Introduction

Long before Iran's 1979 Revolution, red-light districts were already well-known fixtures in major cities across Iran. In the capital Tehran, official maps, government reports, and social worker and historian accounts document that a nascent brothel district had formed in the late Qajar period (1785-1925). In March 1786, Tehran – at the time a small village near the ancient city of Rey – was selected by Qajar dynasty founder and patriarch Agha Muhammad Khan to be his capital.1 The "town's population swelled by the courtiers and soldiers," and soon the lure of wages and industrial jobs brought rural migrants pouring into the area, forcing the expansion of the city's newly defined limits.2 Concomitantly, on a site once known as a pastoral residence for royal officials, women who came from mostly rural, economically depressed backgrounds were brought to the area to live and work in 'azab-khaneh (private brothels).3 By the 1920s, these brothels formed a sizable group of houses called Shahr-e No (New City), an area known as Tehran's largest red-light district for almost a century.4 Elsewhere in Iran there were other incarnations of Shahr-e No, designated zones around town where prostitution was solicited. In the 1960s, when Pahlavi officials introduced a series of nationwide reforms in the education and public health sectors, among others, red-light districts in particular became sites of government regulation. University researchers, doctors, social workers and ministry health officials were sent to monitor the residents and activities of Shahr-e No. Prostitutes were subsequently checked for venereal infections, and some were sent to rehabilitation and skills training programmes. Yet these measures did little to ameliorate their lives; instead, government intervention had the effect of institutionalizing an industry built upon the notion that male sexual desires needed a relieving space.

Before the fall of the monarchy, much of the opposition's criticism against the Pahlavis was based on claims that the regime had supported "dens of moral corruption" – meaning cinemas, private brothels, red-light districts and entertainment clubs in cities across Iran. The Gomrok neighbourhood in south-west central Tehran, where the Shahr-e No quarter was located, was reportedly set on fire (http://www.zamaaneh.com/revolution/2009/01/post_218.html) (trapping an unknown number of

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4 Floor: (see FN 3), 249.
residents inside) for that very reason. After Khomeini's supporters consolidated and increased their own power, special revolutionary courts emerged, ordering all brothels closed, demolished, or both. In 1979, prostitution became illegal. Kanun-e Hemayat-e Eslami (Centre for Islamic Protection) officially closed down the quarter. Apprehended prostitutes were hastily tried in closed-door proceedings, with their punishments determined by an Islamic criminal code. Yet the criminalization of prostitution did little to halt the sex industry's growth in the first decades of the post-revolutionary period. The services provided in the red-light district and other brothel areas simply went underground, or remained in plain sight. More than three decades on, prostitution is still arranged in public, often in city parks and in full view of police, officials and local denizens. In fact, in the exact location where Shahr-e No once stood is now the manicured public park known as Park-e Razi (Razi Park), where undercover sex workers and potential customers easily mingle in the midst of families picnicking on lawns.

What is unique about the historical narrative of Shahr-e No in particular, and the discourse of prostitution in general, is not that sex sells in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rather, it is that the sex industry continually mutates itself soon after its brothels are destroyed and prostitutes are arrested. The reasons for this regeneration are institutionally and conceptually based and perhaps best exemplified by the following idiosyncratic statement made famous in the revolutionary period. At the time of the Gomrok fire, a popular Shi'a cleric and contemporary of Ayatollah Khomeini came to Shahr-e No's defence. Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani is widely known to have uttered the oft-repeated line: "Every house needs a mosterah (toilet)." Its meaning is commonly interpreted that in every society (or, metaphorically, house), a space for excess must exist as an output for human aggression, sexual release, folly, or sin. In other words, prostitutes figuratively embody the proverbial toilet – their role and function is that of a human repository for the discharge of male sexuality. In regard to Shahr-e No, Taleghani's metaphor speaks to an underlying acceptance – by a well-respected cleric and national figure – that brothels and prostitutes are requisite for maintaining some level of social order. And for many Iranians, his quip – and its repetition ever since – reinforces this popular understanding about prostitution and its societal relevance. Thus the "mosterah" should be tolerated and incorporated into daily life – provided, of course, that its activities are conducted in private. This was apparently the justification for Shahr-e No; its more than a century's existence was generally tolerated and put under government regulation.

After the 1979 revolution, with the main site of prostitution eliminated and the profession criminalized, it was

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7 The phrase is often found on Persian-language blogs and heard in street conversations. Taleghani's comment was made in early 1979 when he was asked about the fires destroying red-light districts in southern Tehran.

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commonly reported that the sex industry rebounded, albeit operating in different modes and conditions. Ethnographic fieldwork illustrates this view; on the former land of Shahr-e No, which has been turned into a family park, prostitution actively continues on the very same contested site.

Perhaps one of the primary reasons for prostitution's recurring presence in this particular space lies in the continuity – and not rupture – of a normative conceptualization of human sexuality that prevails in the contemporary Iranian context: the recognition that a physical outlet for male sexual expression, in which women "of the periphery" play a formative and functional role, must coexist and cooperate with the "morally acceptable" norms and conduct of the time. In such a frame, there are many questions over which to ponder: what became of the prostitutes and/or of the conditions that pushed the sex district into full operational mode in the first place, after Shahr-e No was demolished and purposefully erased from the official historical record? Were they expected to disappear or self-reform once the site was transformed into an Islamic family park? From a quantitative perspective, have the rates of prostitution subsequently abated since the district's destruction in 1979? Moreover, what do these particular interrogations into the history of Shahr-e No and its subsequent redevelopment reveal about the unsavoury links between – and contestations over – clerical authorities, police protection, government morality, male sexuality, poverty and public memory in the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic?

Vali Mahlouji writes, "The erasure of the urban neighbourhood signified the initiation of a programme of cultural cleansing that transformed the Iranian landscape. At the core of this cultural revolution was a redefining of sexual and gender urban mores." Yet, crucial to understanding the institution of prostitution – its constraints, social support networks, cultural and political impact, and/or how it operates in contemporary Iranian society – is charting the intersections of economic exchange, sex, gender, poverty, law, religious doctrine and disease that are elaborated through the piecing together of Shahr-e No's history, detailing, for instance, its processes of development, demise, and "Islamically acceptable" modification. When analysing how different institutions, agents and interests become interconnected and modified over time, the "cultural cleansing" and "transformations" of the Iranian landscape appear merely superficial; the subcutaneous layers have in fact remained intact, with sexual mores and appetites for illicit sex satiated in more diversified forms and, as observed at Razi Park, in plain sight. In brief, the prostitution industry continues to thrive in present-day Iran, no longer contained within the "citadel" of Shahr-e No.

In what follows, I aim to document the kaleidoscopic history of Iran's most controversial red-light district, Shahr-e No, examining primary, secondary and tertiary players and powers operating in the district from the

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early twentieth century until the contemporary period. I mark a slight turning point in 1979, when the site is demolished, but follow the continuities in its historical narrative, considering its many spatial and conceptual transformations, until the site is reconfigured into the modern-day public leisure space of Park-e Razi. I underscore the disciplinary technologies employed by two consecutive regimes (Pahlavi and Islamic Republic) both to regulate the sex industry and reinvent a century-old landmark into a workable site of government regulation and reform – be it one designed to express modern development, or to convey a moral triumph over Western decadence. In an effort to explore the mentalities that structure the diverse understandings and experiences of the “space” of Shahr-e No, I frequented the park in 2011, interviewing its patrons and reflecting on “ideological and societal concepts physically emplaced and enacted” at that specific location. This ethnographic section acted as a natural segue into a larger discussion on the possibilities of meaning behind, first, Shahr-e No’s transformation into a “morally righteous” park; and second, the reinforcement of historical ghettos constructed to satisfy and safeguard male sexuality. On some level, Shahr-e No’s reformulation and strategic transformations are interpreted as attempts to sustain female-embodied heterotopias, ironically constructed by seemingly different regimes. The human geographic concept of heterotopia, which Foucault elaborates as "a space of illusion" that is perceived as natural by society, although nonetheless designed to control, discipline and punish – essentially to regulate social behaviour – provides a useful lens through which to examine the contradictory measures taken by state and clerical authorities to deal with public health fears, socio-economic pressures, and in particular, uncontrolled (male) sexual energy.

