, the chapter of Joseph, in the Quran that is the love story of the Israeli prophet Joseph and the woman who fell in love with him while she was in a marital relationship (Kamarei 1984, 516). In general, it can be argued that the history and sociology of Middle Eastern female sexuality has had relatively little academic attention. Most anthropologists and sociologists who live in local communities prefer to concentrate on other topics (Keddie 2008).

In the beginning of the twentieth century, in a region where female illiteracy was high, writings by women became a strategic and transgressive act allowing female voices to enter the larger public sphere despite the multiple
filters seeking to neutralize subversive impulses (Skalli 2006). Entering a new era of press and printing, women’s education and an increase in their literacy rate allowed Iranian women to find public audiences for their voices, but as Najmabadi argues, “it became a veiled voice” and they had to erase or replace its sexual markers and sanitize their words (488). The hetronormative modern society constructed a new world for females talking about their bodies and sexuality. They had to change their words and way of speaking in this new society to have a place in it (Najmabadi 1993).

The Internet first entered the lives of urban middle class Iranians in the late 1990s. It expanded only after 2001, when the Unicode system made typing in Persian possible and when owning a computer and connecting to the Internet became technically easier and more affordable (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008). Writing in Persian opened the door of blogging too. A blog is a website format containing periodic time-stamped posts on a common Web page. It is an organic entity, usually, but not always, maintained by a single person who publishes entries or posts text, images, or other data formats on a regular basis. Blogs are either publicly or privately accessible on the Web, presenting theme-based discussions related to various topics. The first Persian blog was launched in September 2001 and it quickly spread among Tehran’s young, middle class women, and it became known as the first personal medium for them to express themselves. Learning technological aspects of this new medium, these women started to narrate like never before. Amir-Ebrahimi argues that blogs became a new modern tool for women to trespass the red lines of urf (customary practice), or sharia (Islamic law), “which confine them not only behind walls and veils but also in their words and expression” (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008, 98). For women, the technology is useful; it permits access to information and knowledge outside the mechanisms of censorship and it increases the volume of women’s voices, without the censorship of the traditional media (Skalli 2006).

These women are overcoming censorship in some taboo topics like their private sex life and sexual desires. They are just starting to write about their private lives, not only about their sexual partners, but even about masturbation and their relationships with their bodies in a few cases. In the last seven years, with the increase in blogging and the inclusion of many feminist voices in the Weblogestan (Iranian blogosphere), it is less unusual for readers to read more about women talking openly about their bodies and intimate relationships. But the reaction is mixed. Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) argues that male bloggers write about their sexual experiences without judgment. She argues though, that women are not only censored by the government when they are writing about their bodies and sexuality, but are also criticized by other female and male bloggers. Yet, a series of posts by
various bloggers in April 2008 shows some unprecedented behavior by both Iranian male and female bloggers. Amir-Ebraimi found that “some of the women bloggers were harshly attacked, but many took up their defenses, arguing that a blog is above all a private space where a blogger can write whatever they want” (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008, 105). The Weblogestan faced both positive and negative reaction to the topic of women writing freely about their bodies and sexuality.

In The Laugh of the Medusa, Helene Cixous discusses how women have been repressed through the control of their bodies throughout history. She suggests that if women are forced to remain in their existing body image as a result of male repression, then they can do one of two things. The first option is to remain trapped inside this image, thereby being responsible for their own passivity; the second option is to use the female body as a medium of communication, a tool through which women can speak. This is ironic given that the body, the very thing women have been defined by and trapped within, can now become a vehicle for transcending the boundaries formerly created. As Cixous states, a “woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (Cohen 1976, 875). She argues that women need to construct a whole new dialogue about their bodies by writing about them.

In the last few years, several studies, including Doostdar (2004), Amir-Ebrahimi (2006, 2008), Alavi (2005), and Khiabani and Serberny (2007), have analyzed the Iranian Weblogestan to study the different behavior of Iranian bloggers. Recently, in her third article about Weblogestan, Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) briefly mentions a series of posts by female bloggers published in April 2008, about their sexuality and bodies. This research examines thirty-eight of these posts in-depth to determine if women bloggers used this tool to speak about their bodies, their sexual desires, and intimate relationships in order to see if they challenged traditional Iranian social norms regarding “female decency.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the launch of the first Persian blog in 2001, the impact of this new media has become obvious in a specific group of young Iranians. As a result, many social scientists have studied this phenomenon. There are two terms that need to be defined in this work. First, according to Doostar, the term Weblogestan defines the Persian equivalent of blogosphere. It is used to refer to the collectivity of weblogs on the Internet but often connotes specifically
the Persian-language blogging community (Doostar 2004). Second, the terms “blog” and “weblog” are used interchangeably by the author.

