part two

Rights Claims in an Oil Economy
The question of whether a country’s economic dependence on oil has an effect on democracy has stimulated much debate, but analysis on the effects of oil-based economies on women remains relatively limited. While some scholars suggest that such economies hamper gender equality (Ross 2001, 2008; Sherk 2003), others argue that the roots of inequality for women are far more complex (Charrad 2009; Miller 2004). Using global indicators of gender equity (i.e., the degree to which people of different genders are treated with impartiality), we analyze the status of Canadian and Iranian women’s equality (i.e., the state of being equal). These “snapshots” of women’s equity and equality tell only part of the story, however. Therefore, we also employ the insights of Sylvia Walby on equality and human rights and of Erich Fromm and Michel Foucault on modernity to probe the issue of equality for women.

We begin this chapter by defining and exploring the concepts of “patriarchy” and “gender equality,” as well as the utility of nationally based indicators of equity. Because of the shortcomings of these indicators in identifying sameness and evaluating difference, we provide a historical and cultural analysis of Iran and Canada as a context in which to evaluate the impacts of systems and structures on the status of women. Given both this book’s focus on Alberta and the province’s retrogressive status within Canada with respect to gender equality, we also consider the status of women in that province within the larger Canadian context. We show in our analysis that both Iran and Canada score well on some indicators of women’s equity and equality relative to men and not so well on others. In both countries, women have not been able to build consistently on their achievements. This is largely because patriarchy is entrenched and reactive in both Canada and Iran, becoming even more pronounced in
times of social dislocation. We conclude that giving primacy to oil dependency as a causal factor of gender inequalities is simplistic in societies where patriarchy is deeply embedded within political, social, cultural, and religious norms.

Patriarchy and Gender Equality in Iran and Canada

Sylvia Walby (2005, 20) defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.” Patriarchy is a system of power relations through which men control women's production, reproduction, and sexuality. Gender stereotypes are not only derived from patriarchy; they perpetuate it in that they reinforce inequality. Patriarchy is not static; gender relations are dynamic and complex, vary among societies, and are based in class, status, religion, region, ethnicity, and socio-cultural practices.

Concepts related to gender equality, as well as the routes to achieving it, are equally complex. Walby describes the three most common models used to define gender equality: “equality through sameness (equal opportunities or treatment), through equal valuation of difference (special programmes) and [through] the transformation of gendered practices and standards of evaluation” (374). She notes that while some progress can be made using the first two approaches, they tend to maintain the status quo by leaving uncontested the masculine norm as the standard against which equality is measured. De Bonfils et al. (2013, 8) observe that the “sameness” approach emphasizes women becoming equal to men, whereas the “difference” approach suggests that “women’s physical difference from men results in different life patterns, psychology and moral values.” Advocates of the latter approach (e.g. Cockburn 1991) tend to seek parity rather than sameness. The distinction between the first two approaches is particularly germane to this study, since the quest for equality in the Eastern context is frequently based on “complementarity” (equal but different) rather than on the rights-based notion of “sameness” through which feminism in the West is often expressed.

Walby (2005, 374) contends that for true gender equality and justice to occur, there must be transformation and social reorganization of institutions, standards, and gender relations, for “it is not possible to be ‘different but equal’ because differences are too entwined with power and resources.” Other scholars and the European Commission argue for using a combination of all three approaches—sameness, difference, and transformation—in the attempt to achieve deep cultural changes, create new structures, and transform the

We begin our analysis using parameters that measure equality through sameness, but we also examine gendered practices implicit in Walby’s third model. With respect to sameness, we use the “freedom” indicators employed by human rights bodies to categorize countries along a spectrum, with democracy and dictatorship at opposite ends. Various government and nongovernment agencies regularly rank countries on civil, political, and economic indicators of freedom and democracy, progress on human development (e.g., fertility rates), and the gap between outcomes for men and women in terms of education and labour force participation (Freedom House 2012; Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi 2011; OECD 2012; UN Women 2011; World Bank 2011). There are arguments against using this approach. For example, in her discussion of the institutionalization of “gender” within governance discourse in South Africa, Linzi Manicom (2001, 18), suggests that “evaluating the status of the nation in terms of the status, or freedom, of its ‘womenfolk’ echoes a patronizing colonialist stance that moralises hierarchical inter-state relations. It positions women as objects of rescue rather than as agents and equal participants in the national transformation project.” Nevertheless, we use such indicators because they help illuminate the sources of inequalities that exist in Canada and Iran when examined within a human rights framework. The norm of gender equity is central to the rights-based approach, “which resists, rather than accommodates, relativist approaches to the interpretation of human rights” (Goonesekere, n.d., para. 7). Resisting relativism is particularly important when studying two countries with significant differences in culture, religion, and history.

In many respects, Canada and Iran could be seen as complete opposites: Canada is considered a “free” state, whereas Iran is “not free.” Canada is a federation in the Global North, and Iran is a unitary state in the Global South. What these two countries have in common is that they are both among the world’s top ten energy producers and exporters of oil (IEA 2011). To complicate our analysis, oil is concentrated in the province of Alberta in Canada and in the province of Khuzestan in Iran. The equivalent of country-level statistics and indices are not always reported at the subnational level, and provinces in both countries vary linguistically and culturally. However, because provinces share common political and economic structures within their country, as well as a national identity, we use national measures as proxies for the oil-producing provinces. Given this book’s focus on Alberta and the historical importance of Alberta...
women to gender politics in Canada, we also consider the state of women in Alberta, despite the methodological challenges.

