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# The struggle for freedom, justice, and equality: The history of the journey of Iranian women in the last century

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

University College

International Affairs

**THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE, AND EQUALITY:  
THE HISTORY OF THE JOURNEY OF IRANIAN WOMEN IN  
THE LAST CENTURY**

By

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A thesis presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in International Affairs

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Saint Louis, Missouri

As a woman, you gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience that you face.

To the brave women of Iran and to my amazing mother (Shoukoh al-Zaman Bigdeliazari) who has taught me that even the impossible is possible.

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## **Introduction**

Iran is an ancient nation with centuries-old traditions and social values. The Iranian civilization is considered to be an Aryan civilization having evolved from a nomadic and tribal society to a central authority. In the 12 centuries before Islam, the women of Iran played a major role in the society. Pre-Islamic Iran had empresses such as Pourandokht and Azarmidokht who were in charge of the empire and were given the title of Shahanshah (King of Kings). The historical Iranian Navy of that time had a well-known female commander by the name of Artemis; women also held various other high positions of power in the armed forces. While in ancient times, aristocratic females possessed numerous rights sometimes on par with men, in post-Islamic Iran women's rights were pummeled in favor of establishing a patriarchal society governed by Islamic laws. This backward suppressive attitude towards women persisted through much of Iranian history. Generally Iranian women did not attain any parity until the 20th century and any gains in social rights and status was in short strides and often short-lived.

The significant upheavals in 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran created the proper ingredients for women's progress. Nevertheless, at each stage, the struggle between religious zealots and secular elements continued to curtail the women's rights movement from obtaining any significant momentum. The aim of this thesis is to discuss how women were affected by the political landscape in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and define the important role they played at each turning point in the history of modern Iran. In this context it is also important to relay not only the dogmatic role of Islam on the society but also the interplay between the foreign colonial powers in dominating Iranian politics.

In Chapter 1, the role of Iranian women is discussed during the Qajar period (1794-1925). Particularly, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the end of Nasser al-Din Shah's reign a noticeable change occurred as women began to play a larger role in society and became more visible. This was the beginning of a change in women's perception of themselves, their awareness of the world outside the harem and their frustration with their lifestyle. The impression of empowerment (that for the first time had extended beyond the traditional confinement of the house) allowed women to vent their frustrations by playing an active role in the ratification of the Constitution on December 30, 1906. The country acquired its constitution without much bloodshed, but the death of the Mozaffar al-Din Shah five days after ratification of the document suddenly changed the picture.

The next king, Muhammad- Ali, lost no time in exerting pressure on the members of the new parliament to bring about the demise of the constitution. It was during these critical years that a small but dedicated group of women, mainly from upper and upper-middle class families, became actively involved on the side of the constitutionalists. Using their veils as protection, they acted as couriers for transfer of messages and arms between various revolutionary hideouts. They formed several secret societies for enlightening their fellow women and for generating more support for the constitution.

In Chapter 2, the discussion is focused on the rise of secularism during the Pahlavi era (1930 -1979). During this period, Iranian women once again became involved in state-affairs - as the Pahlavi king's reduced the power and influence of the Muslim clergy, which up until the arrival of Reza Shah had an immense control over Iranian society. Reza Shah made sure to reduce the political grip of the clergy which had

confined women to their subservient religious roles and restricting their influence on social and judicial matters.

During Reza Shah's 16 years of rule, major developments, such as large road construction projects and the Trans-Iranian Railway, were built. Modern education was introduced and the government sponsored European education for many Iranian students. Along with the modernization of the nation, Reza Shah was the ruler during the time of the Women's Awakening (1936–1941). This movement sought the elimination of the Islamic veil from Iranian society. Supporters held that the veil impeded physical exercise and the ability of women to enter society and contribute to the progress of the nation. This move met opposition from the religious establishment. Under Reza Shah, the government supported advancements by women against child marriage, polygamy, exclusion from public society and education segregation. However, independent feminist political groups were shut down and forcibly integrated into one state-created institution.

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, rapid economic growth and restructuring of the educational system mandated the need to incorporate women at all levels of the society. Increasingly women were involved in all aspects of the society, gaining more autonomy and in many instances emulating their Western counterparts.

Unfortunately the rapid “modernization” policies of the shah that were designed to prepare Iran for the 21<sup>st</sup> century were not in harmony with the vast number of underprivileged Iranians who were left out of the benefits obtained from large oil revenues. The polarization of the society into the ultra rich on one side and the poor on the other, along with rampant inflation, stoked public discontent. The shah's regime suppressed and marginalized its opponents with the help of Iran's security and



intelligence organization, the Savak. Relying on oil revenues, which sharply increased in late 1973 during the first oil embargo, the shah pursued his goal of developing Iran as a mighty regional power dedicated to social reform and economic development. Yet he continually sidestepped democratic arrangements and refused to allow meaningful civic and political liberties, remaining unresponsive to public opinion.

By the mid-1970s the shah reigned amidst widespread discontent caused by the continuing repressiveness of his regime, socio-economic changes that benefited some classes at the expense of others, and the increasing gap between the ruling elite and the disaffected populace. Islamic leaders, particularly the exiled cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, were able to focus this discontent with a populist ideology tied to Islamic principles and calls for the overthrow of the shah. The shah's government collapsed following widespread uprisings in 1978 -1979 and consequently an Islamic Republic succeeded his regime.

The re-establishment of Islamic law with significant restrictions on women and the reintroduction of mandatory veiling yet again resurrected barriers to women's progress Iranian society. In Chapter 3, discussion is focused on the historical events that led to the 1979 Revolution which once again reduced the status of women to half that of a man. Women were banned from the armed forces and many other sectors of society. The immense progress that had been achieved during the Pahlavi Dynasty had been severely set back. Nevertheless, the resolve for progress, in contrast, to what many viewed as regression to the old patriarchal system, allowed women to defy the ruling establishment. In fact, women were the first to demonstrate against Ayatollah Khomeini's regime with a mass rally in Tehran on 8 March 1979 - less than a month after the mullahs had seized

power. Over the next decade, the authorities imprisoned, and executed thousands. But women continued to fight a regime that deemed them subhuman. Their resistance prevented the clergy from abrogating many of the pre-revolutionary laws limiting gender discrimination. Thus, women succeeded in keeping their right to vote and win public office. Even to this day Iranian women continue to fight for their rights in a society dominated by a religious hierarchy that continues to demean them.

The changes that affected Iranian women's lives after the coming of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century were similar to the changes that occurred in their lives after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In both cases these changes were largely wrought by men. Iranian women have been actively involved and have participated fully in diverse religious, political, and social contexts since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but frequently without recognition. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the belief that education was a pillar of freedom began to gain popularity among Iranian women. Their efforts to secure an equal place with men in the nation's educational institutions received support from a number of women writers and poets in the form of protests and petitions. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, witnessed the destruction of most of Iranian women's hopes and quests. Different Iranian governments enacted a series of important laws and regulations touching on "women's issues" without allowing any input from women. In the last three decades, under the Islamic Republic, laws and regulations affecting the status of Iranian women came in the form of different religious decrees that were justified by the argument that they all complied with the Quran and the Shari 'ah (Islamic law). The struggle of Iranian women has continued as they refuse to abandon their quests for an equal status.