Regulation of Prostitution during Reza Shah Pahlavi’s Reign (1925-1941)

In the first half of the twentieth century, the infamous Shahr-e No district was publically regarded as an illicit activity zone where prostitution, drug abuse, khalafkari (deceit and mischief) and sexually transmitted diseases were rampant. According to one social worker’s account, most of the female prostitutes were addicted to opium and arak. They were also accused of spreading venereal diseases (VD). Outbreaks of syphilis in particular were commonly reported, as the disease had become more widespread by the turn of the century and had been steadily increasing. In one report, an Iranian doctor surmised, "[T]he prostitute


\[10\] Foucault, Michel, "Of Other Spaces", in Diacritics 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 22-27.

\[11\] The term khalafkari denotes delinquency and wrongdoing in a person.

\[12\] Arak is a highly alcoholic spirit, often homemade.


\[13\] There are a variety of Persian terms for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Floor’s translation of venereal disease is bimariha-yi jeldi. A more common term is amraz-e mogharebati. Typically, bimariha-yi jeldi refers to diseases that affect the skin. For specific kinds of VD, syphilis is translated as seflis, and gonorrhea is known as suzak.

carries the poison of this dangerous disease [syphilis], and death is considered the best end to it." By the mid-twentieth century syphilis and gonorrhoea were common afflictions among Iranians, for whom condom use was both costly and a social stigma. Contracting gonorrhoea in particular was of heightened concern, for it potentially led to sterility and affected young couples hoping to expand their families. Less reported was the fact that women of all social classes were impacted by rising VD rates. Not only were increasing numbers becoming infected by their husbands (as a result of their extra-marital sex), but children were also being born with syphilis-related disabilities. "To put the problem of VD in perspective," said investigative reporter Hedayatollah Hakim-Olahi, "three hundred thousand inhabitants of Tehran, or 40 per cent of its population, had VD in 1946."

Concerns over the spread of VD among the military were especially high, and the blame was again directed at prostitutes. According to Willem Floor, the Pahlavi government began to register prostitutes from Shahr-e No in the 1930s and also threatened to ban brothels and arrest any officer found with a prostitute. In October 1933 it was reported that a law was passed, although not signed by the Shah, to make brothels illegal and have them shut down in three months' time. The proposed regulations would require prostitutes to carry identification cards with their signature and the date of their last hospital visit. This order was soon revoked. It was only in 1941 that a law on the prevention of venereal and contagious diseases was passed by the parliament; however, it was evidently poorly enforced due to lack of funding and training. By the 1960s, the level of venereal diseases had not abated. According to a 1963 report, cases of VD were as high as 80 per cent in rural areas.

The Pahlavi-era method of regulation for prostitution was shaped, to some extent, by European contagious disease legislation and influenced by public health regulatory measures enacted by European and Ottoman governments during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, a policy of "regulationism" of prostitution commenced in Continental Europe and spread throughout the British colonies.

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16 Floor: (see FN 3), 269.

17 Floor: (see FN 3), 389.

18 Kashani-Sabet, Firoozeh: (see FN 15), 17.

19 According to Floor, Hedayatollah Hakim-Olahi was an investigative reporter who based his findings on hospital data in the report, Ba Man beh Shahr-e No Biyaid/Come with Me to Shahr-e No. Quoted in Floor: (see FN 3), 269, 388.

20 Floor: (see FN 3), 268-70. See also Schayegh, Cyrus, Who is Knowledgeable is Strong (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 140.

21 Floor: (see FN 3), 253.

22 Floor: (see FN 3), 386, 388, 391.
As Muge Ozbek has observed, "the regulationist regimes targeted prostitutes, not their clients, as the primary conduits of venereal disease within a gender-biased discourse of social hygiene." These policies were justified as pragmatic responses "to the threat of venereal diseases and the problems of security and social order." European governments began to abandon policies of toleration in favour of regulationism – except for Victorian-era Britain – and legalized prostitution by "allowing brothels legal or quasi-legal status and giving prostitutes special licenses."23

Regulatory policy in general consisted of registering prostitutes, mandatory health examinations and administrative surveillance.24 Ozbek contends, "The existence of prostitution was accepted as a 'necessary evil' that should be tolerated, as toleration allowed the state stricter control of prostitutes in order to protect public health and social order."25 As an immediate example: in the late 1870s, the Ottoman municipal government began requiring prostitutes to carry unique identity cards designating their special status among the general population. Brothels were also obliged to register as licensed businesses with municipal commissions.26

For the Pahlavi state, the regulation of prostitution also involved policing prostitutes' behaviour. Prostitutes were quarantined in a red-light district, where police supervision could be conducted at specific sites.27 In lieu of scrutinizing their male customers or, say, addressing the issue of male promiscuity, the authorities were suspicious of prostitutes. They were ordered by the Ministry of Health to undergo monthly medical check-ups and obtain identity cards. However, medical examinations were not regularly conducted.28 Underlying the Pahlavi policy was the protection of public health through curtailing the spread of VD among prostitutes and not their clients.29 These policies were reasoned to be essential, pragmatic measures to control the

23 Ozbek, Muge, "The Regulation of Prostitution in Beyoglu (1875-1915)", in Middle Eastern Studies 46, no. 4 (July 2010), 555.
24 See Doezema, Jo, "Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women", in Gender Issues 18, no. 1 (1 January 2000), 23-50.
25 Ozbek: (see FN 23), 555.
26 Ozbek: (see FN 23), 557.
27 Hakim-Olahi, Ba Man beh Shahr-e No Biyaid, vol. 2, ii-iv. Quoted in Floor: (see FN 3), 390-91. Floor mentions this 1946 book by Hakim-Olahi, who implored the Shah's government to contain the syphilis outbreak in Tehran. Hakim-Olahi recommended that the red-light district be relocated to a new site under direct police and public health provision. Prostitutes, who would need health cards, would be examined daily and at their homes.
28 Floor: (see FN 3), 277. As researched by Floor, a 1945 article in Mard-e Emruz newspaper argued that Iran should follow the Turkish example of "placing prostitutes under police control for public health reasons". The article based its arguments on permitting prostitution and temporary marriage as "sexual outlets for males", Floor: (see FN 3), 389-390, 392.
29 There were plans to conduct a national survey of the spread of syphilis. According to the 1949 Report on Seven-Year Development Plan for the Plan Organization of the Imperial Government of Iran, the government intended to conduct a survey to determine the incidence of syphilis in a "more vigorous attack upon venereal disease." Public health officers
“necessary evil” of prostitution. Remarkably, absent in this policy was encouraging the general public to take on preventive health measures, such as condom usage.  

**Regulation of Prostitution during Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s Reign**

While Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was monarch (1941-1979), the regulation of prostitution became integrated into the modernization and reform agenda of the 1960s called the White Revolution. Earlier, in 1949, the Shah had announced his main objective as ruler, namely, "the restoration of the dignity and a better life to the people of Iran." By the early 1960s, "a better life" was translated into top-down modernization and development projects, outlined in a six-point executive order addressed to the Iranian people. A few years later, state-administered land, economic, cultural and social reforms commenced, the last of which were ostensibly designed to improve the status of Iranian women. This entailed eliminating illiteracy, extending suffrage rights to women, revamping public health policy and setting up vocational training programmes for poorer communities. Initially, these progressive reforms did not address the issue of prostitution or include social welfare programmes for female prostitutes. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, twin sister of Muhammad Reza Shah, became the figurehead of a programme funded by the government's Fourth Development Economic Plan to provide educational assistance and training for a small number of female prostitutes. By improving their literacy and teaching them domestic trades, such as sewing, the aim was to enable them to return to society as functional, socially accepted citizens. Nevertheless, these policy measures did little to break the cycles and conditions of poverty that these women experienced. Khosrou Mansourian, a social worker who documented living conditions at Shahr-e No for


30 For information about the concerted efforts to blame prostitutes in Iran for venereal disease, see Schayegh, Cyrus, "Criminal-Women and Mother-women: Sociocultural Transformations and the Critique of Criminality in Early Post-World War II in Iran", in *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 5-6.  


32 Shahbaz: (see FN 33), 19. In this executive order, the Shah asserts the government's improvements in state infrastructure through programmes focusing on economic development, progress, anti-corruption and public cooperation.  

33 Mahdavi, Shireen, "Women and the Shi'i Ulama in Iran", in *Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (January 1983), 17.  

34 Floor: (see FN 3), 265. The Fourth Development Plan was implemented between 1968 and 1973. For more on the development programmes of the Shah's White Revolution era, see Najmabadi, Afsaneh, *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran* (Salt Lake City, UT, 1987); Watson, Keith, "The Shah's White Revolution-Education and Reform in Iran", in *Comparative Education* 12, no. 1 (March 1976), 23-36.  