Interestingly, Alberta and Iran both have reputations as socially regressive regimes. Within Canada, oil-rich Alberta is known as the “redneck”; the Alberta government has historically resisted attempts to promote the equality of minority groups (Harder 2003) and until 2015, has been dominated by conservative parties since the rise to power of the Social Credit in 1935 (Barrie 2006; Finkel 1989; Gibbins and Arrison 1995). Similarly, Iran is popularly seen as the maverick “bad boy” of the Middle Eastern states: governed by a fundamentalist Islamic theocracy, it is known as anti-Western and ultra-conservative, particularly with respect to the equality of women (Afary 2009). Could the country’s economic dependence on oil be an important factor in explaining its conservatism, especially with respect to gender equality?

The Oil Curse: An Explanation for Women’s Inequality in Oil-Rich States

Much of the limited literature on the impact of oil on women’s equality suggests that oil reinforces patriarchal norms. With special reference to the Middle East, Michael Ross (2008, 120) maintains that “petroleum perpetuates patriarchy.” According to Ross, during an oil boom, the number of women in the labour force shrinks for two reasons: first, because the “tradable goods” sector—the sector where women are more likely to be employed—decreases, causing a decrease in demand for women’s labour, and second, because the size of household income (via the male earner) increases, causing women to be less willing to take low-paying jobs (109–10). In turn, decreased participation in the labour force reduces the political influence of women; thus, oil-producing countries end up with unusually strong patriarchal norms, laws, and political institutions. Ross concedes that the reduction of female participation in the economy or in politics is not seen in oil-rich countries such as Norway, New Zealand, and Australia, a point noted by Mounira Charrad (2009). Charrad points out that the strong patriarchal cultures and institutions in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya that Ross attributes to oil predate the oil economies in the Middle East (548). In her view, the pre-existing patriarchal, tribal, and kinship structures (solidarities in the political system that rely on bonds among men) are the basis for the formation of political systems and social structures, onto which the oil economy was later grafted, especially in the Muslim Middle East.
A study by Gloria Miller (2004) of the experiences of women engineers in the Alberta oil industry suggests that the oil industry itself exhibits a particular kinship structure based on hypermasculinity, to which women must adapt. Predictably, this high-paying sector remains predominately male, reinforcing the powerful patriarchal networks that perpetuate gender inequality. Likewise, Susan Sherk’s (2003) study of women working in the oil and gas sectors in Canada reveals male-dominated organizational cultures that discourage alternative perspectives that may be brought in by women; ultimately, these women are under pressure to conform. Other factors—such as the lack of alternative work schedules, including part-time work and job-sharing, as well as challenges with child care arrangements—bar women from participating equitably and advancing within petroleum industries. The barriers to employment and promotion in this lucrative field help to exacerbate the difference in earning potential between men and women, relegating women to jobs that pay much less. Sara Dorow (this volume) explores the gendered, hierarchical nature of the oil industry and its impact on both jobs and family. Dorow argues that the oil economy both benefits from and perpetuates these unequal configurations.

Particularly germane to our work is Mark Milke’s 2011 Fraser Institute report, which uses Freedom House indicators to compare thirty-eight oil-producing nations from five continents on civil, political, and economic freedoms. Indices include electoral democracy; media, religious, and economic freedoms; the legal system; property rights; corruption; and judicial independence (22). Milke concludes that oil-producing countries are strikingly different. For example, women in Canada are “free,” whereas women in Iran are “not free,” and, this being the case, it is more “ethical” to purchase oil from Canada than from a country like Iran that suppresses the freedom of women. If we accept his conclusions at face value, we might conclude that oil production has a differential impact on the equality of women in various countries. In the next section, we examine the evidence for this assertion.

Women’s Status Assessed: The Evidence from Canada and Iran

Indicators that measure the liberal-democratic rights of their citizens underscore stark differences between Canada and Iran. Canada scores very well in all areas (Milke 2011, 36, 53), while Iran has no electoral democracy, and no media, religious or economic freedoms. Iran scores moderately well with respect to
its economic system, legal system, and property rights; however, in the areas of corruption and judicial independence, it receives particularly low ratings, especially compared to Canada (69–71).

With respect to freedoms specific to women, Milke reports that Canadian women are free to choose careers, to travel outside the country without a male guardian’s permission, and to have surgery without a male guardian’s permission (53). In contrast, Iran scores poorly (71). But while Canadian women enjoy superior basic freedoms compared to women in Iran, they perform at much the same level on other indicators, such as education (36, 53, 71). Recent data from the World Bank (2011, 60) paints an even more positive picture for Iran with respect to literacy and education:

The female-to-male ratio in primary school is the world’s highest, with 1.2 girls enrolled for every boy. The number of women in secondary school as a percentage of the eligible age group more than doubled from 30 percent to 81 percent, and in 2009, more than half of all Iranian university students, 68 percent of the students in science, and 28 percent in engineering were women.