## **Chapter 1**

### Role of Iranian women during the Constitutional Revolution

During the 17th century, European countries such as Great Britain, imperial Russia, and France had started to establish colonial footholds in the Central Asia region. As a result Iran lost sovereignty over many of its provinces to these countries. Most importantly, the discovery of oil in 1908 by the British in Khuzestan spawned intense renewed interest in Persia by the British Empire. Control of Persia remained contested between the United Kingdom and Russia and the result divided Persia into spheres of influence, regardless of her national sovereignty. At the time, Persia was under the rule of the Qajar Dynasty (1794-1925) and her political and commercial ties with European countries accelerated the process of becoming dependant on the colonial powers.

In 1803, under Fath Ali Shah, the Qajars set out to fight against the Russian empire in what was known as Russo-Persian War of 1804-1813. The Qajars were deeply concern about the Russian expansion into the Caucasus, which had long been an Iranian domain. This period marked the first major economic and military encroachments on Iranian interests during the colonial era. Fath Ali Shah's reign saw increased diplomatic contacts with the West and the beginning of intense European diplomatic rivalries over Iran. His grandson, Mohammad Shah, who fell under the Russian influence, succeeded him in 1834. When Mohammad Shah died in 1848 the succession passed to his son, Nasser al-Din.

During Nasser al-Din Shah's reign, Western science, technology, and educational methods were introduced into Persia, and the country's modernization began. Nasser al-Din Shah

tried to exploit the mutual distrust between Great Britain and Russia to preserve Persia's independence, but foreign interference and territorial encroachment increased under his rule. He contracted foreign loans to finance his expensive trips to Europe. These trips were part of his strategy to put Persia on the map as an independent, ancient, civilized state. Although the trips in this field were rather successful, he was not able to prevent Britain and Russia from encroaching into regions of traditional Persian influence.

In 1896, Nasser al-Din Shah Qajar was assassinated by Mirza Reza Kermani the crown passed to his son, Mozaffar al-Din. Mozaffare al-Din Shah was a moderate but not a very effective ruler. During his reign, commercial reforms carried out in Iran in the name of modernization by Belgian customs officials further cemented an incipient anti-imperialist alliance among merchants, members of the 'ulama (leading clerics), and dissident elites.<sup>1</sup> This coalition, which asked the government to establish a series of protectionist measures, became an important component of the constitutional revolution in its early stages.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, royal extravagance and the absence of incoming revenues exacerbated financial problems. The Iranian people began to demand a curb on royal authority and the establishment of the rule of law as their concern over foreign influence grew.

In 1905, the international rivalry between the Russian and British empires had weakened successive central governments in Tehran. Leading elements of Persia's society believed the only way they could save their country from total domination by foreign powers was to counter the weak monarchy, establish a democratic system, and stop it from being manipulated by foreign powers.<sup>3</sup> It was felt by the intellectuals, the merchants, and the 'ulama of the time that the best way to do this was to develop a written code of laws, or a constitution.

On April 5, 1906, after a yearlong series of popular protests and demonstrations led by merchants and clerical leaders, a reluctant Mozaffar al-Din Shah, who ruled from 1896 until 1907, issued a royal proclamation that called for the formation of a National Consultative Majlis and the writing of a constitution.<sup>4</sup>

On August 6, 1906, the first Legislative assembly (called Supreme National Assembly) was formed to make the preparations for the opening of the first term of the Majlis, or parliament, and drafting the election law. In the first five months of this revolution, constitutionalists conducted popular elections and chose members of the parliament. The electoral laws of September 1906 established a corporate and estate form of representation and gave limited franchise to six classes of male voters: members of the Qajar aristocracy, other nobles and landowners, the clerics, as well as the merchants, the smallholders, and members of trade guilds.

This first step Iranian election was popularly embraced and seen by the Iranian people as an example of democratic politics.<sup>5</sup> Most available sources hardly mention women's role at this point, and one tends to believe that the revolution was strictly a man's affair.<sup>6</sup> With the help of a few political memoirs and newspaper clippings and family stories that has passed on, one can see that women were also active in many ways. Women were able to turn their traditional social and religious gatherings into political meetings. Women learned about the latest political events at mosques and discussed them in their secret societies or anjumans. Their political activities ranged from circulating information, spreading news, and participating in demonstrations. Some of their societies are as follows: the Anjuman for the Freedom of Women (one of the first societies formed in early 1907), the secret Union Women (had strong revolutionary tendencies formed in 1907), Anjuman of Women (active during constitutional periods to recognizing the

women's councils), the Anjuman of Ladies of the Homeland (formed in 1910), Anjuman of Ladies of Iran (formed in 1910, it raised funds for schools, hospitals, and orphanages), the Anjuman of Women's Efforts (very active during the Russian ultimatum of 1911), the Council of Women of the Center (active during the Russian ultimatum of 1911) and finally societies such as the Association for the Welfare of Women of Iran. The women's anjumans were active not only in Tehran but in other cities such as Qazvin, Azerbaijan, Isfahan and many more.

Soon after the formation of the Majlis in Tehran, and before many provincial deputies arrived, an elite group of constitutionalists drafted the short constitution of 1906. This document, which was influenced by the 1791 French and the 1831 Belgian constitutions, laid out the skeleton of a modern parliamentary system for Iran.<sup>7</sup> Although he was in a very poor health, Mozzafar-al-Din Shah signed the constitution on December 30, 1906, but refused to forfeit all of his power to the Majles. He attached a caveat to the constitution that made his signature on all laws required for their enactment. He died five days later. The Majlis balanced the budget, decreased the salaries of the Qajar princes and the shah, and abolished the land allotments laws that were in favor of the Qajar family. Also, the constitution took a strong stand against European intervention in Iran.

With the aid of Russia, Mozzafar al-Din Shah's son, Mohammad Ali Shah, who ruled from 1907 through 1909, attempted to rescind the constitution and abolish parliamentary government. After several disputes with the members of the Majlis, in June 1908 he used his Russian-officered Persian Cossacks Brigade to bomb the Majlis building, arrest many of the deputies and close down the assembly. Resistance to the shah, however, coalesced in Tabriz, Isfahan, Rasht and elsewhere. In July 1909, a large crowd of pro-constitution forces marched from Rasht to Tehran led by Mohammad Vali Khan Sepahsalar Khalatbari Tonekaboni, deposed

the Shah, and re-established the constitution. The ex-shah went into exile in Russia. He died in San Remo, Italy in April 1925.

On July 16, 1909, the Majlis voted to place Mohammad Ali Shah's 11-year-old son, Ahmad Shah, on the throne. Although the pro-constitutional forces had triumphed, they faced serious difficulties. The upheavals of the constitutional revolution and civil war had undermined stability and trade. In addition, the ex-shah, with Russian support, attempted to regain his throne, landing troops in July 1910. Most serious of all, the hope that the constitutional revolution would inaugurate a new era of independence from the great powers ended when, under the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, Britain and Russia agreed to divide Persia into spheres of influence. The Russians were to enjoy exclusive rights to pursue their interests in the northern sphere, the British in the south and east.

Both powers would be free to compete for economic and political advantage in a neutral sphere in the center. Matters came to a head when Morgan Shuster, a United States administrator hired as treasurer general by the Persian government to reform its finances, sought to collect taxes from powerful officials who were Russian protégés and sent members of the treasury gendarmerie, a tax department police force, into the Russian zone to enforce too. When in December 1911 the Majlis unanimously refused a Russian ultimatum demanding Shuster's dismissal, Russian troops, already in the country, moved to occupy the capital. To prevent this, on December 20 Bakhtiari chiefs and their troops surrounded the Majles building, forced acceptance of the Russian ultimatum, and shut down the assembly, once again suspending the constitution.