35 Floor: (see FN 3), 264.  

36 Indeed, there were efforts by the opposition Tudeh party to confront prostitution. The Tudeh-led Democratic Association of Women (DAW) adopted a 1946 declaration of aims and objectives in which “the struggle against prostitution and moral decadence” was addressed. It is not clear, however, what practical measures were taken to confront this issue. See Paidar, Parvin, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-century Iran* (New York, 1997), 125.
official reports, maintained that the reform programmes did not significantly ameliorate the poverty and nor did they improve prostitutes' literacy rates. According to one report, prostitutes who attended vocational workshops had left the red-light district only to continue the same activities in other parts of Tehran.

The Brothels of Shahr-e No

Uneven socio-economic development in the 1960s and 1970s fuelled a growing city population in which sprawling slums sprang up to match the urban construction boom. The influx of rural migration, fuelled by officials' demands for domestic industrial development, meant that a thriving sex industry grew to cater to the labour force. Especially in impoverished quarters of Tehran, prostitution was becoming rampant. Alongside this wave flourished a sexual vocabulary about women in the sex trade; for the term "prostitute", the words jendeh, fahesheh, rouspigar, and zan-e marufe were all variants of a gendered terminology primarily dependent on male promiscuity and the demand for paid sex. At the time, red-light districts were unspoken enclaves located not only in the capital but also in provincial cities such as Abadan, Bandar Abbas, Ahvaz, Esfahan and Shiraz. Except for Tehran's district, most areas of prostitution were located on the outskirts of cities and had "virtually no street lights at all, red or otherwise," notes Kamran Talatoff.

The "toilet" of Taleghani's day was known colloquially by the euphemism Shahr-e No or "New City." It was a designated space of sexual transaction and transgression and tacitly accepted, but not discussed candidly. Even though lurking in the shadows, there was no denying the presence of prostitution in Iranian society.

The most famous of the Shahrha­ye No (New Cities) was located in what is now central Tehran – its name differentiated from other Shahrha­ye No by the terms Qal'eh (fort or castle) Shahr-e No or Qal'eh Zahedi, a name attributed to a Pahlavi statesman and General, Fazlollah Zahedi.

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37 Khosrou Mansourian, interview by author, New York, 15 November 2011. Khosrou Mansourian was a researcher for Farman Farmaian's report on Shahr-e No. I conducted two interviews with him in July and November 2011, in Tehran and New York, respectively.

38 Floor: (see FN 3), 265.

39 Najmabadi, Afsaneh, "Iran's Turn to Islam: From Modernism to a Moral Order", in Middle East Journal 41, no. 2 (Spring 1987), 213.

40 Floor: (see FN 3), 263. This is also verified in Paidar: (see FN 38), 41.

41 Floor: (see FN 3), 263.

42 Talattof, Kamran, Modernity, Sexuality and Ideology in Iran: The Life and Legacy of Popular Female Artists (Syracuse, NY, 2011), 57.

43 General Zahedi (1897-1963) was Mohammad Mossadeq's former Minister of the Interior and a coup leader who was instrumental during the October 1952 American and British-led overthrow of Mossadeq, See Ebrahian, Ervand, "The 1953 Coup in Iran", in Science and Society 65, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 182-215.
As Iran's modernization projects advanced during the 1960s, one of its effects was that Qal'eh Shahr-e No became a heterotopic space as residents who found themselves marginalized from society became integral to the functioning of illicit practices. In Foucault's analysis of space, heterotopia is a philosophical concept of "other" spaces, meaning relational spaces housing, containing and dealing with "otherness". When space is perceived as heterotopic – in the case of prisons, nursing homes, or brothels, for instance – the site generally functions both as an escape from a society's real self and as an illusion of its best self. And in this heterotopic space, bodies from society's point-of-view considered weak, undesirable, vulnerable, or "in crisis" remain separate from normative society. They function as physical sites of exclusion and are generally reserved for individuals in a state of crisis, such as adolescents and the elderly. Foucault highlights brothels as an "extreme type of heterotopia" where contradictions, dualities, and tensions of society's "ideal self" are brought to the fore once these sites are investigated and found to sustain discrimination, gender segregation and unequal power dynamics. That the sex trade keeps expanding in new "sites", reappearing in other Tehran districts, shows the ubiquity in the tensions arising from money, power, gender and ideology, which constantly radiate out into new Iranian heterotopias.

In Shahr-e No, prostitutes worked and resided in a government-regulated vice district. The site was a microcosm of urban city life, with its own hierarchical system of madams and pimps, cafes, theatres, groundskeepers, police protection and government health examinations. A citadel-like enclosure on Jamshid Street in the Gomrok district (where Razi Square now stands), Qal'eh Shahr-e No housed at one time an estimated 4,000 prostitutes living in squalid, cramped quarters. From north to south, the area was made up of approximately twelve alleyways; from west to east, it covered the space of three major streets – in total a surface area of about 135,000 square metres (Figure 1). This town-within-a-city was initially a pastoral haven of the political elite; during the late Qajar period, the area was known as a retreat for the Qajar royal

44 Hereafter I use the terms Qal'eh, Qal'eh Shahr-e No and Qal'eh Zahedi interchangeably.
45 Foucault: (see FN 10).
46 Foucault: (see FN 10), 24.
47 Foucault: (see FN 10), 27.
48 Floor: (see FN 3), 258.
49 Information about Tehran's qal'eh, in the area known as Shahr-e No, is available from various reports, documentaries, newspaper clippings and photojournalist documentation of both underground and state-administered sex trafficking during the Pahlavi era. A two-part, black-and-white documentary film entitled Qal'eh, directed by Kamran Shirdel and produced by Iran's Ministry of Culture and Art from 1966 until 1980 and the "Shahr-e No 1975-1977" exhibition of photographer Kaveh Golestan were referenced for this section. See Qaleh 1965-1980/ Shahr-e No Quarter 1965-1980, directed by Kamran Shirdel (Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Art, 1980).
50 The north side of the area was located near Farabi Hospital, which is still situated south of Ghazvane Square. Surface area estimate provided by Floor: (see FN 3), 259.
family.51 At the time, a well-known local named Zal Muhammad Khan reportedly managed it.52

![Figure 1: 1969 map of Qal'eh Shahr-e No district](image)

Famed social historian Ja'far Shahri wrote that in the late nineteenth century, Tehran's own Shahr-e No was not yet an identifiable brothel district. By the turn of the century, however, it was well known where to find the best prostitutes – women who were considered the cleanest (paktizetarin) – and they were located in this district. Shahri wrote, "Indeed, the official number of brothels was 850 of which 4,421 prostitution rooms were attributed to the Shahr-e No area."54 The worst prostitution houses, located in payeen-e shahr (poorer downtown areas), were found in the areas of Chaleh Meydan and Chaleh Silabi (See Figure 1). Brothels were scattered across Tehran, and their protection by the police ensured their ongoing business. According to Shahri, police contracts with brothel owners made certain that prostitution rings would survive.

By the time Reza Shah seized power in 1925, the number of brothels had ballooned. Their ownership fell increasingly into the hands of private entrepreneurs and local managers. As a large number of young women, the majority of whom had originated from Iran's central provinces, were brought to Shahr-e No for sex work, the district's reputation worsened.55 By the time Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi was handed back

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51 Floor states that Shahr-e No was founded in 1881. Floor: (see FN 3), 259. This cannot be independently verified by Persian sources from that era.

52 Montazarqa'em, Mehdi, Rouspigari dar Iran/ Prostitution in Iran (Tehran, 1384/2005), 15.


54 Shahri, Ja'far, Tarikh-e Ijtimai-e Tehran dar Qarn-e 13/ The Social History of Tehran in the 13th Century (Tehran, 1368/1989), 469-470.

55 Floor: (see FN 3), 263. It is doubtful that these young girls and women were brought into the district of their own
his throne by British and American intelligence on 18 August 1953, Qal'eh Shahr-e No was already a well-known local institution. The area gained its "citadel" status around 1958, when national Chief of Police Fazollah Zahedi (who later became Iran's 63rd prime minister) ordered the construction of a brick wall around the site, in effect alienating the prostitutes from the rest of Tehran society. By this very act, Shahr-e No became a designated heterotopic space – separated from Iranian society, yet integrated into public life as a government-regulated red-light district.