_Transgression in Narration: The Lives of Iranian Women in Cyberspace_ by Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi was published in 2008. She argues that since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian society has been living under three major standards of law and culture: urf, sharia, and modernity. Each of these has its own rules for controlling women and their sexuality in the public and private sphere; whatever is required by sharia, and recommended by urf, is rejected by modernity. She argues that in the last two decades, transgression from urf and sharia became a sign of modernity and in a broader sense, a form of non-conformity to the Islamic regime. Amir-Ebrahimi writes that women bloggers actually practice transgression from these two by the narration in their blogs. The strategy of women in both spaces, virtual and physical, is the same: they seek to achieve visibility and to create new identities close to what Amir-Ebrahimi calls the “inner self.” The act of self-narration and self-disclosure in the Weblogestan challenges the discriminatory laws and the norms of submission and silence in this culture. Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) suggests that this transgression does not mean breaking the law, but crossing the red lines of urf that confine women behind walls and veils.

Amir-Ebrahimi argues that the most interesting aspect of the Weblogestan is people’s ordinary stories about their personal and private lives, which have been hidden from Iranian society. She notes that the virtual world provides a safer space for women to talk about their inner selves. From the first days of blogging, stories of the body and sexuality quickly attract many bloggers and readers. Some writers on these topics are harshly attacked by other bloggers or by their readers. Some of the attacked writers argue that a blog is their private space and that they can write whatever they want.

_Performance in Everyday Life and Rediscovery of the “Self” in Iranian Weblogs_ (2007) is another article by Amir Ebrahimi published in the online magazine Badjens. In her article, the author claims that as a new form of public space in Iran, weblogs have found many meanings beside daily writings for Iranian youth and women in particular. They are using blogs as a process of identity formation and self-rediscovery as well as a way to create relationships.

Using Gofman’s theory of self and stages, Amir-Ebrahimi argues that the Internet, specifically weblogs, have become a key space for discovery of self, socialization, and the forming of relationships, and has become a space to discuss matters traditionally censored in Iranian society (matters like sexuality and non-marital sexual relationships). Bloggers create narratives of self in virtual space that can be totally different from who they are in the physical world. Amir-Ebrahimi argues, “the Internet and weblogs become a space
to define identities and unknown layer and/or produce the silenced and diverse multiplicity within individuals,” and suggests that this is one of the main reasons for the popularity of the Internet and the high use of weblogs among Iranian women and youth (Amir-Ebrahimi 2004, 4).

*The Politics of/ in Blogging in Iran* by Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberry was published in the *Journal of Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* in 2008. This article explores the Iranian blogosphere as a vital site of political discourse that extends the definition of the political into personal, gendered, and social realms. The authors historicize the rise of Iranian blogging and look at the emergence of weblogs in the context of the rapidly expanding Iranian communications industries. They categorized blogs by type and content and then analyzed specific sites by using variables such as public/private, the formal/informal, the individual/collective, and inside/outside Iran. Khiabany and Sreberry found that a large number of Iranian blogs have taken on the important role of offering a platform for discussion, debate, and dissent in a volatile and vibrant political environment. Although limited access to the Internet remains a crucial factor, there are other sides to the realities of the digital divide in Iran, not only in terms of usage, but also in relation to concerns, desire and aspirations. In summary, the Persian blogosphere is relevant in the context of the wider communications development in Iran.

*We are Iran* by Nasrin Alavi (Skull Press 2005) is the first major book to focus exclusively on the Weblogestan. Weblogs are the author’s main source of reference and Alavi attempts to march through the dynamic and sparkling history of Iran in areas related to the subjects of the weblogs, such as the women’s movement, journalism, the Iran and Iraq War, and the media. Although she tries to bring the history of all of these issues together, Alavi recognizes that for a comprehensive and accurate analysis of today’s Iran, more in-depth studies are needed.