The constitution of 1906 provided, within limits, for freedom of press, speech, and association, and for security of life and property. Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were recognized as citizens and given equality before the law. Ultimately, however, the new Iranian law could not reconcile the conflict between religious law and secular law and gave unprecedented new institutional powers to the clerical establishment. It thereby undermined the new civil liberties the constitution granted and curtailed the power of both the Parliament and the judiciary. Overall, the constitution established the framework for secular legislation, judicial codes, and courts of appeals, which reduced the powers of the royal court and the religious authorities.

Prior to the constitutional revolution, a dual system of authority existed in traditional Iranian society where several other patriarchs the clerics, the tribes, and the local notables, including princes and other provincial governors, checked the patrimonial powers of the king in some arenas. There were also two sets of laws: shariat law (religion) and *urf* (customary). Shariat law was derived from the Quran and the hadiths (judgments of the twelve Shi'a imams).<sup>8</sup> The state administered the *urf* (often pre-Islamic in origin), which dealt mostly with criminal conduct.

During the early stages of the revolution and the entire period of the first Majles (1906 - 1908), women's roles were minimal and their participation kept under control by 'ulama. They were restricted to staging street demonstrations in support of the constitutionalist, religious and social welfare causes. But they also demanded the right for a public, and not just private, education, and many began to attend what were then the only available institutions: the American and the French girls' schools. Here they won the intelligentsia's full support. Since the late 19th century, poets such as Iraj Mirza, journalists and a few Majlis delegates such as Vakil

al-Ru 'aya and Taqizadah had championed this cause, arguing that it would benefit the country to have educated women raise future generations of Iranians and, by the same token, pleading for the abolition of polygamy.<sup>9</sup> Neither the hijab (the veil) nor the right to vote was addressed. The clerical hierarchy, led by Ayatollah Fazlollah Nuri (The Khomeini of his time) proclaimed these demands to be part of a conspiracy to eradicate Islam in the country. He was a constitutional sympathizer who then became one of the most powerful opponents of the revolution. He issued a religious edict against girls' schools, declared these schools and women's education in general, contrary to the Islamic law, and denounced the whole project. This was confronted and challenged by a few intellectual women. These women were strong supporters of the Majlis and demanded an opportunity to take part in national reform.<sup>10</sup>

In August of 1906, these intellectual women, mostly from upper classes, began to organize themselves into parties or anjumans -secret societies. These parties were not only to support their male leaders but also to promote women's education. For example, during the first period when the majlis had to govern the nation, one of its tasks was to create a national bank without borrowing from abroad. Without hesitation, women contributed large sums of cash and donated their own jewelry. However, the women's anjumans' most enduring effort was the promotion of women's education. They were seriously active, giving public speeches for the need of women's to get an education, opening new schools for them, and providing their budget and staff themselves. These were difficult times as they had other responsibilities and expectations from their husbands to take care of their own families, to cook, clean, sew and take care of household task at the same time.

However, this was not easy for the women as they had to face many obstacles and humiliation by the hostile attacks of the 'ulama. The girls and women teachers were faced with

daily insults, obscene gestures, spitting and accused of unchaste and immoral behavior by the followers of the Ayatollah Fazlollah Nuri. At the beginning of the revolution, activist women had emerged as supporters of the 'ulama who joined the strikes. However, now that Nuri and his supporters, with their fatwa (religious decree) against women's education, had openly expressed their hostility to women's learning, a few women began to question the 'ulama's authority. The women's determination was strong and such intimidation had no effect. Morgan Shuster, the American citizen made treasure-general in Tehran, who supported and was supported by Majlis, has written in his book, Strangling of Persia:

veiled women who overnight became teachers, newspaper writers, founders of women's club,... the Persian women have given to the world a notable example of the ability of unsullied mind to assimilate rapidly and absolutely new ideas, and with the élan of the crusader who has a vision, they early set to work to accomplish their ideals.<sup>11</sup>

Safiyah Yazdi is among the women who joined the Freedom of Women's anjuman and worked tirelessly to promote the women's right to education. She was the wife of a leading 'ulama, Muhammad Husain Yazdi. Unlike Ayatollah Fazlollah Nuri and other conservative clerics, Yazdi supported the idea of women's education and encouraged his wife to open a school. Safiyah founded the Iffatiah Girls School in 1910 and gained a reputation for her outspoken lectures on women's issues.<sup>12</sup>

Nationalist women also had their own anjuman to promote the idea of wearing native fabrics and to stop the purchase of imported European textiles. They believed that the boycott of European textiles in Iran would free the nation from its dependence on European merchants and manufacturers. School children proudly began to wear native garments, while in Tabriz women organized meetings to promote the idea of wearing their old cloths for some time hoping that the nation would soon produce its own textiles.<sup>13</sup>

During June 1908, in the period of national resistance to the restored autocracy and throughout the second Majles (1909 - 1912), small organizations of women, the close relatives of prominent secular constitutionalist leaders, began to express publicly their aspirations for the right to vote. A few even dared to manifest their revolt against the hijab in public. Fearful of the cleric's hostile reaction, constitutionalist politicians and journalists dismissed these "extremists" as unrepresentative of women's constitutional interests. The Fundamental Law guaranteed women's right to education, but nothing else. Nonetheless, women's organizations continued to play a role in support of the constitution, increasing pressure on court officials.

Women's prominent role in social movements in Iran began long before the 19th century. With the spread of Islam to Persia in 7<sup>th</sup> century, the interaction between Persian nationalism and Shiite Islam's defiant outlook gave impetus to many movements that rebelled against the oppressive status quo. Women actively took part in many of these movements, which surfaced from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the Sanbad movement in Neyshabur, Moqane' and Sarbedaran, in Khorassan province (northeast), Ostadsis in Sistan (southeast), and Babak in Azerbaijan (northwest). Iranian history has witnessed through the centuries the rise to social prominence of many leading women. Their struggle for power and influence, however, was carried on mostly within the closed doors of the harem. One of the examples of such women is the story of Anis ud Daula, the third wife of Nasser al- Din shah. She was originally a sigheh, temporary wife, who lifted her veil to the shah while out riding, and so fascinated the Shah that she was removed next day to the royal harem. As she got the rank of the lawful wife and the first favorite, she secured lucrative positions for all her relations. She was responsible for bringing down Sipahsalar, the prime minister at the time, because of a disagreement.

The first women's rebellion that occurred is known as the "Tobacco Movement." Women took the lead and developed useful experience in organizing in 1895, when the Qajar monarch, Nasser al-Din Shah, gave the exclusive rights for tobacco production and sale to a British citizen, Gerald F Talbot. Despite the cautious measures taken by the Shah and the British in keeping the concession confidential, news reached the Iranian people through reports in two Iranian newspapers published outside of Iran, Akhtar (The Stars) and Qanun (The Law). Both newspapers called upon Iranians to unite against the government and the tobacco concession. That gave rise to massive protests, which was led by clerics and with merchants as allies.

The Iranian people strongly objected and boycotted the use of tobacco, forcing the Shah to annul the agreement. Iranian women were at the forefront of this resistance even though smoking was popular among women in those days. However, the Shah's wives refused to smoke tobacco. When Nasser al-Din Shah tried to break the boycott in his own harem, his wives resisted and told him in protest that "tobacco has been boycotted by those who have married us to you."<sup>14</sup> At the peak of the protests, Amin ol-Soltan, the court-appointed chancellor, tried to convince and coerce citizens to end their rebellion. Hundreds of women charged forward, calling on their husbands to reject his pleas.