Life inside Shahr-e No

Although the literature on the conditions of brothel life after the 1979 Revolution is scarce, pre-revolution research was substantive, as academics and field workers from social and public health sectors investigated and regulated the conditions of Qal'eh prostitutes. A pioneering social worker by the name of Sattareh Farman Farmaian published a groundbreaking report in 1969 about the prostitutes of Qal'eh Shahr-e No during the Pahlavi period. Farman Farmaian's report is important not only for the descriptions of Qal'eh daily life, but also for the sociological details it provides about the 1,548 sex workers whom her team interviewed in the summer of 1968. The data compiled reveals living conditions and sex work, including many tables on awareness of prophylactic usage, marriage status, education level, and even spending habits, among other topics.

volition. Afsaneh Najmabadi wrote a seminal book on the 1905 raiding of villages, in the Quchan province, where young girls were sold into sex slavery by villagers who had trouble paying their taxes. Other girls were reportedly stolen by Turkmen tribes. The event caused a public outcry after the villagers attempted to seek help from the parliamentary government, to no avail. See Najmabadi, Afsaneh, The Story of the Daughters of Quchan (Syracuse, NY, 1998).

56 Shahri, Ja'tar, Tehran-e Qadim (Tehran: 24 Azar 1376/24 December 1997). This five-volume work by Shahri (1914-1994) offers a social history of Tehran during the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.

57 There are very few sources in Persian about the extent to which prostitution has spread in post-revolutionary Iran. Independent scholars, both lay and professional, have commented on the taboo nature of this topic and thus it is unlikely that their writings would have passed government censors in the publication sector of the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. According to Mansourian, Farman Farmaian wrote the only comprehensive study of Tehran's Shahr-e No to date. Additionally, there are available blog posts about the history of the red-light district. See "Shahr-e No: Mazhar-e Fesad dar Qabl az Engelab/Shahr-e No: The Symbol of Moral Corruption before the Revolution," Tahrir-e Moaaser-e Iran, 22 Ordibehesht 1387/ 11 May 2008, http://bahman18.blogfa.com/post-11.aspx (accessed 21 November 2011); "Shahr-e No", Ahari Qorbat-Neshin (blog), 9 August 2011, http://aharii.wordpress.com/2011/08/09/%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%86%D9%88/ (accessed 1 July 2012)

58 Farman Farmaian is often praised as the "Mother of Social Work" in Iran. Her memoir, Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from her Father's Harem through the Islamic Republic (New York, 1992), is a personal reflection about her large aristocratic family in Tehran and her education in social work at the University of Southern California. She returned to Iran to establish, with the Shah's approval, Iran's very first School of Social Work in 1958. At the time, there was no word for the term "social work", so she invented the term madadkar, meaning "one who helps." As a critic both of the Pahlavi regime and Khomeini, she was arrested by revolutionary forces in 1979 and immigrated to the United States soon after her release. She died in May 2012.

59 Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), especially 17-24. Her work is still highly regarded among sociologists in Iran. Shirin Ahmadnia, personal interview by author, Tehran, 3 July 2010.

60 Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 63, Table 20.

61 Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 60.
Taking cues from prostitution discourse in America – many of her theoretical sources are based on publications from the American Social Health Association (http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/xml/sw0045.xml) – Farman Farmaian provided what is still considered to be the most in-depth analysis of the conditions of prostitution inside Qal'eh Shahr-e No. Funded by the Vezarat-e Keshvar (Ministry of Interior), the report concentrates on five locations across Tehran (see Figure 2) where sex workers were prevalent, and the largest section of this report is dedicated to conditions inside Qal'eh. Most of this research documents prostitutes working on the streets, in restaurants and bars, residing in the Qal'eh, or based in private brothels spread throughout the city. At the time of the report's publication, prostitution was a specific criminal offence in the Pahlavi penal code.

Living Conditions inside the Brothel District

Qal'eh Shahr-e No was no lover's paradise. In black-and-white images of the "citadel" taken by Kaveh Golestan, a photojournalist, he wanted the viewer's interpretation of his pictures deliberately coloured. Golestan famously remarked (http://payvand.com/blog/blog/2010/12/10/photos-tehrans-brothel-district-shahr-e-no-1975-77-by-kaveh-golestan), "I want to show you images that will be like a slap in your face to shatter your security. You can look away, turn off, hide your identity like murderers, but you cannot stop the truth. No one can."

Women were shown residing in cramped quarters, assigned to single rooms in houses containing six to seven rooms each. Every house typically had a tiled hayat or courtyard, which functioned as an ersatz area of refuse. Described as a "waste ground or public toilet," conditions inside the compound were so grim that life was anything but paradise.

The American Social Health Association (ASHA), now called the American Sexual Health Association, is a non-profit organization dedicated to heightening public awareness about sexual health, including information about sexual rights, STDs and health care providers. Although established in 1914 to control and prevent venereal diseases, drug addiction and prostitution, by the 1960s ASHA had expanded its programmes to treating and rehabilitating drug addicts. See "American Social Health Association Records, 1905-2005", Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, 2002, http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/xml/sw0045.xml (accessed 1 July 2015).

Farman Farmaian researched other sites, such as public streets, houses outside of Qal'eh Shahr-e No, night entertainment spots, discotheques in southern Tehran; qowdha (holes), and garbage dumps that appeared more like slums, based also in the south of Tehran. Prostitutes lived and worked in some of the deep crevices of the qowdha. See Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 22-23.

Although there was no law criminalizing prostitution, a Pahlavi-era law criminalized acts committed against social morality. According to section 3, Article 211 of the Qanoun-e Mojazat-e Ommumi (Pahlavi Criminal Code), ratified in 1924, the law stipulates: "Any person who participates in an act, which is against social morality, will be imprisoned from one month to one year, or will be fined from 25 to 500 toman." Adultery, homosexuality (men having sex with men), rape and incest were treated as crimes, punishable by death in Section 3, Article 207. See Qanoun-e Mojazat-e Ommumi, 1304/1924, Section 3, Article 207, 211.


Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 14.
that one report noted a pile of rotting, post-coital tissues left in the *hayat*.

According to Farman Farmaian's study, although the area was generally dilapidated, Shahr-e No as an institution was more like a hierarchal microcosm in which social roles were clearly defined among the key figures inside the district. *Sahebs* (male pimps) and *nae'eB khanoms* (madams) were in charge of Qal'eh's management. They confiscated a percentage of the prostitutes' wages and acted as their liaisons to the world outside Qal'eh. As detailed in the report, both clients and Qal'eh management followed certain role-playing and protocols during the sexual transactions. A potential customer would enter the Qal'eh, and shortly a madam would appear, beckoning him to meet her in one of the courtyards or to come inside the house. Prostitutes would stand in requisite positions; they were often visible from the window balconies or sitting near the front door – "as if on display," recalled Mansourian – for the potential customer. When a potential customer found a woman who appealed to him, a bartering session between the madam and him ensued. After a price was agreed upon, the madam would hand him a token, which he would then give to the prostitute with whom he chose to have sexual relations. The prostitute in turn handed all tokens accumulated at the end of the day to the elder *Maman* (madam-figure) of the house. A veteran among the prostitutes and well known by customers, *Maman* would place the token in her leather or nylon purse; by day's end, the number of tokens was tallied in order to divvy out the sums owed to each prostitute. At some point, the police would confiscate a portion of the madam's profits – protecting women came at a price.

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67 Vivid images of this district are found in the photo compilation by Halasa, Malu and Golestan, Hengameh (ed.), *Kaveh Golestan 1950-2003: Recording the Truth in Iran* (Ostfildern, 2007).
68 Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 25.
69 Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 14.
70 Khosrou Mansourian, interview by author, Tehran, 17 July 2011.
71 Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55).
In total, prostitutes served "some 16,000 men each day, most of them regulars"; each woman typically had 15 customers per day and worked between three to twelve hours, and some close to 18 hours. Women charged customers a daily rate of up to 600 rials (or 60 tomans). Children were offered at a discounted hourly rate of 40 to 50 tomans.