Alavi explores the worlds of Iranian bloggers and provides insights into their thoughts and feelings. She argues that they are not disconnected from the world. They care not only about their personal and Iran-related issues, but have a deep understanding of today’s world. Although she utilizes numerous weblogs, she does not state her criteria for selection of the blogs. She suggests that the Weblogestan or any virtual meeting place is the only realms that provide unique environments for Iranians to bypass many of the controlled social codes that are imposed by the Islamic state.

*The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging: On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan* by Alireza Doostar was published through the Harvard Research Center of Middle Eastern Studies in 2006. This article is a study of Persian-
language weblogs, focusing on a divisive argument among Iranian bloggers that came to be known as the “vulgar spirit” debate. The debate centered around the claim that blogging had a “vulgar spirit” that made it easy for everything, from standards of writings to the principle of logical reasoning, to be undermined. Doostar’s study focuses on the linguistics side of the controversy.

*The Laugh of Medusa* by Helene Cixous, a pioneering French feminist, was first published in 1971 and is still considered to be a primary source on the subject of women and sexuality. Cixous explains that since women cannot feasibly come up with a new language, they must expose the mistakes that currently exist in the present one. However, even through attempts to expose current inadequacies, it will always be impossible to define a feminine practice of writing because this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, and coded.

By endowing Medusa with a voice, Cixous allows her to speak against the lies and falsehoods introduced by men in an attempt to scare women away from exploring their own power. The myth of the abyss was created when men made women believe that the questions surrounding the male-created myths were “too dark to be exportable...and we believed” (Cohen 876). By believing and therefore failing to question the validity of the myths, women allowed the male-created fear to continue. If women would look farther into the myths, they would discover there is nothing to fear, that there is no validity to what they have been told previously.

All of the literature studied points out the importance of continued research in the area of social life in cyberspace. Being relatively new fields of study, since weblogs were not introduced until 2001 in Iran, there is still much to be learned about different behavior in virtual and cyber spaces. This paper, for the first time, has reviewed a debate in the Weblogestan over female body image and sexuality that happened in April 2008.

**METHOD**

This study is qualitative in nature and relies on the use of a case study mythology, which brings an understanding to a specific issue or object and can expand experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research. As researcher Robert K. Yin states, case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (2003).

Researchers have used the case study research method for many years across a variety of disciplines. Social scientists, in particular, have made wide use of this qualitative research method to examine contemporary and real-
life situations to provide the basis for the application of theories and an extension of methods. Yin defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context: when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (2003). Critics of this method argue that the study of a small number of subjects cannot offer grounds for establishing reliability or generalizability. As a result, some scholars only accept case study research as an exploratory tool.

Since this research examines raw data using many interpretations in order to find linkages between the research object and the outcomes with reference to the original research questions, case study is the most suitable method. This research project studied 38 cases (blog posts) published in April 2008. All primary sources were originally Persian and were collected during April and May 2009. The data has been categorized based on two control variables: gender and residence. Since both men and women bloggers contributed to this topic, the researcher divided posts first based on gender and then looked at each gender group to find out the percentage of each group’s participation. Many Iranian bloggers live outside of Iran, which means they usually have more freedom to write under their real names and express their feelings more openly than those who live and write in Iran.

**Data Analysis**

From April 5, 2008 until April 23, 2008, thirty-eight bloggers contributed to the subject of female body image and sexuality. The data shows that 27 of the 38 bloggers were female and 11 were males. Twenty-eight of the thirty-eight blogs were written inside of Iran and ten were written outside of Iran.

**Discussion**

Writing about body image and sexuality is not new to the Weblogestan. As previously discussed, since they started blogging, female bloggers have used this medium to express their opinions about sex, their bodies and desires, but what makes this debate unique was the extension of the topic over many weblogs in a certain period of time. Two female bloggers (Hamkhabegi and Baloot) wrote about their expectations of their own bodies before sexual acts, and a male blog’s (Natoor) response to their thoughts made the topic debatable.
On April 3, 2008 in a post entitled “A Feminine Project: Getting Ready for Sex,” Yek Zan wrote in her blog, Hamkhabegi:

Unwanted hairs have kept my mind busy for a long time. As a woman, I feel really bad if I don’t shave two hours before sex. Many times I apologize to my partner that my legs are not shaved like foreign models…Each time before sex, I spend a minimum of 45 minutes taking a bath and rewash and re-shave my whole body. ..I spray [hair removal spray] some spot, which takes 10 minutes. I am very careful in shaving my vagina and it takes time. It would be lotion and cream time after these. Each spot of my body has its own cream. .. Then I pick a perfume for my ears, shoulders and breasts. Then I wear a light make up and pick one of my underwear which is suitable for my mood and the other person. Sometimes I try to manicure and pedicure in between which take time.