With only 37 percent of Canadian women enrolled in undergraduate science and engineering (and declining) in 2008–9 (Research Council of Canada 2010, 11), the participation rate of Iranian women is significantly higher. In addition, Iran shows consistent improvements in human development indices for Iranian women, particularly with respect to the World Bank’s key indicator: fertility rates. Iran has the world’s fastest declining rate: in ten years the rate went from 6.9 children to 1.8 (World Bank 2011, 60). Moreover, Iranian women now enjoy better health due to better service delivery and new labour market opportunities. They now constitute 30 percent of the labour force (60).

It seems that that there are indeed differential equality outcomes for oil-producing nations, albeit in different ways than Milke predicted. What is vexing for those who maintain that oil suppresses women’s rights is that the gains for Iranian women were achieved in the two decades following the 1979 Islamic revolution—a time when Iran’s oil-dependent economy almost doubled in value (60). Despite Iran having both an oil-based economy and an authoritarian regime, human development outcomes among Iranian women have improved in terms of reproductive, education, and economic rights (Bahramitash and Kazemipour 2006; World Bank 2011). The next section explores these gains in more detail.
The Quest for Equality in Iran

For centuries, Iranian women have been suppressed physically by the convention of the veil and verbally by the conventions of public silence. Theirs was a private world, where self-expression was confined to the accepted family circle (Milani 1992, 46). The subordination of women was particularly evident in marital relations, where men have traditionally had the right to divorce at will, the ability to execute an adulterous wife, and the right (albeit rarely used) to a polygamous marriage. While clearly patriarchal, the family, the kinship networks, and the customs surrounding the marriage contract itself provided some degree of economic and social support for women in their clearly defined roles within the family.

Like women elsewhere in the world, however, modernization prompted a quest for equal rights. New rights for Iranian women came in the early years of the twentieth century at the time of the 1905–7 Iranian Constitutional Revolution. During this era, members of the Iranian aristocracy travelled extensively abroad and were greatly influenced by Western ideas. The discovery of oil in 1908 resulted in the formation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company; the agreement struck between Iran and Britain entitled Iran to 16 percent of the net profits. The Anglo-Persian partnership marked the beginning of a protracted period of agitation for increased gender equality. In the private sphere, women began working toward the reformation of marriage laws and the right to vote. But the impetus for change came primarily from the top rather than the bottom; the installation of Reza Shah through a military coup saw the replacement of the Qajar dynasty with the Pahlavi dynasty. Maintaining the modernization trajectory of those who had preceded him, Reza Shah ambitiously reformed the judiciary and undertook major infrastructure, industry, transportation, health, and education projects. This era also saw the modernization of gender relations through the passage of a new marriage law that limited polygamy, the abolishment of extrajudicial divorce, and the prohibition of women wearing the veil in public (Goldstein 2010). Milani (1992, 157) describes this era as characterized by an “intense thirst” for anything Western, at least on the part of the new middle classes. As Warren Goldstein notes (2010, 53), “Many traditional women felt that not wearing a veil in public was like being naked. Consequently, they did not go outside.”

During this period, equality came in the form of rights, but it also came in the form of laws that prohibited traditional cultural norms. Thus, while Reza
Shah embraced Western ideas, he did not embrace the notion of consensual rule. Suffice to say, his autocratic governing style did not sit well with intellectual and religious elites. In the public sphere, the agitation for change focused on capturing a more equitable share of profit from Iran’s petroleum partnership. Internal and external tensions over profit sharing increased, culminating in the 1941 invasion of Iran in a combined British-Soviet effort to secure flowing oil for the Allied war effort; the Allies forced the Shah to abdicate to his son Mohammad Reza Shah, and a constitutional monarchy was re-established. A decade later, the populist, democratically elected government of Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. In reaction, the West used the CIA to overthrow the government in 1953, protecting Western control of an enormously lucrative oil infrastructure. The coup also transformed a constitutional monarchy into an absolutist kingship and induced a succession of unintended consequences, including the Islamic revolution of 1979 (Kinzer 2003, 120–21). Modernization continued, but the new government did not tolerate political dissent.

Repeated encounters with imperialism caused infatuation with the West to be replaced by animosity. Westomania—or more commonly, Westoxification, a term coined by Jalal Al-e Ahmad to describe “a contagious disease that [had] infested, infatuated, and stupefied Iranians”—captured the sentiments of the larger public in this era (Milani 1992, 156). This new anti-Western orientation had little effect on progressive thought, however, and the following decades saw achievements of all kinds, including many relating to the status of women. Female literacy improved, women gained the right to vote, and, in 1963, Iranians elected the first woman, Farrokhroo Parsa, to Parliament. In 1968, Parsa became the first woman to hold a cabinet post in the Iranian government. In addition, two new marriage laws expanded the equality rights of women. These initiatives were part of a larger worldwide trend to improve the status of women, but in Iran, the combination of oil revenue and the initial embracing of Western norms meant that change came with extraordinary speed. Dramatic change, however, also fuelled festering anti-Western sentiment.