**The Women of Shahr-e No**

Both young and old women who ended up in Qa'l'eh were primarily from rural areas and poor families; they had minimal literacy and virtually no schooling. Sold into the sex trade, many had not given their consent nor had any knowledge that they were being trafficked. In some cases, their own husbands and parents tricked or sold them into prostitution. Little girls as young as six years old were sold by their parents to traffickers and madams and brought to live and work in the district. Some of the older women prostitutes had arrived at Qa'l'eh as divorcees, having had little or no financial support from their families. Added to the mix of Qa'l'eh denizens were female runaways and orphans, whom opportunistic characters collected from the provinces, raped, and brought to Shahr-e No. Throughout the district's history, gigolo-types (both male and female) were also present. This is the price estimate of children, according to a Shahr-e No prostitute interviewed in the Shirdel film, *A Documentary about Prostitution in Qa'l'eh Shahr-e No, Tehran* which was produced by Iran's Ministry of Culture and Art between 1966 and 1980. Farman Farmaian also interviewed prostitutes who were younger than age fifteen. See Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 63, Table 20. However, this price counters the story of a Qa'l'eh Shahr-e No prostitute who was interviewed for the documentary; she stated that children were prostituted for 40 to 50 tomans per hour. In addition, Floor uses Farman Farmaian's report to note that the average daily income of a Shahr-e No prostitute was 743 riyals, a price significantly lower than Mansourian's estimate. It is likely that Mansourian was using 2011 currency exchange rates to estimate their salaries. In October 2011, one US dollar was equivalent to 10,700 rials or 1070 tomans. See Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran*, 264. It is also worth noting that whatever money a Shahr-e No prostitute earned would be divided according to rent and food expenses, as well as among the madams and other prostitutes residing in each house.

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72 Floor: (see FN 3), 263-65.

73 According to an online report of currency exchange rates from 1979, one US dollar was equivalent to 70 rials or 7 tomans. See "Iran Currency Exchange Rate History: 1975-2012," Farsinet.com, [http://www.farsinet.com/toman/exchange.html](http://www.farsinet.com/toman/exchange.html) (accessed 3 July 2012). There are contesting reports about the daily salary of prostitutes from this period. Mansourian stated in an interview that prostitutes made between 400 and 500 tomans for each session. However, this price counters the story of a Qa'l'eh Shahr-e No prostitute who was interviewed for the documentary; she stated that children were prostituted for 40 to 50 tomans per hour. In addition, Floor uses Farman Farmaian's report to note that the average daily income of a Shahr-e No prostitute was 743 riyals, a price significantly lower than Mansourian's estimate. It is likely that Mansourian was using 2011 currency exchange rates to estimate their salaries. In October 2011, one US dollar was equivalent to 10,700 rials or 1070 tomans. See Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran*, 264. It is also worth noting that whatever money a Shahr-e No prostitute earned would be divided according to rent and food expenses, as well as among the madams and other prostitutes residing in each house.

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75 Halasa and Golestan: (see FN 70), n.p. For literacy rates of Shahr-e No prostitutes, see Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 77, Table 37.

76 Farman Farmaian: (see FN 12), 301. Farman Farmaian explains, "Many were wives or village girls who had been lured or abducted from their homes and sold into the brothels, so that they were beyond the pale of respectable society and could never return to their families."

77 Farman Farmaian interviewed 1,180 prostitutes and checked how many were married. In Shahr-e No, 893 were married compared to 287 who were single. Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 63, Table 20.

78 Mansourian, personal interview by author, Tehran, 17 July 2011.

and female) forced women into sexual servitude as compensation for providing their housing; although
women were held against their will, they were ordered to pay back debts that they owed either to the gigolos
or to their own parents.\footnote{80}

In Farman Farmaian’s report, social workers had asked prostitutes their reasons for entering the sex trade.
Their responses are worth noting: 572 said they were fooled; 415 were sold; 311 had no guardian or
immediate care; 41 had desires for wealth; and 72 answered they became prostitutes for a “pleasure,” or
lezat in Persian, which is not explained by Farman Farmaian or by the interviewees.\footnote{81} Although not
elaborating on their answers, the report illustrates that there was some dimension of choice in deciding to
enter and remain within the sex industry. Long before the initiatives for sex workers’ rights in the mid-1980s
pushed for international conventions to include self-determination and state protection of the industry,\footnote{82}
the answers illustrate a certain self-awareness behind some of the women’s decisions to enter and work at
Shahr-e No. Another interesting find is that the majority of the prostitutes had minimal awareness of sex: only
157 were aware of what sex was, whereas the remaining 1,389 expressed ignorance.\footnote{83}

**The Intrepid Pari Bolandeh of Shahr-e No**

Once Shahr-e No became a veritable red-light district, it was guarded by the police and fortified with a wall
that permanently demarcated its perimeters. At least two guardsmen stood at Shahr-e No’s only entrance on
Sohrab Street (now Helal Ahmar Street) and inspected men and women hoping to pass through its gates. It
was difficult for prostitutes to leave the premises of their own volition, because Shahr-e No’s sole entrance\footnote{84}
was also its only exit; escaping was usually their only recourse to pursuing a life outside the quarter.\footnote{85} Many
prostitutes who had fled the premises were eventually arrested, beaten and then returned to Qal’eh.\footnote{86}

\footnote{80} “Shahr-e No: Mazhar-e Fesaad dar Qabl az Enqelab.” This sentiment was also expressed by Mansourian in the
November 2011 interview.

\footnote{81} Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 75, Table 34.

\footnote{82} Doezema, Jo, "Forced to choose: Beyond the voluntary v. Forced prostitution dichotomy", in Kempadoo, Kamala and
Doezema, Jo (ed.), *Global Sex Workers* (New York, 1998), 35.

\footnote{83} Farman Farmaian: (see FN 55), 60, Table 16.

\footnote{84} Vali Mahlouji, curator of the photo exhibit "Kaveh Golestan: The Citadel" elaborates: "Access was through two gates
but this was later reduced to only one, where only men could go in." FOAM Amsterdam, "Kaveh Golestan: The Citadel"
pamphlet, 21 March–4 May 2014.

\footnote{85} In an interview of 10 August 2011 that I conducted with 26-year-old Forough A., whose name has been altered to
protect her identity, she recounted a story of a grandfather who, as a teenager, had fallen in love with a young girl living
inside Shahr-e No. Because this girl could not leave the premises on her own, the young man and a group of his friends
entered the district, carrying extra men’s clothing. After getting dressed as a young boy, the girl left the citadel with them
and soon after the young girl and boy married. Forough A., interview by author, Tehran, 10 August 2011.

\footnote{86} For information about police tactics see film *Qal'eh Shahr-e No, Tehran*, FN 51.
There were an untold number of powerful hands participating in economically and materially sustaining this institution, suggesting that political influence and corruption extended deep into the Iranian political system. Certain female figures inside Qal'eh also attracted attention and received clemency that originated well beyond Qal'eh's domain. Being business savvy, madams were able to invest in commercial and political opportunities outside Qal'eh. One of the most recognized of these madams was a prostitute by the name of "Pari Bolandeh" (Pari the Tall), the catchy moniker of Sakineh Qasemi.

Nicknames like hers were hard to come by. During Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign, women were typically not referred to by their full names. According to the formal custom of the time, women were referred to by their relationship to the closest male relative, and rarely for how they looked. Khanom (wife) or dokhtar (daughter) of agha (Mister) was a more appropriate reference, ensuring that a respectful distance be maintained at all times between mahram relations. However, state modernization attempts altered many of these customs. Once Reza Shah had demanded that Iran westernize itself, through force and legal measures, women were ordered to unveil in 1936.Prostitutes were exempt from this edict and allowed to wear the chador as a way of distinguishing themselves as women who were not chaste. But Pari Bolandeh was a tradition-breaker; she capitalized on this era of state-administered modernist reform. A tall and slender woman, she was known for her brazenness in promoting her employees' sexual services. Originally from Ghazvin, she appeared to be a respected figure in her community, having managed brothels from several properties throughout Tehran. Her reach even extended into the field of politics. During the American-orchestrated coup to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh, Qasemi participated in demonstrations against the pro-Soviet Tudeh party, which were organized by Pahlavi state authorities. Pictured demonstrating along with athletes from zur-khanehs (traditional gymnasia of urban Persia) and

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87 This comment about political corruption in Shahr-e No was stated both by Fatemeh Sadeghi (the daughter of former Islamic revolutionary judge Khalkhali) and Mansourian during personal interviews. Fatemeh Sadeghi, interview by author, Tehran, 1 October 2011.


89 Mahram is an Islamic shari'a legal terminology that describes kin who cannot have sexual relations or get married, as it would be considered both illegal and incestuous. A mahram relationship can also be established by blood, milk, marriage or sexual union. See Khatib-Chahidi, Jane, "Sexual Prohibitions, Shared Space and 'Fictive' Marriages in Shi'i Iran," in Ardener, Shirley (ed.), Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps (Oxford, 1997), 114.