Ibrahim Taymouri writes in his book, The Tobacco Boycott: Women's perseverance in this movement was such that when the ban on tobacco was announced, women led the protesters who marched toward Nasser al-Din Shah's palace. As they passed through the bazaar, these women closed down the shops, igniting a citywide strike.<sup>15</sup>

He also describes the women protesting marches:

There was a group of young children in front of the crowd followed by women in organized lines. When the demonstrators reached Ark square, slogans were shouted, with women loudly addressing Nasser al-Din Shah "O, you mustached sister-king (Shah baji sibilu), you scarf-head (lachak bi sar), you with no religion (la mazhab), we do not want you."<sup>16</sup>

When the large group of women reached the palace, the Qajar monarch sent one of his confidants to calm them. His attempts at talking to the protesters failed, because the women continued shouting slogans against Nasser al-Din shah. When, in a nearby mosque, the Friday prayer leader called on the marchers to disperse, angry women charged in and forced him to flee.<sup>17</sup>

One woman, the tales of whose audacity have been passed down through generations of Iranians is a peasant girl called Zeinab Pasha. Her struggle against not only gender but also because of her social and economic status earned her the male title of Pasha. Pasha is originally an Ottoman Turkish term that means general. Also known as Bibi shah Zeinab, she led the popular opposition to the tobacco concession in Tabriz, capital of East Azerbaijan province. Zeinab Pasha organized seven groups of armed women to parry government efforts to put down the rebellion. The seven groups under her command themselves led other groups of women. When government forces intimidated the bazaar merchants into opening their shops, Zeinab Pasha and a group of armed women, wearing the chador, forced the shops to close again. Eventually, bowing to pressures from across the country, Nasser al-Din shah canceled the concession by the end of January 1892.

A few years later, Zeinab and her group of women continued to play an important role in the movement against foreign domination, and in favor of a constitutional monarchy and the establishment of a house of justice. She also attacked and stoned the houses and storage facilities of those who had hidden food during the famine with the help of her seven commanders. She confiscated the food and distributed it to the poor.<sup>18</sup>

The beginning of the constitutional movement marked the unprecedented participation of women as a major social force. As the movement grew, women's democratic institutions grew with it. Although the movement did not achieve its goals, it was nevertheless very important in propelling the women's movement in Iran forward. Many pro-constitutionalist intellectuals addressed the situation of women and their historical oppression. Simultaneous with attacks on the reactionary, feudalistic culture and social relationships, recognition of women's rights became a subject of hot debate in a leading progressive newspaper.

In its August 1890 issue, *Qanoon*, a monthly published in London, wrote: "Women make up half of any nation. No plan of national significance will move forward unless women are consulted. The potential of a woman aware of her human essence, to serve in the progress of her country is equivalent to that of 100 men."<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, the newspaper wrote: "There are many cases of distinguished women surpassing men solely because of their abilities to reason and their wisdom. Their understanding of society's meaning and privileges is far greater than men's."<sup>20</sup> Such commentaries at a time when women were generally considered as the property of men sparked many egalitarian ideas.

The expansion of the press, itself an indicator of the growth of democracy and a new era in Iran, was accompanied by greater participation of women in social affairs. From 1905 to 1915, some 30 women journalists joined the newspaper. Gradually, independent women's newspapers were also published and played a significant role in diversifying public opinion, spreading the revolution and opening doors for women.

The role of women in the constitutional revolution began with their offers of logistical and financial support for the movement, their success at inspiring patriotism and pride at

gatherings, and their participation in marches and demonstrations.<sup>21</sup> Anjumans took shape in large cities and launched a series of organized activities to advance the cause. Activities pioneered by the more educated and enlightened women gained momentum while women from all walks of life entered the social arena.

On December 16, 1906, the Edalat (Justice) newspaper wrote the following on the role of women in the constitutional movement: "The Honorable Seyyed Jamal ad-din Va'ez, addressing an enthusiastic crowd, said: 'Constitutionalism will not take shape without financial support. Everyone must contribute what he can.' Suddenly, loud voices were heard among the women present. The impoverished women took off their earrings and offered them to advance this sacred movement. One of them told His Honor, 'I have two sons who earn two qarans (pennies) a day. From now on, I will give half of what they earn to any locality that you designate.'"<sup>22</sup>

Women supported the newly established parliament and actively challenged the conservative factions and the clerics who had been elected as deputies. When the parliament decided to establish Iran's national bank without seeking financial help from foreign countries, women enthusiastically raised money and donated their jewelry. Women were also very active in the movement to boycott foreign imports. In Tehran, Tabriz and other cities, they held gatherings to make people aware of the issues and urged families to use their old clothing in the hope that, in the future, the country would develop its own textile industry.

On December 30, 1906, when Mozzafar al-Din Shah signed the new constitution, women had a statement published in the parliament's newspaper calling on the government to initiate the education of women and set up girls' schools. When the parliament did not go along with the suggestion, instead declaring that women had a right only to the kind of education that would



prepare them for "child rearing and house work" and urging them not to engage in political and governmental affairs, women took the initiative, creating a network of different associations and setting up girls schools and women's hospitals. By 1910, some 50 girls' schools had been established in Tehran. That same year, women organized a conference on cultural affairs. The weeklies Danesh (Knowledge) in 1910 and Shokoufeh (Blossoming) in 1913 were the first publications by women. Other publications such as "Women's Letters," "Daughters of Iran," "Women's World" and "The World of Women" soon followed.

In 1907, the first organized meeting of women adopted 10 resolutions against discrimination and called for state education for girls. The Association of Women of the Homeland and the Association of Patriotic Women were among the more influential women's associations of the time. In Tehran alone, 12 women's associations were involved in different social and political activities. Through their members and activities, which included gatherings, these associations acted as a pressure group against the despotic regime and closely monitored political developments. Other active associations included the Association of Women's Freedom, the Secret League of Women, the Women's Committee, the Isfahan's Women's Organization and the Assembly of Women's Revolution.

Women's role in the uprising in Tabriz was particularly noteworthy. When the Qajar king, Mohammad-Ali shah, shelled the parliament and constitutionalists were being gunned down, women in Azerbaijan province "upheld the nation's honor more than anyone else."<sup>23</sup> They were active on several fronts. They sent telegrams to other countries to raise international awareness and seek help. During the 11-month siege of Tabriz, women handled logistics, raising money, getting food from one bunker to the next, getting medicine to the wounded and preparing

ammunition. In addition, they took up arms and took part in the 1908 and 1909 movements. Women wore men's clothing and fought alongside the men. "In one of the battles between Sattar Khan (the leader of the uprising) and the shah's forces, the bodies of 20 women in men's clothing were found."<sup>24</sup>

On November 29, 1911, Czarist Russia, with the approval of the British government, sent an ultimatum to the Iranian parliament: Shuster, the financial advisor to the government, must be expelled within 48 hours, or the capital would be occupied. Shuster was able to create a viable administrative apparatus to collect taxes, the *sin qua non* of creating a nationalist government capable of resisting imperialism. For this reasons he and his assistants were the direct targets of the Russian. A wave of protests erupted throughout the country. In Tehran, 50,000 marched and declared a general strike. Large groups of women, declaring their readiness to sacrifice their lives for the cause, were among them. On December 1, 1911, the Association of Women of the Homeland staged a demonstration by thousands of women in front of the Majlis. Shuster wrote that a group of some 300 women entered the parliament:

clad in their plain black robes with the white nets of their veil dropped over their faces. Many held pistol under their skirts or in the folds of their sleeves. Straight to the Majlis they went, and, gathered there, demanded of the President that he admit them all.... The President consented to receive a delegation of them. In his reception-hall they confronted him, and lest he and his colleagues should doubt their meaning, these cloistered Persian mothers, wives and daughters exhibited threateningly their revolvers, tore aside their veils, and confessed their decision to kill their own husbands and sons, and leave them behind their own dead bodies, if the deputies wavered in their duty to uphold the liberty and dignity of the Persian people and nation.<sup>25</sup>

In mid-December, when Russian forces reached Qazvin (140 km west of Tehran), the city's League of Women called for help. Isfahan's League of Women called on the provincial associations to arm their members and declared its readiness to resist against the Russian forces.