The legal equality of women took a dramatic U-turn after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the installation of an Islamic theocracy (Afary 2009). This populist uprising against an unpopular monarch was in part the result of many decades of resentment against Western political and economic interests. One outcome of the revolution—the revival of eighth-century Sharia law—caught many Iranians by surprise. As Janet Afary (2009, 265) notes, “The
1979 Islamic Revolution was not a wholesale return to the past; rather, the new state reinvented and expanded certain retrogressive gender and cultural practices and presented them . . . through modern technologies of power.” Within a month of Ayatollah Khomeini’s return from exile, the newly installed Supreme Leader of the country presided over the firing of all female judges, the compulsory veiling of women, the banning of co-education of males and females, the barring of married girls from attending high schools, the closure of workplace nurseries, and the systematic dismantling of the previous fifty years of reforms to family law (Afshar 1998, 50). Farrokhroo Parsa was executed, and women’s participation in the labour force contracted (Afary 2009, 309). The preamble to the post-revolution constitution underscores the new orientation. Specifically, it states that the roles of mother and wife had eroded as a result of the drive to modernize and that seizing them back would be particularly empowering for women: “Such a position in the family removes women from being objects of pleasure or tools of production and frees them of the burdens of exploitation and imperialism and enables them to find once more their critical duties of motherhood and raising of humanity” (translated and quoted in Afshar 1998, 150).

Women in Iran resisted these policies through legal challenges, protests, and outright refusals (Afshar 1998; Milani 1992). Had it not been for external threats that galvanized popular support for the new republic, it is plausible that such regressive “reforms” would not have had quite the staying power that they did. Soon after the revolution, militant students took American diplomatic staff hostage, resulting in both a botched rescue attempt by the United States and the Iran-Contra affair. Shortly thereafter, Iraq, with whom Iran had had ongoing border skirmishes, took advantage of Iran’s internal turmoil and invaded the country. In the ensuing eight-year war, an estimated 500,000 people were killed; the international community remained silent over the Iraqi use of chemical weapons in this conflict (Pelletiere 1992).

These events provide a backdrop for understanding why some Iranian women saw an Islamic government with its regressive policies toward women as tolerable in the face of foreign aggression. For Iranians, aggression took the form not only of invasion but also of cultural imperialism—namely, the Western commodification of women as sex objects. In her summation of this perspective, Afshar (1998, 15) explains that for many Iranian women, the veil “puts an end to the beauty myth and the relentless pursuit of fashion and beauty products. It is this view which, at the end of the twentieth century, has
persuaded many women to abandon the mini-skirt for the veil, and has persuaded many Islamist groups and governments to adopt veiled women as the public emblem of Islamification.”

Although the immediate post-revolutionary period saw a dramatic decline of women’s rights, gender equality actually improved in the ensuing decades. For example, the share of women in the labour force rose from 20 percent in 1986 to 33 percent in 2011 (World Bank 2011, 60). A booming oil economy that resulted in a rapid rise in female education and a change in demographics accounts, to a large extent, for this progress. Moreover, some attribute the absorption of women into the education, health, and social services sectors to the fact that Iran does not rely on cheap female labour in the manufacturing export sector, as other Global South countries do (Bahramitash and Kazemipour 2006, 118–19). Thus, contrary to Ross’s conclusion that oil production reduces the number of women in the labour force in the Middle East (2008, 1), the opposite appears to be true in Iran. In 2009, Shahla Haeri noted that Iranian women are now “working in various professions and pursuing different sociopolitical goals” (134).

Although some progress toward equality has been made, patriarchy is alive and well in Iran. In terms of labour force participation, oil stimulated the economy and provided the necessary funds to expand educational and employment opportunities for women. The primary causal factor in the inhibition of women’s rights in contemporary Iran is not oil, but the installation of an Islamic theocracy that interprets the Koran in a paternalistic way. Given the strategic importance of Iran to the industrialized world, this orientation can also be seen as a conscious rejection of the modern international political system. The next section illustrates that Canada has also not been immune to patriarchy, nor to the forces of change.

The Quest for Women’s Equality in Canada

Since Canada’s confederation in 1867, Canadian women have achieved many successes in attaining equal rights, among them the right to own property and to vote. Much of the pressure to grant these rights came from Western Canada—and in particular, from Alberta, where women were actively involved in politics. The election of Hannah Gale as alderman on Calgary’s City Council in 1917 represented a first for women serving at any level of government in Canada—and indeed, in the British Commonwealth (Sanderson 1999, 28). Canada’s Famous Five also lived in Alberta; they were among the first women
in Canada to hold legal and political positions. Their most well-known accomplishment was having women recognized as “persons,” thus making women eligible for appointment to the Canadian Senate in 1929. Commenting on the fact that the two main political parties in Alberta in 2012 were led by females, Sylvia Bashevkin (2012) references the province’s trail-blazing history in Canada: “This pattern is consistent with an international trend that saw women’s rights move forward far more rapidly in frontier environments rather than traditional societies.”