Yek Zan goes on to explain that it is interesting for her to know how this process [of getting ready for sex] happens for men. She believes that in general it is different not only in the time they spend on it, but in the number of activities they have to do [to get ready for sex]. She states that she often cancels sex dates because she did not have time to get ready and she concludes that she respects her partners’ sex desires and thinks that mutual understanding helps women to not feel required to do all of these thing and they do not feel bad about their body because they have hair left over and are not wearing lotion all over their bodies.

This post was just the beginning of the debate. Baloot, another female blogger, answered by saying:

It is not important for me not having any hair on my body when I am going to bed. I do not spend hours to get myself ready for a good part of my life. I never wanted to be like a porn star. From the first time I saw such a movie, I found that it is a male dominated industry. Men, who like the other parts of history, politics, sociology, and laws, this time by entertainment industry, tried to dictate their standard to women. The marble women of these movies are not real. I want to be real in my bed. My hairs are parts of my body. Why do I have to remove them? (Baloot Blog, posted on April 5, 2008).
Similarly, blogger Natoor, in a post titled Puke, wrote:

_For the sake of your “dear partners” do not relate your concerns about your bottom part and your somersault in bed and your wool to intellectuality, feminism and women’s right movement and their fight with particular society which makes me puke_ (Natoor Blog, posted on April 7, 2008).

In her reaction, Baloot wrote: “Actually these are the kind of arguments that need to be made. When the modern, intellectual woman still has issue with her body image, how can she talk about other rights? It is my first right to know where this unreal image of my body came from” (Baloot Blog, posted in April 9, 2008). It can be said that these three initial posts and Baloot’s reaction to Natoor’s “Puke” launched a debate across the Weblogestan.

Although Baloot still argues that women need to talk and write about this subject, she has also advocated for the privacy of a blog. She wrote: “I did not mean my bottom part’s hair, but if I did, it was not your business. It was my blog and if I want, I do write about my wool.” (Baloot Blog, posted in April 9, 2008).

Baloot’s reaction was later called “irrational” by other bloggers (Ali Yazdzad, April 23, 2008, in an e-mail to Ellize). A comment from her reader “A” however brought the argument back to its first point. “A” wrote: “Why don’t you have a problem with a woman who talks about her gentle body and her sex and you don’t think she is breaking taboos and you do not want to puke?” (The Baloot Blog, comment posted April 9, 2008). Baloot argues that people who are against the public presentation of female sexual acts and their bodies, are angered when they hear something against the mainstream presentation of female sexual desires, but they do not say anything when a woman reproduces the standard of beauty and what the society wants for women.

It is very important to mention the role of comments in these initial posts. Each of these posts has been linked to by many other bloggers and received comments (Hamakhabegi’s post received 31 comments and Baloot’s first post received 36 comments). The present research does not review comments in this study, but it is very important to understand that what drove this argument in the Weblogestan was not only these three bloggers, but numerous readers.

The discussion sparked out of these three initial posts can be categorized in three main categories: feminism and argument, morality and corruption argument (including religious arguments), and privacy arguments. What
follows is not a chronological study of these posts, but rather a study of argument categories identified in the posts.

Feminist Argument
Natoor agitated the Weblogestan with two issues that were continued by other bloggers. He argued that writing about sexuality and sex in general is private and the women need to keep their stories in their bedroom. He also pushed them not to relate these stories to feminism or as he said “Women’s Struggle Movement” (Natoor Blog, posted in April 7, 2008). Baloot’s response was that her blog is a private place where she can write whatever she wants, and she also argues that writing about these narratives from female perspectives is what feminism wants women to do.

Ellize, with two posts on this subject, directly answered Natoor and his argument of talking about the body and how (in Natoor’s argument) it does not relate to feminism and the women’s rights movement. She argues that having a female version of these narratives is not only related, but it is necessary to women’s struggle. Without such a perspective, Ellize argues, people will read or see only 50% of the story. She asks why are men afraid of hearing different versions of the story, especially when the storyteller is a woman. Ellize argues that they are afraid to find out that their satisfaction is not enough and that women want something different. So, based on her argument, when a woman starts to narrate her story, some men call her a whore or a slut and want to challenge and insult her. Ellize concluded that these male audiences never challenge Persian pornography on the Internet, but, when a serious, educated, feminist blogger tells her version of sex, which they are not expecting, these men feel uncomfortable (Ellize Blog, posted on April 11, 2008).