90 Nashat adds, "After the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, when the rule prohibiting the veil was abandoned, many women returned to it. But the trend was not completely reversed since the present-day chador bears only a remote resemblance to the elaborate veil of yesteryear." See Nashat, Guity, "Women in the Islamic Republic in Iran", in Iranian Studies 13, no. 1/4, Iranian Revolution in Perspective (1980), 167.

91 Zur-khaneh, literally translated as "house of strength," are places where boys and men would practice strength training. Until the mid-twentieth century they were associated primarily with wrestling. In 1953, one of the most prominent traditional athletes, Ša'bān Ja'fari, was a ringleader of the CIA-financed riots that accompanied the military coup d'état of
other prostitutes from Qal'eh Shahr-e No, Qasemi reportedly chanted “Death to Mossadegh” and called for an end to his nationalist policies.\(^92\)

The 1979 overthrow of the Pahlavi regime meant the swift cessation of Pari Bolandeh's madam activities and political activism. Arrested and tried in the Islamic revolutionary courts, she was executed by a firing squad on 12 July 1979 (http://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-3345/sakineh-qasemi), along with two other female associates, Saheb Afsari (also known as Soraya Tarkeh) and Zahra Mafi (also known as Ashraf Cheharchesme, or Ashraf Four Eyes).\(^93\) Although details of the court proceedings are scarce (few facts about her court case and execution were released in Kayhan newspaper), it was reported that after several closed meetings, Branch One of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran found her guilty of administering and abetting the illegal prostitution of girls, deceiving women, operating brothels and spreading corruption among generations – or, as the judgment read, "corruption on earth".\(^94\) In the last known photograph of her (Figure 3), taken some time before her execution, she appears downcast, wearing a chador.\(^95\)

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92 Although this photograph cannot be properly verified, a number of online Persian sources have posted snapshots of Pari Bolandeh. In a black-and-white photograph apparently taken on the day of the coup, she is photographed waving a rod in the air, holding onto a car door and surrounded by men. See Kayhan, Issue 10700 (20 Dey 1390/ 10 January 2012), front cover.


94 Boroumand Foundation, "One Person's Story: Mr. Monir Taheri," Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation.

95 The photograph of "Pari Bolandeh" can be found in the same Kayhan article announcing her execution. See "Be Hokm-e Dadgahha-ye Engelab-e Esiami: Seh Zan va Chehar Mard Tirbaran Shodand/ The Islamic Revolutionary Courts Executed Three Women and Four Men by Firing Squad," Kayhan, Issue 10755.
Male Clientele: Recalling Shahr-e No’s Past

For male patrons of Shahr-e No, gaining entrance into the brothel district meant access into a somewhat exclusive club of mischief, revelry and male sexual experience. Although politicians, celebrities and even clerics were spotted entering Qal'eh, male labourers were reportedly the most frequent patrons. Men sought such services because it was claimed – and implicitly accepted – that given the extended periods away from their marital beds, their sexual tension needed release. According to some former male patrons I interviewed for this study, Qal'eh had once provided an opportune space for a man's sexual rite of passage.

From ten interviews conducted with primarily middle-age Iranian men based in Tehran, all of whom were teenagers or in their early twenties at the time of the revolution, I heard many diverse explanations for why men chose to enter Qal'eh. Primary motivations were spontaneity, sexual rite of passage and youthful curiosity. In one interview, Jamal, a middle-aged craftsman, admitted that his friends – and not he – were frequent visitors of Qal'eh. Yet during my interview with his close female relative, she recalled

96 Floor: (see FN 3), 253-259; Payvand: (see FN 68).
97 All interviews for this project followed International Review Board regulations, approved by Columbia University and the US Department of Health and Human Services.
98 Eager to hear personal accounts of the site, I conducted interviews specifically about Shahr-e No with ten Iranians (three women and seven men) in June and October 2011. The interviewees were all Tehran residents above the age of 40 (except for 35-year-old Farhad). I had met each respondent through word of mouth, and most of the interviews took place in the privacy of their homes. Notably, among the respondents, there was only one person who felt sympathy for the prostitutes and/or acknowledged the role that they had played. Farhad, a web designer whose older cousins would tell him about their Shahr-e No dalliances, lamented the site's demolition and the consequences this had had for Iranian society. Farhad explained that once the quarter had been destroyed, the public soon forgot about its prostitutes and in some respects, they were made redundant. When I asked him to elaborate, he said that before the revolution, prostitutes were generally believed to work primarily at one site; now sex work had dispersed throughout Tehran, with others willing to participate and with little institutional regulation and intervention.
99 Because of this sensitive subject, I employ vague terminology to protect the names and identities of the interviewees and their family members.
doctor's prescription slip for syphilis treatment in his trouser pocket when he was 15 years old. She presumed it was unlikely he had become infected from having sexual relations outside of Shahr-e No. For some of the male interviewees, sneaking around the premises, either alone or with a group of friends, was just enough experience to weave into a nostalgic memory about youthful adventure. According to one male respondent, Shahr-e No offered an entrance into the world of sexual experience; he remembered when his friend's father, worried about his son remaining sexually inexperienced, purchased the services of a Shahr-e No prostitute to rid his son of his virginity.

Yet not all males were allowed entrance into the district, according to Mansourian. Age and masculine appearance were key factors. Police officers standing at Qual-eh's gates would check if a male had fully entered puberty by rubbing their bare hands across his cheek and chin. If an officer felt hair stubble, then the male was permitted inside to use Shahr-e No's services. Those too young to produce a sign of a beard or any facial hair were reportedly turned away. 100

The Demolition of Shahr-e No

As the tide of Pahlavi dissent culminated in the co-opting of a people's revolution in the name of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islam, prostitutes fared no better. Public condemnation of them swiftly rose to the level of riots, with angry crowds gathering around Shahr-e No within the first days of the Revolution. Qal'eh's denouement proved both gruesome and spectacular: After a failed attempt to set fire to the district in November 1978, 101 three months later in early February 1979 an angry mob was reported to have attacked its residents, setting the district ablaze after attempts by police and firefighters to quell the riots were unsuccessful. 102 There were two confirmed deaths (http://zamaaneh.com/revolution/2009/01/post_218.html). 103 Soon after, Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhal (http://aharii.wordpress.com/2011/08/09/), himself notorious for the swift condemnation

100 Mansourian, interview by author, New York, 15 November 2011. Mansourian disputed the claim that male labourers were the most frequent patrons, stating that men from various social strata and political persuasions used Shahr-e No's services.

101 In her memoir, Farman Farmaian details her role in the November 1978 torching of Qal'eh – which to her surprise was lauded by Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani. Fearing for the lives of the women and children at the welfare center of Qal'eh, she and her colleagues ran to the district, carrying buckets of water to put out the fire while alerting the police and fire stations to help. She then realized they had not entered Qal'eh because "it was better to let the Qal'eh burn than to antagonize the 'beards.'" "Beards" was the nickname for the most fanatical of the clerical supporters who Farman Farmaian witnessed carrying torches and cans of kerosene, intent on "punishing a few miserable women for the sins of the 'imperialists.'" Farman Farmaian: (see FN 12), 301-02.

102 Mehrangiz Kar claims that the riots were the work of Islamic revolutionary extremists who had come to "destroy the roots of moral corruption." Kar, Mehrangiz, Crossing the Red Line: The Struggle for Human Rights in Iran (Costa Mesa, 2007), 181.

and execution of political prisoners and activists during his tenure as Chief of Justice of Iran's first revolutionary courts, denounced the area and ordered bulldozers (http://balatarin.com/permlink/2011/8/5/2651728) inside it to level the district for its illegal and un-Islamic activities.\footnote{Khalkhali was sworn into office as Head of the Revolutionary Courts on 24 Bahman 1357 (13 February 1979). For more on Khalkhali’s involvement, see Balatarin, “Shahr-e No”, http://balatarin.com/permlink/2011/8/5/2651728 (accessed 1 July 2015).}

![Figure 4: April 2015 aerial view of Park-e Razi Park-e Razi: Cleansing the Site of Prostitution for a Moral Leisure Area](image)

Today, the Shahr-e No narrative has faded into the shadows of public memory. Ask most Iranians under the age of 30 about this district, and they will likely puzzle over its existence and history.\footnote{Pahlavi-era movies and novels highlighting Shahr-e No characters sustain the district’s presence in the public memory; however it was interviews with former patrons and inhabitants who lived in Qal'eh’s surrounding areas that offered personal, nonfictional accounts of its social life, networks and the intra-dynamics of the quarter and its residents.} Ask instead where Gomrok district is located, and more likely the response will be, "It’s near a park!"