It can be said with certainty that it was largely due to the activities of these brave women that the constitutional parliament resisted the ultimatum for more than a year.

Although the constitutional revolution brought real progress in Iran and the constitution subsequently drafted guaranteed certain rights of the Iranian people, it continued to deny women their rights. The wording of the electoral law adopted in 1906 unequivocally denied women the right to vote.

In 1905, when the first phase of the constitutional movement succeeded, the newspapers remained silent about the denial of women's rights. After Mohammad-Ali shah shelled the parliament during the second phase, however, women's rights became a major issue of debate. With the victory of the Socialist revolution in 1917, which ended the domination of Czarist Russia over Iran, a new wave of activism for women's rights began. Many women and intellectuals, influenced by socialist thinking, joined the movement.

The occupation of Persia during World War I by Russian and British forces was a blow from which Ahmad Shah never effectively recovered. In February 1921, Reza Khan, commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, staged a coup d'état, becoming the effective ruler of Iran. In 1923, Ahmad Shah went into exile in Europe. Reza Khan persuaded the Majles to depose Ahmad Shah in October 1925, and to exclude the Qajar dynasty permanently. Reza Khan was subsequently proclaimed as Reza Shah Pahlavi, reigning from 1925 to 1941.

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## **Chapter 2**

### The Pahlavi Era

During World War I, despite its neutrality Iran was invaded by the armies of various countries and, therefore, its society and economy were severely disrupted. At the end of the war the country was plunged into anarchy and chaos; various separatist movements in the provinces of Azerbaijan, Gilan, Khurasan, Kurdistan, and Khuzistan threatened its survival. The fear of the country's disintegration prepared the people for the coup d' etat of February 1921, which brought Reza Khan to power.

On October 26, 1923, Reza Khan quickly forced the young Ahmad Shah Qajar to exile in Europe. However, as prime minister, Reza Khan wanted to secure his power in opposition to any potential restoration of the Qajar house. At first, he seriously considered establishing a republic, as Kemal Ataturk had done in Turkey. However, powerful clergymen, feudal landlords, and some leaders of the Majlis fiercely opposed the idea of a republic. In particular Reza Khan assured the landlords and the conservative clergy that he would defend Islamic law and would not undertake any radical reform. Several members, including Hassan Modarres and the young Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh, forcefully opposed Reza Khan's plan to consolidate his autocracy. Nevertheless, the Majlis, on December 12, 1925, declared him the shah. The military officer who had become master of Iran was crowned as Reza Shah Pahlavi in April 1926; thus began the reign of the Pahlavi Dynasty.

Reza Shah came to power aiming to push Iran in a radical new direction both economically and culturally. Impressed by the successes of the reforms of Ataturk in neighboring Turkey, Reza Shah wished Iran to become a similarly modern, secular society with strong central

leadership. For that reason, he took for the name of his dynasty the name Pahlavi, a sign that he also wished to infuse Persia with a new spirit of nationalism. Not only is Pahlavi the name of the ancient language of pre-Islamic Iran, but also echoes the word pahlavan, literally meaning, “champion.”

Even before he became shah, Reza Khan initiated a series of reforms aimed at creating a strong central government. As Reza Shah, with the assistance of a group of army officers and younger bureaucrats, many trained in Europe, he launched a broad program of change designed to bring Iran into the modern world. Reza Shah used the army not only to bolster his own power but also to pacify the country and to bring the tribes under control. He forcibly resettled many of the tribes. He was determined to unify what he saw as Iran's heterogeneous peoples, end foreign influence, and emancipate women. He considered women's emancipation an important aspect of national progress. And on March 21, 1935, he issued a decree asking foreign delegates to use the term Iran in formal correspondence in accordance with the fact that Persia was a term used for a country identified as Iran in the Persian language. The name Iran means, “Land of the Aryans”.

To extend government control and promote westernization, Reza Shah overhauled the administrative machinery and vastly expanded the bureaucracy. The pervasive influence in politics of the religious establishment was considered by Reza Shah to be an obstacle to modernization.<sup>1</sup> Education, previously the domain of the mullahs, was reformed along the lines of Western systems and made compulsory.

This process of modernization involved a move toward secularization, a process that affected particularly the educational system that had been dominated by the mullahs since the coming of Islam to Iran in 637 C.E. The primary schools, called maktab, were often affiliated

with the mosques or run by the mullahs or their wives. Madrasahs, Islamic schools, were exclusively male centers for higher education. In general, the majority of women did not receive a formal education in the maktab. They received basic instruction in Islam, such as prayers, and were taught the five pillars of Islam. In most cases their literacy was limited only to the reading of the Quran.

As Reza Shah set about following the path of Ataturk's Turkey by rapid westernization, he made the elevation of the status of women a part of such a plan. However, an important point to recognize is that Ataturk was able to draw upon the ongoing processes of modernization begun by the Young Ottomans and continued for his reform programs. In contrast, Reza Shah had to introduce modernization processes into a society that was dominated to a great extent by conservative religious and provincial elites. In the other hand, some of the policies enacted by Reza Shah helped attain the goals that women activists had set for themselves. A good example of it is the public education for girls.

Although the constitution had enshrined the principle of public education for girls in 1907, the first public school for girls did not open until 1918. It was only after Reza Shah had consolidated his power that the law began to be seriously implemented. He created an extensive system of secular primary and secondary schools that paved the way for women to enter the newly formed European-style Tehran University in 1935, as well as enabling them to take jobs in government services. These schools and institutions of higher education became training grounds for the new bureaucracy and, along with economic expansion, helped create a new middle class.<sup>2</sup>

Reza Shah's biggest accomplishment was to unveil the women of Iran.<sup>3</sup> In 1929 the shah issued a law forcing Iranians to ban Islamic dress in favor of Western clothing, which was



followed by another law for in 1935 requiring men European-style hats. The step that was hailed by many educated women as freedom from oppression was the abolition of the veil. To many activists and their male supporters, the veil was the symbol of their subjugation. Many leading poets and intellectuals, such as Iraj Mirza, Arif, and Ishqi, had denounced wearing of the veil in their poetry and writing. Some upper-middle class women had begun to appear unveiled in private gatherings. In the late 1920s, several leading women activists, such as Sadiqeh Dowlatabadi and Shams ul-Muluk Javahirkalam, stopped wearing the veil in public. Some of these women taught in girls' schools. They also encouraged their students to cast off their veils. However, resistance to unveiled women was strong, and women who dared take off their veil in the more affluent uptown sections of Tehran had to put them back on when they went to the poorer downtown parts.