In her April 13, 2008, response, Afkar noted:

Feminism, as far as I know, does not care if you sleep around nor if you stay virgin till your marriage. It doesn’t care if you shave all your body everyday nor if you be a ball of fur. The basis is of it is, women, be independent by ourselves.

She argues that society’s norms have to change and that women need to alter their way of thinking to be satisfied by whoever they are and not change by society’s norms.

A blog called Raha starts the argument with a simple example of the daily abuse of women through name-calling. She argues that the opposition, especially from men, is because women are entering their territory, so men try to silence these women. As a result these men call women whores or
prostitutes because they found these names to be most offensive. She suggests that women, no matter what the reaction, need to continue writing about their sexual desires (Raha Blog, posted on April 15, 2008).

Sibil Tala injected some feminist theories and thoughts to the discussion. Referring to “Afkar,” she argues that her reading of feminism [it is important for feminism that all women be independent] is dangerous, because like other -isms, feminism dictates its own violence based on culture, race, social class, geopolitics, religion, and gender. Yet, Sibil Tala still refers to herself as a feminist since “feminism, through history means rethinking for making new knowledge” (Sibil Tala Blog, posted on April 17, 2008). Referring to a death threat a blogger received a few years ago after she wrote about masturbation, Sibi Tala argues:

What is that important about a woman masturbating? Isn't it true that women always masturbate? So writing about masturbating was the issue not the masturbating itself. The issue was a women writing about masturbating that takes her down from the heaven to dark down (Sibil Tala Blog, posted on April 17, 2008).

Donya-e Majazi opposed this kind of argument about sexuality and feminism. He believes that breaking a taboo is not an art and there are certain taboos that are needed for a society. He argues that writing about sexuality and female genitalia does not help to improve society. He wrote: “If you are looking for equality, men are more aggressive and they can write more and much better, so by continuing this way, [women] would hardly defeat” (Donya-e Majazi Blog, posted on April 19, 2008). He argues that people like Sibil Tala should not call themselves feminists since there are many men who are more feminist than them. He wants men to follow up with the “feminism issue” and, after assuring the way [to the equality] is an easy walk, he suggests then that women can follow them.

Yek Zan, in her second post, also makes the same argument that Ellize made to show how some men are against these kinds of writings by women when they are never against similar male writing:

All these fights are over a topic that there is lot of male versions of it is out there. I, personally, find a lot in this fight and I am happy that this patriarchal mind has been challenged since it is a feminist duty to criticize patriarchy and challenge the power relations it makes in the society (Hamkhabegi Blog, posted on April 16, 2008).
Privacy (Public and Private)

After Natoor's post asking women not to bring their personal stories of their bedroom to the public and Baloot's personal space response, the subject of the privacy of a blog took the attention of many bloggers.

The Shoor o Shar blog brings another feminist perspective to the argument by saying that the public versus private space is an old argument among feminists, and they believe that the personal is political. She believes that posing an issue as a public issue makes it possible to talk about it and find a solution. Most women’s issues are related to their private space, but it is essential to bring them to the public to find a solution to the problem of gender inequality. Like Sibil Tala, Shoor o Shar objectified “white feminism,” which makes many women into “modern Cinderellas” even if they are working and earning academic degrees (Shoor o Sha’r Blog, posted on April 17, 2008).

The Chel Tikeh blog argues that in developed countries, if someone does not have sex until their twenties, she or he would be sent to a psychiatrist, since sex is considered a life necessity. She also mentions that she does not personally like to write about her own intimate relationships, but admires those who do. “If [reading] these [posts] does have a conflict of interest with your beliefs or ideas, just don’t read them, but be sure that [reading those posts] won’t make any problems” (Chel Tikeh Blog, posted on April 15, 2008).

Males are not the only ones dissenting about female sexual narratives. Two female bloggers also showed oppositions. Safhe 13 asks: “Would you explain all these experiences to your male relatives? Would you think your intellectualism directly relates to talking about your most private moments? Would you live in a glass bedroom? Would you think in a sick society like ours, is it possible to write such memories for people who know your real name and identity? Has private space defined for you at all?” (Safhe 13 blog, posted on April 9, 2008). She did not answer any of these questions, but is questioning writing of such memories and experiences.