Interestingly, the reinforcement of women’s unequal status that enraged women across Canada also involved an Alberta woman. In 1973, the Supreme Court upheld an earlier decision in the Murdoch divorce case that denied an Alberta farm wife (Irene Murdoch, from Turner Valley) her rights to a share in the family cattle ranch that she had worked on and managed for twenty-five years. That same year, the Supreme Court of Canada made a second inequitable ruling that validated a section of the Indian Act that denied Native status to Indian women who married non-Natives. Native men who married non-Natives did not lose their status (CBC 2001). Thus, achieving equal rights for women has had an uneven trajectory, with race and class discrimination often embedded within gender discrimination. As is evident in chapter 10 in this volume, race- and class-based gender inequality in Canada, and in Alberta specifically, is still seen today.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the passage of the Canadian Human Rights Act (1977), the adoption of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), and the entrenchment of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982); all contained provisions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender. Additionally, the federal government was actively supporting feminist organizations, which where emerging in this era. Feminists in Alberta had the unenviable position of having to fight just to preserve earlier advancements, since this was also the era of a complex federal-provincial conflict over oil. The simple act of accepting money from the federal government, which was locked in a battle with the provincial government over the National Energy Program, demonized women’s groups in the eyes of many Albertans (Harder 2003, 21).

Growing neoliberalism further exacerbated gender inequality in Canada by reducing the allocation of resources to alleviate gender inequities (Teghtsoonian 2005, 311). Adopting female-friendly conventions and funding feminist organizations do not mean much if the political will to promote equality is missing.
Neoliberal thought eschews using the state to effect progressive social change; by the mid-1990s, governments at all levels were dramatically reducing programs that benefited women. In 2008, the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action gave Canada “a failing grade on women’s equality” because of its failure “to comply with its obligations to women under international human rights law” (CFAIA 2008, 9). The Alliance noted that Canadian women, and especially women from disadvantaged groups (including Aboriginal, and other nonwhite women, as well as the disabled, seniors, immigrants, and single parents), are disproportionately poor, leaving them particularly vulnerable to violence, precarious housing, political exclusion, poor health, and discrimination (CFAIA 2008). For many women in Canada, access to education, the justice system, and participation in politics is increasingly challenging. Moreover, cuts to public services do not acknowledge the value of unpaid labour and the sexual divisions of labour that reproduce inequalities based on gender. With particular reference to Alberta, New Zealand’s Marilyn Waring observes that services are not devolved from the public to the private sector, but to the community, which “is usually mom or daughter or aunty or neighbour or some other woman” (quoted in Cavanaugh 1998; see also Waring 2012).

In the labour force, Canadian women remain overrepresented in sex-segregated lower-paying jobs. The Canadian Federation of University Women and the National Council of Women of Canada highlight the disparity in wages for Canadian women generally and have called on the government to follow through on its 2009 acceptance of the UN Universal Periodic Review’s recommendation to “implement International Labour organization (ILO) and Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (CERSC) recommendations to ensure remuneration for work of equal value in public and private sectors” (quoted in CFUW and NCWC 2012, 10). Instead, in February 2009, Stephen Harper’s government introduced the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act. The act changed the criteria used to assess whether jobs are of equal value and forces women to deal with pay equity at the bargaining table. More importantly, it makes pay equity claims more difficult by requiring a “female predominant” job group to comprise 70 percent women (10). The Public Service Alliance of Canada maintained that “the downgrading of pay equity as proposed in this bill is a violation of the constitutional Charter equality rights of working women” (PSAC 2009). According to Kathleen Lahey’s analysis of Budget 2012, there appears to be no relief in sight for Canadian women, whose economic condition has remained virtually unchanged since 1997. She concludes that Budget 2012’s
cuts to taxes, public services, and Canada’s old age security system, as well as its changes to Employment Insurance, benefit men and disadvantage women (Lahey 2012).

The labour situation for women in Alberta both reflects and deviates from the larger Canadian picture. A study by the Parkland Institute and the Alberta College of Social Workers (Gibson 2012) comparing Alberta to other Canadian provinces shows that the province leads the race to the bottom with respect to the social safety net, including such issues as maternity leave, child care, support for single mothers, and low-wage earners (who are overwhelmingly women in Alberta). Yet, according to statistics provided by the Alberta government, the province has the highest labour rate participation and highest employment rate of women in Canada. Moreover, while more women work part-time than men, over the ten-year period between 2004 and 2014, “the largest percentage increases in full-time employment were women in the 65 years and over and the 45-64 years age groups: 188.7% and 39.1% respectively” (Alberta 2015, 1). Alberta women also enjoy the highest average hourly wage ($24.63) compared to the overall average of $22.64 for Canadian women overall. Across all age groups, however, women’s average wage is lower than men’s ($31.21) in Alberta, and the difference increases with age (1). In the well-paid resource sector, women make up only 18.6 percent of the labour force, and only 1.4 percent of those who run the companies are women (Lahey 2015, 85). The gap between what women and men earn in Alberta has increased since the mid-1990s; in 2014, women in Alberta earned 63 percent of the earnings of their male counterparts (12). The wage differential between men and women is attributed to tax changes that increased the burden on low income earners in whose ranks women are concentrated (26) and to the rollback of social programs for ideological or budgetary reasons (89). Despite gains in some areas, women in Alberta are still lagging behind men in finding full-time employment, achieving pay equity, and escaping poverty. And, as explained by Sara Dorow (this volume), high wages, shift work, long commutes, and the lack of family support in Alberta’s oil patch conspire to keep the lower-paid spouse (who typically is female) out of the workforce and taking care of children. As Lahey observes, Alberta’s “paradox of plenty” produces a situation where women are “underdeveloped” in comparison to men “precisely because women’s economic opportunities are more dependent on the adequacy of education, childcare, healthcare, transportation, housing, employment equality, skills training programs, and the vitality of value chain production. These are all the types of programs that will be the
immediate focus of spending freezes and cuts when anticipated resource revenues suddenly vaporize due to market swings” (89).