In January 1936, Reza Shah, who had recently returned from a visit to Turkey, issued a decree outlawing the veil and banning women from wearing the chador. He implemented his unveiling plan with caution, taking several steps to prepare the public for it. For example, newspaper articles were widely printed discussing the disadvantages of the veil and praising its disappearance in other Muslim countries. Women who resisted this compulsory unveiling had their chador forcibly removed by the police. A European wife of an Iranian man witnessed the police on the streets of Tehran tearing scarves from the women's heads and handing them back in ribbons to their owners.<sup>4</sup>

Ataturk also enacted similar unveiling laws in Turkey. But the difference between the two was while the shah used coercion and force to unveil women, Ataturk used a method of encouragement, requesting that women remove their chador, not requiring it. While the shah's policies for women accomplished some objectives, they also suffered from serious drawbacks as

well. For example, the ban made it possible for a small group of women to cast aside the veil, but the majority had to be harshly forced to do so. Therefore, it created a great deal of resentment among most women and made them suspicious of reforms and modern ideas.

At about the same time, Reza Shah appeared at an educational function accompanied by his unveiled queen, and his daughters. He delivered a speech to an audience of unveiled teachers and wives of civil servants:

I am extremely delighted to see that women have become aware of their rights and entitlement... Women of this country not only could not demonstrate their talents and inherent qualities because of being separated from society, but also could not pay their dues to their homeland and serve and make sacrifices for their country. Now women are on their way to gain other rights in addition to the great privilege of motherhood. Women should consider today a great day and use the opportunities available to them to work for the progress and happiness of this country...Future prosperity is in your hands because you train the future generation. You can be good teachers to train good individuals. My expectation is that now that you learned ladies are becoming aware of your rights and duties towards your country, you should be wise in life, work hard, become accustomed to frugality, and avoid extravagance and overspending.<sup>5</sup>

A large segment of professional middle- class women hailed the abolishment of the chador as freedom from oppression. To these women the chador signified backwardness and subjugation. Several women's magazines invited debate on the topic, including *Women's World* in 1936, and received an overwhelming response of both pro and con arguments about the unveiling.

Generally the response was supportive of the shah's unveiling policy. It's important to remember, though, that the majority of women writing letters to the editors were generally well educated, or at the very least, literate. The magazines were only publishing the opinions of one specific group of women. Parvin Itisami, the leading women poet, wrote a poem commemorating

the event, likening the lives of women under the veil to being held in a cage and calling the veil the primary cause of women's ignorance. She proclaimed that the abolition of the veil "gave the women of Iran a chance to live."<sup>6</sup>

For many women, however, the chador was not a sign of oppression, but protection from strange eyes. The unveiling had negative effects for certain groups of Iranian women, especially older women. It was unthinkable for them to go out in public unveiled. After Reza Shah took away the chador, many women became isolated in their homes. Being unveiled, to them, was equal to nudity. They became dependent on their family members to run their errands and do all their tasks that required being in the public eye. The unveiling law was short lived, however, diminishing when the shah was forced to abdicate in 1941.

The women who chose to return to the veil did so for several reasons. For one, the waning of the law was not caused by a lack of enforcement, but rather a lack of a socialization process to discard the wearing of the veil.<sup>7</sup> Many women chose to reveal themselves because they had never come to accept the shah's law. Another reason women chose to reveal themselves ties into the first. Many women were forced to reveal themselves because of the strong social pressures that had developed, as the people of Iran never came to accept the unveiling policies that were implemented.

Although women's unveiling was a tremendous blow to the clergy's ideological authority and beliefs, the clergy's opposition to this remained ineffective. As his reign became more secure, Reza Shah clashed with Iran's clergy and devout Muslims on many issues. A good example of his determination to push through the unveiling of women is when the queen and her daughters wearing dresses in European styles accompanied by a few other women from the court

attended the shrine of Fatima al-Masumeh in Qom in March 1928. The clergy present in the shrine felt insulted and confronted the shah's family and asked them either to put on the veil or leave. The queen and her company left the shrine and sent a message to the shah explaining what had happened.

A few hours later the shah arrived in person, violated the sanctuary of Qom's Fatima al-Masumeh Shrine and beat a cleric who had angrily admonished his wife. The very next morning Sheykh Abdolkarim, a respected cleric who anticipated riots in Qom against the shah, issued a decree and banned any discussion of the incident in public: "The decree was like water poured over fire, and prevented the outbreak of public riots which would have led to killing and looting." Faced with state suppression and tremendous middle-class and upper-class social support for unveiling and other state reforms, the most important religious figure of this period, Mirza Razagholi Shariat-Sanglaji, made a plea to the 'ulama to abandon their reactionary and superstitious attitudes and modernize Islam.<sup>8</sup> In December of that year Reza Shah instituted a law requiring everyone (except Shia jurisconsults who had passed a special qualifying examination) to wear Western clothes. This angered devout Muslims because it included a hat with a brim, which prevented the devout from touching their foreheads on the ground during prayer as required by Islamic law.

Another example of Reza Shah's readiness to take repressive measures against the clergy and the push for his social reforms is when he ordered severe punishment for a cleric who condemned the ruler for allowing his family to appear unveiled in public. The cleric was publicly insulted by the removal of his turban and shaving of his head and beard.

By the mid-1930s, Reza Shah's rule had caused intense dissatisfaction within the Shi'a clergy throughout Iran.<sup>9</sup> The devout were also angered by policies, which allowed mixing of the sexes and ordering all citizens - rich and poor - to bring their wives to public functions without head coverings. Women were allowed to study in the colleges of law and medicine, and in 1934 a law set heavy fines for cinemas, restaurants, and hotels that did not open doors to both sexes.<sup>10</sup> Doctors were permitted to dissect human bodies. The Shah restricted public mourning observances to one day and required mosques to use chairs during these observances instead of the traditional sitting on the floors of mosques. All of these steps were against traditional Islam.

Many of the shah's measures were consciously designed to break the power of the religious hierarchy. His educational reforms ended the clerics' near monopoly on education. To limit further the power of the clerics, he undertook a codification of the laws that created a body of secular laws, applied and interpreted by a secular judiciary outside the control of the religious establishment. He excluded the clerics from judgeships, created a system of secular courts, and transferred the important and lucrative task of notarizing documents from the clerics to state-licensed notaries.<sup>11</sup> Reza Shah was a self-educated man who managed to suppress the clergy and keep them silent for almost 16 years.

The reforms for making of modern Iranian society coincided with the bold and controversial attempt of Reza Shah to radically transform Iranian womanhood. The Women's Awakening of 1936-41 was a state feminism project that offered new opportunities in employment and education for some Iranian women in exchange for the requirement that all Iranian women abandon their veils in public. The regime of Reza Shah championed and enforced a particular vision of the modern Iranian woman. She was to be as educated as any European or American woman. She was to be integrated into the workforce in increasingly prestigious

professions, not just to be a supportive companion to her husband. She was also to complement the modern Iranian man in the civic arena -- her unveiled entrance into society "chaperoned" by her modern male guardian.<sup>12</sup> Yet the notion of the modern male guardian likewise reflected new social realities. He was no longer simply a woman's relative or husband, but also her classmate, her professor, and her colleague.

After the state-sanctioned unveiling, women's employment was mainly in teaching and midwifery. A new college was established that trained women teachers for girls' schools. However, women teachers were paid half as much as men. Still, there were some women who gained access to middle-class professions. Some had been educated abroad, and returned home to practice medicine or lecture in the University of Tehran. At this early stage, however, public education for girls did not result in a substantial change in the pattern and extent of employment amongst women. Moreover, entry into education and employment was not followed by participation in politics. The state did not introduce any changes in the electoral law of 1907 and women were not granted the right to vote and to be elected.