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Prior to 1979, this form of response would have been impossible. The name Gomrok was heavily associated with the notorious sex district, and although its name has not been altered, for two generations of Iranians born in the post-revolutionary period, its contemporary connotations resonate quite differently.

In the site of Shahr-e No now stands a manicured, multi-acre park known as Park-e Razi. Located in Tehran's District Eleven, all 44 hectares (almost 108.7 acres) of the park essentially cover Qal'eh's perimeter, although bearing no physical resemblance to its pre-revolutionary form. Unlike the majority of formerly inhabited areas in Tehran which after the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war were intensively developed into office and apartment buildings during a lucrative, post-war construction boom, this particular site was transformed into a family-friendly leisure and athletics space. Its grounds now include a cultural exhibition centre, a public library, a cinema, the now defunct amusement park of Shahr-e Bazi (Play City), and a man-made lake complete with a neon-lit bridge on which park patrons and fishermen can observe swan gondola trips (Figure 5).

The park also hosts a children's playground area (Figure 6), a prayer space and a lecture hall, as well as an open-air callisthenics section for public use. From the park's main entrance on Kargar Street (Figure 7), petty traders are found sitting on benches with their satchels open, selling snacks and trinkets to passers-by. Traditional and fast food restaurants line avenues reaching to the main square, where a statue of Persian

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106 For information on the impact of rapid urbanization of Tehran from a study of satellite images of the capital's development, see Shahrazi, S.Z.; Arzjani, Z.; Ahmadifard, N., "A Systematic Study of the Impact of Urbanization of Tehran City on Agricultural and Garden Land Use"; in *Crop Research (Hisar)* 37, no. 1/3 (2009), 307-11.
medieval scholar and physician Mohammad Ibn Zakariya al-Razi peers over a rotunda. Park-e Razi's surrounding area is still relatively poor, characterized by a mixture of rundown two-storey buildings, vacant shopping centres, local banks, and family-operated businesses selling various odds and ends.107

Figure 6: Painted car at a side entrance and in front of the children's playground at Park-e Razi, Tehran, July 2011, © Soraya Batmanghelichi

107 Located nearby are Park-e Khanevadeh (Family Park) and the miniature Ghazvene Square.
The Tehran Parks and Green Space Organization runs most of the capital's 800 parks, providing maintenance, landscaping and beautification services. The organization even produces its own newsletters about park-related topics and the psychological benefits of being park patrons. For instance, it published the article "The Importance of Green Spaces and its Effect on Human Mentality" (http://parks.tehran.ir/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=wBH9D6Qm7Uw%3d&tabid=101&mid=481), praising municipal parks as symbols of heaven and health. They are places where individuals escape to nature for peace, leisure, and relaxation. According to this article, visitors frequent parks in order to have calmer thoughts, which are facilitated by the psychologically pleasant green colours surrounding them.

Fariba Abdelkhah has studied how municipal parks and gardens, especially in Tehran, offer a public, communal space in which different social groups and classes of society coexist and share in their "favourite consumption and leisure practices", such as picnicking, socializing with friends, family gatherings, sports, and selling crafts. However public parks are also sites where varied social practices and groups interact and compete with one another. Parks are often where
Park-e Razi is, however, operated by a different municipal authority. Since 2005, it has been uniquely managed by the state cultural organization, Sazman-e Farhangi Honari Shahrdari-ye Tehran (Art and Cultural Organization of Tehran Municipality), which has administrative offices located near a park entrance. The organization describes itself as a "centre for cultural activities in Tehran and administers over 300 cultural centres" across the city (http://en.tehran.ir/default.aspx?tabid=77&ArticleId=747).\textsuperscript{110} As a state institution, it also has its own publishing branch (http://en.tehran.ir/ViewArticle/tabid/77/ArticleId/523/Comprehensive-Chronology-of-Islamic-Revolution-Published.aspx).\textsuperscript{111} According to a news report, the Sazman had special plans for Park-e Razi, transforming it into the "cultural pole of the capital".\textsuperscript{112} Currently, the park hosts art and film exhibitions and offers cultural and religious programmes, such as the 2012 spring season lecture series on hejab and chastity, called \textit{Gohar-e Efaf} (The Jewel of Chastity).

In the last three decades since the formation of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian government has been engaged in the reinvention and recalibration of certain monuments and geographic sites into Islamic communal leisure spaces, subsequently expunging from records the pre-revolutionary historical narrative of those particular spaces and objects. Redeveloping a century-old site of prostitution into a familial space is one method of projecting the triumph of Islamic values over the corrupt and symbolic political capital of the Pahlavis that these sites had formerly embodied. According to the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary narrative, while the Pahlavi state promoted “dens of moral corruption”, Ayatollah Khomeini’s version of an Islamic state,


\textsuperscript{111} It commemorated the thirty-second anniversary of the revolution by publishing a 600-page chronology of revolutionary milestones from state-media sources, which it planned to sell during the anniversary’s demonstrations. “Comprehensive Chronology of Islamic Revolution Published”, Tehran Municipality website, 8 February 8 2012, http://en.tehran.ir/ViewArticle/tabid/77/ArticleId/523/Comprehensive-Chronology-of-Islamic-Revolution-Published.aspx (accessed 14 June 2012).

\textsuperscript{112} “Yek Mohit-e Kamelan Farhangi Baraye Noh Hafe/A Cultural Environment for 9 Weeks," Hamshahri News. 1388 Tir 22/ 13 July 2009, http://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news-85383.aspx (accessed 4 June 2012). The link from 2012 has since been removed; in the 2015 history section, details of District 11’s history are not elaborated. There is only a brief two-sentence description of the area once known as “Tehran-No (New Tehran)” or “Qa’eh Tehran-No,” which became associated with corruption and the influx of immigrants. Still, the website mentions that the 1979 revolutionaries destroyed this site. See http://razi.farhangsara.ir/%D8%A2%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C%DB%8C%DB%8C%DB%8A%DA%AF%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2%D9%82%DA%AF%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%9D%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87.aspx (accessed 13 August 2015).
by contrast, promoted religious and family values.\textsuperscript{113} Shahr-e No's development into a recreational public park is one of many illuminating examples. In its place is now a utopian reconstruction of a historical site, which functions in forging a new collective memory and social cohesion through the remodelling of a landscape into an ideologically constructed space. In this site, history can be both erased and re-imagined, in accordance with a particular ideology. This is illustrated in the historical and political narrative of Park-e Razi in relation to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, as published online by the Art and Cultural Organization of Tehran Municipality. According to a 2012 description posted on this website (which has since been removed), an Islamic Revolution\textsuperscript{114} is praised for transforming the land where Shahr-e No once stood into something better:

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Historically, this area is one of the important areas of cultural heritage, if one counts the Ghazvin gates, the Garden of Kings, and Sheikh Hadi and Moniriyeh Streets. Before the revolutionary period, the cultural background of this neighbourhood was very bleak because of the existence of the Jamshid quarter and other profound social problems. However, with the glorious advent of the Islamic Revolution (Khorshid-e Engelab-e Islami) and through the efforts of the municipality, it was transformed from a corrupt area into the biggest leisure and sports centre in the city.\textsuperscript{115}
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Here, the text does not explicitly mention prostitution; instead, a street name also associated with the area – Jamshid – is given, although it is no longer a common reference point for Iranians under the age of 35. As a strategy of replacing the pre-revolutionary history by superimposing an Islamic identity and a new beginning for that site, the illicit past is ostensibly absolved through this process of spatial cleansing. The actual area of Shahr-e No transforms into a purportedly prostitution-free green space that accommodates families, athletes and library patrons. In this zone, Islamic values are cultivated and nurtured through the ubiquitous planning of the state. To a certain degree, visiting Park-e Razi is unlike visiting other parks spread across the city – it is a domain of the state. Because the Cultural Arts organization integrates religious and state programmes into the recreational activities that the park offers, the state determines the meaning and content of recreation. Park-e Razi offers a new social and spatial reality, where Islamic tenets are reinforced and made accessible to the general public. In other words, if a visitor wants to learn about the revolution or the subject of modesty from the state's perspective, then the park becomes a site where he or she can understand these topics. Hence, visiting Park-e Razi involves much more than an escape to nature for the benefits of health and leisure.