It is evident that whether in the public realm of paid labour or in the private sphere, inequalities persist for Canadian women. Given the current government and its latest legislation on pay equity, Canadian women, in Alberta and elsewhere in the country, may be less likely today to achieve wage parity than they were in the past. In some ways, Alberta women fare better than their sisters in other provinces with respect to “sameness” indices like labour force participation, post-secondary education attainment, and hourly wage. But Alberta women are worse off than other women in Canada in terms of wage parity with Alberta men and government support for families. There appears to be an inverse relationship between the importance of Alberta’s oil to Canada’s economy and the federal government’s concern with promoting equality for Canadian women; however, this deterioration could be the result of the entrenchment of neoliberal thought at the federal level. In the next section, we explore an alternative explanation of gender relations; we give primacy to pivotal historical events, fuelled by socio-economic dislocation, for understanding the suppression of women’s equality.

Beyond the Indicators, Beyond the Oil Curse: Explaining the Retrenchment of Patriarchy

Sylvia Walby’s idea introduced at the outset of this chapter, that women’s equality comes through transformative social and institutional change, leads us to an examination of how public policy affects men and women’s power, either reinforcing or challenging the existing forms of social organization (Paterson 2010). Foucault (1978, 110) argues that Western societies exercised increasing control over individuals, primarily through the family. Combined with urbanization, this control caused the role, function, and structure of the family to change. Change created stress, and subsequently, those individuals within the family who could not adapt to the new structure were deemed “abnormal.” To address this dysfunction, professionals within the new disciplines of psychology and psychiatry emerged to assist individuals in adapting to the new boundaries set by society.

In a similar vein, Erich Fromm analyzed the psychological impact on individuals of the freedoms associated with liberalism. Fromm (1965, 123–29) argues that the negative impact of modernity on individuals was more acute
than the impact of the retraction of the rigid class system and social norms that happened gradually in the Middle Ages. Freedom from social hierarchies and changes in the social order resulted in feelings of displacement, disconnectedness, and trauma within individual members of society who experienced economic instability and loss of identity in the new liberal order.

Fromm uses this crisis of identity in explaining why Germans joined the Nazi movement—they traded the anxiety associated with freedom for the security of an authoritarian regime. Similarly, Afary (2009) builds on Foucault’s and Fromm’s analyses to explain why Iranians embraced the ethico-political structure of the Iranian Islamist movement of the 1960s. She argues that in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, people found themselves “caught between pre-modern and modern social values” (19) in the same way that people in Western societies experienced “cultural alienation and psychological trauma” as the result of the change in the social order (201). This trauma was particularly acute for a traditional Islamic society that was embracing modernity.

It is important to point out that with respect to Iranian public policy, the Islamic conception of female sexuality differed quite dramatically from the Western conception. Prior to the sexual revolution in the 1960s, the norm for Western women was to be passive in sexual relations, whereas women in Islamic culture typically have been seen as active participants in heterosexual relations. Female sexuality therefore cannot be left unrestrained; otherwise, chaos might ensue (Mernissi 1975, 31). Accounts of the awkwardness of male-female interaction after the forced unveiling of women by government decree in 1936 reflect this view and explain the high degree of psychological trauma both men and women experienced following the unveiling act (Milani 1992, 35).

While many Iranian women wanted more rights, freedoms, and opportunities in the years leading up to the 1979 revolution, they were uncomfortable with second wave feminism because of its association with imperialism, consumerism, and “free love” culture (Afary 2009, 234). Citing the work of Andrea Dworkin (1983) and Elinor Burkett (1999), American feminist scholars of second wave American feminism, Afray notes similar patterns of loss of identity and insecurity among right-wing American women’s groups. Young Iranians reacted by embracing the regime’s “third way” of understanding gender relations that rejected “the evils of Western imperialism, which turned women into sexual commodities, and Soviet communism, which destroyed family values” (Afary 2009, 234). Moreover, Islamist provided many Iranian women the opportunity to eschew oppressive familial and societal roles by committing
themselves to new roles as revolutionaries. As Afary observes, “Their allegiance to a highly authoritarian and patriarchal movement that advocated women’s subordination to men nonetheless allowed them to gain a measure of personal power, to exercise leadership over others, and to live more gratifying personal lives” (257).