The Bar Saheleh Salamat blog argues that the main problem of women [in Iran] is the lack of private space, and by opening such a topic (personal sexual experiences) to the public they (women) destroy what little privacy that does exist. She believes that there are other ways to find feminine identity and that writing about sexuality is the last way. Bar Saheleh Salamat argues that when women write about their bedrooms and their sexuality, they actually reproduce what men want them to be in the bedroom. She believes that there are more important issues facing Iranian women rather than sexual narratives.
She argues that people who write on this topic need to look at the culture and religiosity of Iranians:

*Where are we going by this kind of intellectualism? Each society has its own conditions. Even if we believe in a theory or a movement, we won’t be successful until we change it towards the mainstream of the society* (Bar Sahel-e Salamat Blog, posted on April 21, 2008).

Immorality and Corruption
The author of the Zahra HB blog centered her argument around religion and norms of the society, *urf, when adding to the debate. She, who identified herself as a “religious girl,” on a post entitled “Weblogestan—e bi din o imon” (non religious and non faithful Weblogestan) wrote:

*This is not important for me what are you doing, but I am getting frustrated when I hear your bedroom stories. This is your private space and you have to keep it private. Now you are writing about it. So what? What do you want to prove? You want to say that you are intellectual or feminist or matriarchal? Do you want to prove your equality with men in this way?* (Zahra HB blog, posted on April 13, 2008).

Zahra HB writes that she feels sorry that all of this “corruption” is happening within an Islamic society that is supposed to go toward nonmaterial values. Then she asked readers if there is anyone who thinks like her and gets upset when she or he is reading about “rabete jensi ba namahram” (sexual relations out of marriage). She received two hundred sixty-one comments from both sides of the argument, but mostly from those who rejected her ideas. These objections prompted another post from her two days later that clarified her positions on religion and sexual narrations.

This second Zahra HB post divided her argument into two parts: feminism and religion. First, she asked feminist bloggers why they did not talk about more important things like arresting a women’s rights activist or the nature of some of the awards that foreign groups and organizations have given to the Iranian women’s movement (such as the National Endowment of Democracy, which awarded some Iranian women who were working on various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). She concluded that there are many more important things for Iranian feminists to concentrate on, and writing about sex is only taking the easiest way and reflects their attempts to follow men’s steps in pornography. The second part of argument focused on the religious belief that premarital sex is an unforgivable sin. She argued that
people who think they are free to write about their private life in their private blog “do not live in a jungle” (Zahra HB Blog, posted on April 15, 2008).

Another blog, Khanoom Shin, brings another concern to the discussion. As a mother, she thinks that these blogs are dangerous for a (female) teenager who is sitting in front of her computer and looking for a reason to give up (her virginity). She believes this kind of writing destroys the honor of families and destroys the chastity of young people. She writes: “Sexual relationships are beautiful and respectful, but not for a teenager. Early experiences won’t help our teenagers....Let women not write, not because they cannot, but because they should not prompt corruption” (Khanoom Shin Blog, posted on April 15, 2008).

Her argument was immediately answered by one of the young bloggers, or as Khanoom Shin called them “teenagers who are sitting in front of their computers, looking for sexual topics” (Khanoom Shin Blog, posted on April 15, 2008). Dokhtar-e Khorshid wrote: “I am 17...since I was 14, I knew all details about sexual relationships... The first time I found about it, I decided to not get married ever. But this feeling of ‘dirty relation’ did not take that much. I justified myself that the pain I see is just part of it” (Dokhtar-e Khorshid Blog, posted on April 18, 2008). Talking about her masturbation, Dokhtar-e Khorshid explains the guilt she felt when she was younger due to her lack of knowledge. But she clearly defended female narratives of sex or even pornography:

But among all these, feminine narratives of sex are important for a teenager girl like me who found our sexual needs and know about sexual acts, to know that sex is not only about painful stories of men wanting to conquer a woman...these kinds of writings don’t describe sexual acts and I don’t want to masturbate after reading them. But teach me not to fear and if I have this need, it is natural (Dokhtar-e Khorshid Blog, posted on April 18, 2008).