The shah was much more concerned with creating the basic structure of the modern Iranian state. Women's suffrage was one of the quickest ways he could show the outside world of Iran's progress. The Shah was not unique in this sense, as much of Ataturk's reforms also centered around women, like with the chador, for example. That's not to say, however, that Reza Shah's policies had no effect on women's roles. But the effects were not as far reaching as one might believe especially since many of his policies were in writing, but often not enforced in practice.

Although many of the legalities were altered in Iran to give women more rights, they were rarely known or used in practice. Many of the reforms remained only skin deep, and did not penetrate Iranian Muslim society as a whole. It is one thing to give women rights on paper, but it is a very different thing to make illiterate village women aware of their rights or to persuade them to exercise them. In fact, in several areas, the government only served to hurt the women's movement. At this time, there was little faith or credibility in the government. The Women's Organization of Iran was never taken very seriously because of its associations with the shah, and the shah's regime refused to give women's organizations any liberty or freedom. Reza Shah saw himself as father of the nation who had to have total control over the women of the nation. As was the case in relation to women in the family, women of the nation, too, were not allowed to act independently and take initiatives for fear of what the unknown might bring about.<sup>13</sup>

The fate of the Patriotic Women's League illustrates this point. The League was formed in 1922 by a group of women with socialist tendencies who had been active in the constitutional revolution. Through its founder, Muntaram Iskandari, the wife of Sulaiman Iskandari, the leader of the Socialist Party, the women's league was affiliated with the Socialist Party, which had resumed its activities in 1920s. Reza Shah used the various political groups at the beginning of his rise to power to consolidate his hold over the political system. However, once he had established firm control, he began to eliminate and disband any groups with any semblance of independence. Although the aim of the Women's League was merely to "emphasize respect for the laws and rituals of Islam, to promote the education and moral upbringing of girls, to encourage national industries, to spread literacy among adult women, to provide care for orphaned girls, etc.,"<sup>14</sup> it was not allowed to survive. The government closed it in 1932. Its successor, the Ladies Center, which was formed in 1935, came into existence by fiat, and even

then it could only tread the thin line defined for it by the government. Therefore, no personal or group initiative could develop under such artificial circumstances.

Although the policies of Reza Shah helped a small group of women, they failed to win the support of the majority of women because they were not in step with the needs and realities of Iranian society at that time. The absence of social and economic conditions that could support those policies ensured that once force was removed they would be abandoned. After Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, the religious authorities almost destroyed the meager gains made by women during the previous few decades. The 'ulama, who had lost much of their power and prestige during the reign of Reza Shah, wanted to reassert their control over society.<sup>15</sup>

One of the quickest and most obvious ways of reassertion was the restoration of the veil. But the repeal of the ban on the veil was not even necessary. Many women in urban centers, including Tehran, seemed to be more than willing to answer the call of the 'ulama to resume the veil. However, the veil that reappeared was lighter. As a result of the 'ulama's opposition to the education of women, a number of schools for girls in provincial towns and capital were closed down on minor pretexts.<sup>16</sup> The religious authorities also launched a campaign to close down the remaining schools.

Despite the 'ulama's success in regaining much of their lost power, they were not fully able to reverse the clock for women. In fact, several forces set in motion in Iranian society helped accelerate the attainment of the goals the early feminists of the constitutional period had set for themselves. These were the political freedom and the flowering of political activity that resulted from lifting of censorship of Reza Shah's period and the rapid socio-economic development of the late 1950's, 1960's and 1970's.



There are many powerful acts that showed how brave and dedicated the Iranian women are for their cause. When the government flight training was available to both men and women civilian in 1940 as part of the Women's Awakening project, Sadiqeh Dowlatshahi, a young typist at the Ministry of Finance, signed up for the training. She had to endure teasing by soldiers but her determination was as real as the training. It took women of special character to accept a challenge to fight the opposition and to complete the demanding training. She made the request to see Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, the future prime minister. These words are part of her confrontation with Dr. Mosaddeq:

But you are such a tiny little person now -- I must tell you that flying airplanes requires big people [Mosaddeq said]." I said, "Man, no, look, tiny people [can] do it better." He said, "God's blessing. God's blessing." Then, he called for -- no, then he said, "Let me tell you one thing, dear child. My daughter, these planes -- all of them -- are the most damaged and junky German planes" -- they sent German and French [planes] -- You will go up, hit the ground, and die. What kind of business is this?

(Her excitement with Dr. Mosaddeq illustrated her determination and his change of heart about letting a women fly.)

I said, "Doctor, sir?" I placed my hand on my chest, "Doctor, sir, a person -- a human dies once, right?" He said, "No -- twice is impossible, just once." I said, "Either I die on the ground, fall to the ground and die, or I have an automobile accident, or it is possible I'll die in bed if I get sick. Well, now I'll die in a plane. Does it make a difference?" He said, "BRAVO. I have no answer for you. Come here!" He called somebody in, "Come here and take a picture. I became the first student."<sup>17</sup>

Reza Shah's policy towards the women's movement reflected his need for control of Iran. In the earlier years, from 1925 to the 1930s, the various women's movements supported his rule. But with the increasing state control and police repression under Reza Shah, the activities of women's groups were repressed, and eventually banned in the mid 1930s. Even while quashing all women's groups, the shah continued to present a pro-women's front. Iran hosted the Second Congress of Eastern Women in 1932, which brought Middle Eastern and South Asian women to

Tehran. The Patriotic Women's League of Iran participated in the Congress, but a man was appointed to oversee them.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the Patriotic Women's League only lasted until 1932, and then the government dismantled it. Two years later, the shah ordered the Kanoon-e Banavan (the Women's Center) to be formed. Kanoon-e Banavan was one of the first women's organizations to hold a close relationship with the government. Its main goals were to improve women's moral and mental education, and to provide housekeeping and child rearing instructions. Kanoon-e Banavan was mainly a pro-charity orientated group, replacing the strong independent feminist groups like the Patriotic Women's League. The women's groups in Iran were tightly controlled by the government and not highly feminist. The changing nature of women's groups under the shah is indicative of his true stance on women's rights. They grew more charity orientated as time progressed. Haideh Mughissi argues that:

the cooptation of these women's groups had far reaching effects, depoliticizing women activists and discrediting the women's movement. Women's organizations were given little respect or credibility in Iran due to their ties with the government.<sup>19</sup>

At the outbreak of World War II, Iran declared its neutrality. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, Iran, already important to the allies for its oil, became the best supply route to Russia. Reza Shah failed to comply with the Russo-British plan for using Iran. His refusal to allow Iranian territory to be used to train, supply, and act as a transport corridor to ship arms to Russia for its war effort against Germany, was the strongest motive for the allied invasion of Iran. On Aug. 26, 1941, Russian and British troops entered Iran. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in September 16, 1941. Iran was subsequently called "The Bridge of Victory" by Winston Churchill because of its importance in the allied victory.<sup>20</sup>

With the ally's removal of the shah, the anti-religious atmosphere began to dissipate. The period saw a major reorganization of the political and democratic parties, allowing for the establishment of special branches for women. Many of these parties felt obligated to address women's rights, or at the least touch upon the issue. Kanoon-e Banavan still pursued its activities after the abdication of the shah, re-emphasizing traditional stands on women's rights. Literacy, sewing and how a woman should treat her husband were the main issues on the group's agenda. The group published a newsletter Zaban Zanan (Women's Voice), to express their views. By 1945, however, membership only consisted of 60 people.<sup>21</sup>

The government-sponsored Kanoon-e Banavan was eventually disbanded and in its place raised two new parties, the Women's party, founded by Safiyeh Firouz and Jamiet Zanan (the Women's League). The Women's Party's goals were similar to Kanoon-e Banavan, but it was less radical. Their goals were to educate and raise women's awareness about the different classes of women. Jamiet Zanan was founded in 1942, and its major objective was to improve the legal conditions of women. The group published its own newspaper called Zan Emrus (Today's Woman) between 1944 and 1945, printing news articles on the behalf of women's legal rights.