Embracing radical Islamism was not just a quest for ideological and spiritual support, however. An added incentive for large numbers of rural Iranians who had “left the old hierarchical social order” of their villages to work or study in “urban industrialized environments” was the food subsidies, health care, and other services that were available to people with allegiance to local religious centres and mosques (201). A broad coalition of support, including more educated members of Iranian society, combined with the rural Iranians who had moved to urban environments and a host of international factors to bring the Islamic government into power in 1979. Islamic laws and policies implemented by the new regime further augmented the segregation of the sexes and the subjugation of women already in place in this millennia-old culture. While women made huge strides with respect to educational attainment in post-revolutionary Iran, this progress can be explained in part by the Islamic state’s “programme for the ‘purification’ of the minds of its people” (Afshar 1998, 65), developed with the purpose of eliminating Western and imperialist ideas.

It is clear that the installation of an Islamic theocracy has had a huge impact on women’s equality in Iran. The allegiance to religious fundamentalism can be interpreted as a reaction to the social, cultural, political, and economic displacement that resulted from urbanization and the transition to modernity. Oil revenue, of course, is an important component in these transformations, but so too are Iran’s twentieth-century economic reforms, its geo-strategic importance, the influence of Western ideas, and Iran’s place in the global economic order.

The loss of identity that comes with rapid change in the social order is also seen in Canada during this time. Canada was being transformed, first through immigration and then through urbanization. In Alberta, these changes were particularly dramatic. Successive waves of immigration from Asia and eastern and southern Europe challenged the hegemony of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite. Adding Catholics, Slavs, and Chinese to a society that previously counted only Aboriginal people as outsiders threatened the social order. As Foucault might have predicted, one way in which provincial elites responded to this alienating and traumatic social transformation was to enact the Sexual
Sterilization Act 1928, which sought to prevent the province’s “undesirables” from reproducing. More than 2,800 people in Alberta were involuntarily sterilized over a forty-three-year period ending in 1972, long after other jurisdictions had ended the practice. Timothy Christian (1974) concludes that the act was primarily used to exert control over the sexuality—and in particular, over the reproductive capacity—of those deemed to be immoral, delinquent, mentally deficient, or otherwise inferior. Women were overrepresented among those who were sterilized. Given that the legislation stipulated that one of the reasons for recommending sterilization was the vague criteria of being “incapable of intelligent parenthood,” it is not difficult to see why Jana Grekul, Harvey Krahn, and Dave Odynak (2004, 365) conclude that “sterilization was essentially a medical solution for a variety of perceived social and behavioural problems.”

A second dramatic social transformation in Alberta occurred after the discovery of oil in Leduc in 1947. This era saw rapid urbanization and dramatic population and economic growth, along with political changes. The thirty-four-year dynasty of the Social Credit Party came to an abrupt end in 1971, and with it ended the authoritarian, faith-based leadership (Finkel 1989, 58–60). For the first time, Albertans had a government wherein the number of representatives of urban ridings surpassed those of rural ridings. The rapid growth, social displacement, and growing inequalities experienced during the oil boom contributed to the province having the highest rates of divorce, suicide, teenage pregnancies, and abortion in the country. As Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer note, “Many individuals and couples, lacking family support systems, could not stand the stress of a boom-bust economy that fostered big dreams, and produced confused values and identities” (1990, 336).

The provincial government’s response to social injustice and dislocation was one of indifference. With respect to the oil boom in the 1970s, Lois Harder (2003, 21) suggests that the oil industry and the state had a symbiotic relationship that benefited the middle class but not those who were struggling:

Those people subjected to the social displacements that emerged out of rapid population growth and economic expansion found their crises framed in terms of individual failings or were simply ignored. The seeming ease with which wealth was accumulated during this period could be used to support the view that systemic inequality could be alleviated by working harder, pulling up one’s bootstraps, and taking advantage of the opportunities of a booming economy.
Despite the largesse that came from a booming economy, Alberta did not expand social entitlements, even though it was apparent that many Albertans were being left behind. As Harder points out, “In the context of an economic boom, the political costs of alienating groups perceived as marginal were minimal” (22). Women, of course, were the most marginal of the marginalized groups.

During this era, the plight of those who were struggling worsened even more during the 1980s world economic recession, which culminated in oil prices plummeting and Canada’s biggest oil companies teetering on the brink of collapse. In Alberta, there was a dramatic rise in unemployment, outmigration, business closures, bankruptcies, and housing foreclosures (Gereluk 2012, 175). Provincially, government involvement in high-profile public investment failures and private sector bailouts led many to question the government’s fiscal management (Gereluk 2012, 199; Harder 2003, 118). Pressure was increasing on already strained social services as public discontent and social hardship increased. In 1986, the opposition ranks swelled from four seats in the legislature to twenty-two (Elections Alberta 2015). The time was ripe for change: Albertans were rethinking the complex relationship between the state, markets, and civil society.