\textsuperscript{114} Here, the 1979 Revolution is identified as an Islamic revolution, eliminating the existence of any oppositional, secular forces that participated in the fall of the Pahlavi regime.

\textsuperscript{115} "Mo'arefi-ye Manteqe-ye 11/ Introducing District 11," Cultural Arts Organization for Tehran Municipality, date unknown, http://razi.farhangsara.ir/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%8A %D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87.aspx (accessed 1 July 2012).
The remodelled site is a cursory reincarnation, disguising an attempt to build over a "primary" site for the purposes of dismissing and revising facts about what exactly went on in that location for many generations. As Robert Sack has argued in his discussion of spatiality and social life:

When place, and not only the things in it, is a force – when it influences, affects, and controls – it is a primary place. Primary places involve human actions and intentions and have the capacity to change things. Unlike a secondary place, which can be replaced without remainder by substituting the objects and interactions in its area, a primary place cannot be re-placed. Primary places are delimited, they possess rules about the things to be included and excluded, and they have meaning.116

In this theoretical paradigm, Park-e Razi is a secondary place. The material fixtures of a children's playground and prayer space are temporary replacements, meant to nurture an Islamic identity grounded in piety, family and Muslim community. Yet, although this new site looks and feels nothing like its predecessor, the prostitution that dominated this space for almost a century is still a quotidian presence, because transactions for illicit sexual activities are made and conducted in various sections of the park.

Recalling Shahr-e No’s Past from Park Visitors

Although Shahr-e No was demolished, what has remained of it is alive in the vivid storytelling of older generations and captured in history books and newspaper clippings. To learn more about the social history of the former brothel district and to observe the physical transformation that the Gomrok district has undergone, I headed to the park and asked visitors about their knowledge of Shahr-e No and of Park-e Razi’s past.117 During those trips on several afternoons in August 2011, the park was virtually empty, presumably because it was very hot and also in the middle of Ramadan. In another period, this would have been unusual; during weekends – for Iranians, Thursday and Friday – public parks were generally packed with families and young people mingling, playing sports and picnicking.

In Park-e Razi, I conducted eight on-site interviews with park patrons (six men and two women), whom I met while they were seated on benches at different locations in the park. Each person was a denizen of the park’s surrounding neighbourhoods. The two women interviewees were in their late twenties and early thirties and both were strangers to me and to each other. The men, however, seemed to be acquainted with


117 I visited the park with a female friend, as my family and I had safety concerns because I was unfamiliar with the area.
one another, as each offered suggestions about the next person with whom I should speak. Of the six men, five were above the age of 60 and told me that they sat in the park as part of their daily ritual. The last interview I held was with a gondola conductor who introduced me to a middle-aged security guard—coincidentally, one who had formerly worked at Shahr-e No.

When I inquired individually if they had heard of Shahr-e No, they all responded that the park was constructed over its remnants. I spoke with a 30-year-old mother, who was waiting for her son to finish a game of football. She admitted she was too young to know details about the red-light district; however, she said that prostitutes were known to frequent the park now in the early mornings and late evenings. In one part of the park, canopies shield tables and benches, and certain areas are not well lit. She pointed out that prostitutes and potential customers can gather discreetly to arrange meeting times and meeting places.

The people I spoke to offered few personal details about the red-light district; this topic caused uneasiness particularly for the elderly men. For instance, after animatedly detailing the layout of Park-e Razi and describing mischievous activities of young couples there, an elderly divorced man suddenly lowered his voice when describing the area before 1979. He said, briefly, “bad things happened here” and promptly ended our conversation. In other interviews with male park visitors, the details tended to be more illustrative of the illicit sexual conduct—such as men and women engaged in petting and fornication—that they had witnessed while visiting the park. According to the 21-year-old gondola conductor and the security guard who was a worker inside Shahr-e No, elderly prostitutes are spotted occasionally in the park, sitting on benches near the man-made lake. The conductor claimed that there was a particular protocol that men and women would follow if they sought casual or paid sex: they would sit on opposite ends of the benches and discreetly flirt, while arranging the specifics of paid sexual encounters. When I asked for more details about these women—namely, their ages and cities of origin—the men separately told me that although the majority were young prostitutes, there were some rumoured to have worked in Shahr-e No. According to their accounts, some women had returned to the site to continue sex work when they had difficulty finding employment after the revolution.

My gender undoubtedly impacted the information that male interviewees felt comfortable sharing with me. Indeed, discussing Shahr-e No and prostitution openly is considered taboo and thus not easily broached in public, and among strangers.

I was not successful in interviewing the females they described as former Shahr-e No prostitutes. Thus there is no way to verify that the women were indeed 1) prostitutes, or 2) had worked in Shahr-e No. I must therefore rely on their words. However, I did seek out additional sources for verification. The park’s guards were reticent in verifying the interviewees’ claims. After leaving the park, I telephoned the local police, asking for any information about the frequency of prostitution in the area. They did not respond to my requests. Thereafter, I contacted Khaneh-ye Khorshid (Sun House), a women’s advocacy centre and safe-haven for female runaways and addicts located on Shush Avenue in south-central Tehran. The centre provides methadone treatment, gynaecological and psychological services for women, and provides basic necessities, such as food and clothing. I wanted more information detailing how prostitution operates in Razi Park. I spoke with one of the volunteer staff members (who was a university student in social work). She
During the time spent in the park, speaking with social workers and park revellers and walking around the area, it became vividly clear to me that despite Shahr-e No's physical destruction and renovation into a park, the legacy of prostitution still lingered. It resisted the official narratives, where it belonged to a bygone era and had been erased. The former “toilet” of Taleghani's day was, in fact, in this post-revolutionary moment, a renovated heterotopia, its concrete walls turned into a manicured and counterfeit green space, but still propagating the same illicit activity. Government morality and careful urban planning could not whitewash the more than century-long history and soul of this space, where a constellation of competing interests undermined and reinforced consecutive social orders from the Pahlavi period to the present day.

My lengthy discussions with the park's patrons about the pre-revolutionary history of Park-e Razi and their acknowledgment that prostitutes still "worked" in the area provide an important and subversive public counter-narrative to the state's attempt at infusing Islamic family values in the construction of Park-e Razi. Clearly, the physical erasure of Shahr-e No had only physically transformed the site where activities in the sex trade were practiced. The ongoing presence of prostitution suggests that the renovation of the space and its attempt to eradicate the sex industry was in reality nothing but a cosmetic effort, doing nothing to address the underlying socio-economic factors and conditions which gave formation to the need for a such a space in the first place. Vilifying prostitutes and demolishing sex districts with a bull-dozer were surface (and ultimately) perfunctory measures which momentarily sought to disguise two very critical issues, both equally worthy of engagement: male sexual promiscuity and the tacit acceptance of prostitution in the overall cohesion and maintenance of the existing social order.

Conclusion

This historical discussion of Tehran's erstwhile red-light district and its more contemporary transformation is not meant to locate and sensationalize the underworld of a thriving sex industry, operating openly in a Tehran park, in an Islamic Republic. By merely acknowledging the presence of sex workers in parks, no radical redirection is offered in how the discourse on prostitution operates and is handled inside Iran. As I discussed earlier, there have been, internationally, various methods of tolerance and regulation of prostitution and persons involved in the sex industry. The unique feature about prostitution discourse in contemporary Iran, in relation to the memory of Shahr-e No, is the overtly politicized, spatial transformation of a former sex site – a physical and overt brothel catering to men to a green park intended for pious, family-oriented patrons. From the ashes of a burned-down red-light district, a public park was constructed to confirmed that in parks located in poorer areas of Tehran, such as Razi Park, prostitution is common. More so, many female addicts temporarily live in them with their children because of the available facilities, such as public toilets, and because they have no stable housing. The staff member did not know if any of the prostitutes were formerly Shahr-e No residents. She also was not aware that Razi Park was the former site of Shahr-e No.
represent and symbolize a new direction in values, distinct and profoundly counter to its pre-revolutionary past. Now promoting religious chastity and modesty, these green spaces were designed to celebrate spiritual and mental health, and a return to nature. Yet, the elimination of prostitution in its previous form did not equate to an eradication of its memory or of the practice of illegal sexual interactions between men and women. When intersections of social, cultural, economic and political factors merge into a zone once highlighted as a place for human excess, it seems the transformation of that particular space into a pious alternative neither excuses nor denies the very existence and continuation of the need for such human excess.

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