Talkh Mesle Asal blog, answering Khanoom Shin’s argument about vulgarity, wrote:

It is like the Islamic Republic’s philosophy who wants to take every one to heaven by force...our teenagers need to know this information and, by the way, they can get whatever they want from thousand other sources not our blogs (Talkh Mesl-e Asal Blog, posted on April 20, 2008).

After her first challenging post, Yek Zan wrote another post regarding female narratives of sex in general (not her own story) and she tries to answer two
other bloggers, Khanoom Shin and Zahra. She challenged Khanoom Shin’s arguments about teenagers’ information about sex. In her point of view, sixteen year-old teenagers now know a lot more than women like Khanoom Shin knew in their day. Today, teens are involved with many aspects of sex, like desire and contraception. She argues:

*Women must talk freely about sex, so that sixteen years old be above those 62.8% of women who never experience orgasm and I call that national catastrophe...if you are that much concern about family foundation, now can you ignore the reason for 50% of divorce [which is not having happy sex life] (Hamkhabegi Blog, posted on April 16, 2008).*

The Farenhite 1979 blog gave advice to women who, like her, are “living in Islamic Iran” (Farenhite Blog, posted on April 16, 2008). She says: “dear brother, if you think it is OK, let your sister read these.” Then she asked women not to trust men in any condition, ever talk about their previous sexual relationships, start sleeping around after marriage, lend more than half of their savings to any man, and asks women to stay virgins if they want to find a husband in Iran. Then she answered those who are against women’s public writing of sexuality because of the corruption it has: “You say it is misleading? Do you think it would be vulgar if your wife or your girlfriend read these and learned how to pleased herself and give you pleasure?” (Farenhite Blog, posted on April 16, 2008).

The author of Shaparkaa, who introduced herself as a married woman living inside Iran, indicated that she never heard [from women around her] that a woman could have sexual pleasure. She notes that in the *urf* she knows, “it’s a woman’s duty to sexually satisfy her husband” and the relationship out of marriage is an unforgivable sin for women, not for men (Shaparakha Blog, posted on April 14, 2008). Her post does not mention anything about her own sexual relationships or sexual pleasure. And in the end, she reminds readers that love is the only bond that can keep a man and a woman together.

A blog named “Letters to My Former Self” makes the argument that it is necessary to have sex and did not touch the issue of narratives. About whether women should write about their experiences or not, the Letters to My Former Self blogger wants women to have sex before marriage to please their husband better:
These women [who never had sex before marriage] don’t tell their husband what they like in sex, what kind of love making they want, and they even feel shamed to ask for sex if they want it …They turn to a robot who only do home chores and wait for their men to sleep with them (Letters to my Former Self Blog, posted on April 16, 2008).

Conclusion

Blogging, due to its nature, has the capacity to split off into different debates. In this case, the debate over what women write about created multiple layers of structure, arguments, and explanations. The three main arguments that shaped this debate were the private nature of a blog that was published publicly, morality of sexual narratives, and the different aspects of feminism and women’s struggle for change.

Although this virtual discussion continued in the Weblogestan for about a month, and some taboos were challenged, women were more criticized by other women than by men for promoting this issue in the public sphere. The majority of women preferred to stay silent and respected determined social norms prohibiting the description of sexual acts and their desires in a sexual relationship. From those who wrote, many tried to convince others with logic about whether writing or not writing about the subject is appropriate. Support for sexual narratives was lost and those women who encouraged premarital sex for women wanted them to have the skills to be good wives for their future husbands and none focused on female pleasure, which suggests a modern movement toward traditional values of sexual pleasure for men.

It is also interesting to study the Weblogestan reaction based on gender and residence of the author. Although not many male bloggers participated in this debate, those who did objectified privacy and relating this kind of writing to feminism. Bloggers from outside Iran were more in favor of this topic and they less objectified the morality, religious, and privacy argument.

It is important to be aware that the Weblogestan is not a sample population of the whole Iranian society inside and outside Iran. Of the large number of those who blog, only a few participated in this particular debate. Cyberspace is not a completely free space in regard to censorship. Not only governments, but bloggers also censor themselves and each other in many ways. The Weblogestan has a very limited impact in the people’s daily life inside Iran, since this medium still belongs to the middle and upper educated population in Iran, not the grassroots lower and working classes. For those who write and read on the Weblogestan, it gives a new window of new experience.
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