Albertans did not deal with the trauma of profound societal change by embracing a faith-based political movement in the 1990s as Iranians had in the 1970s. Rather, they embraced a radical restructuring of the state from activist welfare to limited laissez-faire. Alberta was the first jurisdiction in Canada to embrace neoliberalism, and other governments copied Alberta reforms, including the federal government. This new orientation meshed well with entrenched traditional Christian values, particularly as expressed by the Alberta Social Credit and Reform movements. The contraction of the welfare state affected women in many ways, including increased demands on the unpaid labour they performed within the family unit, and it also led to fewer opportunities for human rights and equality claims making. The entrenchment of neoliberalism in Alberta went hand in hand with the re-entrenchment of neoconservative ideology, which emphasized the traditional family and further decreased the range of possibilities for women. As Gurston Dacks, Joyce Green, and Linda Trimble (1995, 271) explain, “A central tenant of neoconservatism is a preference for hierarchical and authoritarian social relations. One of its most important expressions is its promotion of patriarchal social organization—the systematic domination by men of social, economic, and political power—and a social and family mythology emanating from and supportive of patriarchy.” Sara Dorow

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(this volume) argues that the structure of the oil industry encourages the neo-conservative family mythology that supports patriarchy; women become “flexibilized” labourers, adjusting their paid work so that they can accommodate the demands of being the primary family caregiver. In this way, ideology and economic structures combined to give a particularly strong expression of patriarchy in Alberta.

With the emergence of Alberta as the economic powerhouse of Canada, and the election of the Harper Conservative government at the federal level in 2006, Canada as a whole began to follow Alberta’s neoliberal path of major political and economic reorientation, a change in direction that has already led to profound societal change. The prospects for women's equality in Canada at the dawn of the new millennium are gloomy.

The Impact of Oil on Women’s Equality

What emerges from this analysis is the recognition that the impact of the oil economy on women's equality status is complex and variegated. In Canada, women enjoy fundamental freedoms, many of which are now denied to women in Iran, specifically in relation to legal rights. During the postwar period, when oil was gaining economic importance in Iran and Canada, women's equality made steady strides forward. In both countries, however, progress toward equality has not been linear, with instances of sliding backwards.

A jurisdiction's economic dependence on oil may indeed work against women's equality in some instances, but the record is mixed. We suggest that many factors are critical in holding women back in Iran and Canada. Social dislocation has led to what many call “reactive patriarchy.” This can be fuelled in part by oil, but it is also influenced by factors such as urbanization, population growth, modernization, neoliberal economic and social policies, and religion. In the first half of the century, immigration to western Canada resulted in a dramatic growth of non-Anglo-Saxon populations that threatened the existing pre-oil social order. The discovery of oil contributed to yet more social change in Canada, especially in Alberta. Similarly, the rush to modernize predated the discovery of oil in Iran. The development of an oil industry that encouraged British, Soviet, and American imperialism as well as pro- and anti-West ideologies caused yet more social changes in Iran. The identity crises brought about by social dislocations pushed the populations in both jurisdictions to embrace reactive ideologies that exacerbated existing patriarchal structures.
In the case of Iran, that ideology took the shape of religious fundamentalism steeped in patriarchy. In the case of Alberta, it took the form of eugenics in the early part of the century and neoliberalism in the latter part, both emphasizing patriarchal notions of the family structure that actively repress female sexual expression and cause women’s equality in the social and economic realms to backslide. Neoliberalism would take hold federally in Canada somewhat later but with the same effect: not only was the quest for equality suppressed, but inequality was exacerbated.

In this chapter, we have demonstrated that while a country’s economic reliance on oil clearly has some influence on women’s equality, this is only part of the picture. Discrimination against women is pervasive, complex, and systemic in the world’s oil-rich and non-oil economies. Moreover, the sources of discrimination are linked to deeply entrenched patriarchal systems and social structures that have a global reach and considerable staying power, particularly during times of social dislocation. The Iran-Canada comparison underscores the need to expand the horizon of the enquiry about the impact of oil wealth on political and ideological developments within a country. As noted by Sylvia Walby (2005), the lack of movement in the transformation and social reorganization of institutions, standards, and gender relations is the biggest obstacle in the quest for women’s equality. In trying to understand how a resource economy operates, it is critical to pay attention to historical cultural phenomena that are embedded in a society. These phenomena play a significant part in preventing such a movement toward gender equality, be it in theocratic Iran or democratic Canada.

Notes

1 Interestingly, some Iranian feminists also anchor their equality demands in the Koran, with reference to a brief period of Shiite rule in the seventh century. As Afshar (1998, 19) notes, “in their pursuit of the golden age Iranian Islamist women are equipped with 50 years of history and 114 verses of a holy book—perhaps as good a resource as those offered by any other ideology or utopian vision.”

2 The posts held by the Famous Five were significant even by today’s standards: Emily Murphy was appointed magistrate in the British Empire; Louise McKinney and Roberta MacAdams were the first women to be elected to a provincial legislature; Irene Parlby was appointed Minister without Portfolio in the United Farmer’s government, becoming the second woman in the British Empire to serve as a cabinet minister; and Nellie McClung was the third woman to sit on the Alberta legislature.

As is noted later in this chapter, despite impressive progress early in its history, Alberta has garnered infamy for its egregious violations of human rights in this early period. While Alberta’s most famous suffragettes fought for gender equality, they did not extend equality rights universally; in fact, they subscribed to the eugenics bio-social movement that promoted the involuntary sterilization of those deemed mentally, physically, or morally deficient. These included the indigent, single mothers, prostitutes, immigrants, and First Nations peoples (Christian 1974).

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