Women's organizations were a bit more independent between 1941 and 1952. The weakness of the Pahlavi government after Reza Shah was removed allowed for a little more freedom. The major characterization for women's parties during this time period was their ties to various political parties. Each group had allegiance with one particular party, and women's issues often played secondary roles. There was a lack of a coherent ideological unity, and a lot of strife existed between different parties. Women's groups began to attack each other along their party lines.<sup>22</sup>

Reza Shah took over the leadership of Iran with the goal of creating national, secular codes of laws and as a great reformer working towards more state control of all government functions. In fact, his main aim in establishing new institutions was to expand his control by increasing his state's power into all sectors of the country, into its polity, economy, society, and ideology. Reza Shah did, initially, enjoy great popular support for his reforms. But as time went on his rule became increasingly authoritarian and despotic. He had deprived the Majlis of all effective power, muzzled the press and arrested his political enemies. Even certain members of his own government were put to death with his approval.

Reza Shah's commitments to Germany caught him in the great power conflicts of World War II. He was forced to abdicate in 1941 and leave Iran. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah, succeeded him. Mohammad Reza Shah was young with no experience. His reign began with political freedom, and the parliament and Prime Minister Mohammad-Ali Foroghi became more assertive.

Parties and associations were formed and women's groups also flourished, although usually within other organizations, and mostly in those with communist inclinations. The objects of these women's organizations were focused on the needs of working class women, their social and political rights, and their educational opportunities.

The 1940s saw a heightened consciousness of the role of women in society. Women experienced a freedom of expression that enhanced their consciousness. The Tudeh Party played a particularly important role by enlisting young women from student and other social groups at various organizational levels. Tudeh publications pointed to existing prejudices against women and promised a bright future under socialism, but the process was handicapped by the systematic

and persistent subordination of women's social, economic, and political rights to the demands and priorities of Islamic ideology.

Between 1950 and 1953, Iran underwent serious political and economic changes following the nationalization of the oil industry, which since 1901 had been operating under the monopoly of the British. Iranians from all active political parties with different inclinations, Islamic, nationalist, and communist, along with the women's sections of the parties, joined in the movement supporting nationalization of the oil industry. Iranian women, once again, suspended their demands and hoped that after the success of this important movement, a real constitutional government and parliament committed to democracy, free elections and democratic rights of people, would recognize their rights and fulfill their demands.

The prime minister of the time, Dr. Mohammad Musaddiq, during this crucial period, took a number of steps that could have improved the social, economic and educational situation of both men and women. The emphasis was on increasing the number of the schools in the rural areas that have been neglected. Mussaddiq's legislation protecting workers and employees provided many benefits such as Medicare, accident insurance for workers and their families, unemployment benefits, and more for both men and women.

He also attempted to take steps toward women's suffrage. A bill covering electoral reforms, which finally provided women with the right to vote, was drafted. However, it was strongly opposed by a powerful conservative religious leader, Ayatollah Burujirdi, and Ayatollah Bihbahani as well as, to everyone's surprise, Ayatollah Abul-Qasim Kashani, a strong supporter of Dr. Mussaddiq. Interesting, a few months before Ayatollah Kashani's opposition to women's suffrage, which he called it a "disturbance," he had called upon Iranian women to rise against

British interests and join the movement to nationalize the oil industry. He stated during a press conference in 1949: "Today is the day that this nation, men, women, every member of society, should unite and fight against the foreigners, and they should be ready to sacrifice."<sup>23</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, women entered into fields that in the past had been monopolized by men: law, medicine, and engineering. They also entered the labor force as skilled and unskilled workers. Between 1941 and 1973, many women's organizations were founded as branches of political parties, such as the Democratic Party and the Tudeh Party. However, since the government banned these parties, they went underground. On the other hand, independent women's organization flourished and, by 1959, there were 20 active ones spread all over Iran. These included organizations such as the Council of Iranian Women, the Women's Association of the Hope for tomorrow, Jewish Women's Organization, Armenian Women's Organization, Zoroastrian Women's Organization, the Association of Women Physicians, the Association of Nurses, Teachers' Association, and the Society of Iranian Women in Academia. All shared a common demand, women's suffrage, since Iranian women still could not vote.

Debates on women's suffrage continued to grow. In 1959 numerous debates took place on women's suffrage in the Majlis. During this period, the issue of women's votes became a point of connection between the state and the opposition with the women's movement playing an important role in pushing the issue forward. There were at least three different sets of interests at play for the state policy on women enfranchisement: those of the shah, women, and the prime minister. During Amini's premiership these interests did not coincide. While women were lobbying for the right to vote, the shah was undecided and the prime minister was publicly opposed to it. Amini's stance was due to his policy of wooing the nationalist and religious opposition. He was not very popular with the opposition because of his pro-American position

and his government posts in the past. In April 1962, Amini told a group of American reporter that 'Iranian women should devote their attention and effort to social and charity activities'.<sup>24</sup>

The shah, on the other hand, was motivated to allow women to participate in politics as this seemed in line with his modernism and was the logical conclusion of women's participation in society. In 1961, the High Council of Women's Organizations of Iran was set up under the presidency of the shah's twin sister, Princess Ashraf. Once the women's movement was brought under the royal wing and Prime Minister Ali Amini was removed from his post, state policy became more unified and the shah was able to take the initiative and the credit for women's political rights.<sup>25</sup>

In 1962, under the premiership of Assadollah Alam, a decree was issued giving women the right to vote and to run in provincial and town elections. The first attempt to proclaim women's right to vote encountered strong opposition from no other than Ayatollah Khomeini. Therefore the prime minister withdrew the decree. Khomeini's strong opposition to women's suffrage, supported by the 'ulama, was sufficient to have the proclamation suspended. This awakened different women's organizations to action. The members realized that they had to mobilize and speak with a unified voice to achieve legislation against women's suffrage. Women, as a sign of protest, refused to commemorate the day of unveiling by the shah. Women also staged a one-day strike by various professional organizations including teachers, civil servants and employees of private institutions. Two days after the strike, a ballot was taken to see if the Iranian people would support the six-point program of the shah. Women cast their votes in separate ballot boxes. The women's votes had shown an overwhelming support for the shah's decree, and on February 27, 1963 women were once again given the right to vote and run for office.

On September 17, 1963, elections took place and six women were elected to the Majlis as deputies. The Majlis, which comprised 160 members, contained two female representatives, although neither was elected. The shah appointed each. In 1965, a woman was appointed minister for the first time. A special effort was made by the government to show that not only could women vote, but they also could become elected officials. The image Iran projected was one of progress and modernization in the Islamic world.

Under Mohammed Reza Shah advances in education were made for the entire population of Iran. The shah does not deserve all the credit; the increasing economic activity in Iran played a large role in the value of education. With the growing economy the job market opened up, creating new positions that needed to be filled.<sup>26</sup> This larger market also led to an increased opportunity for women in both the work force and education. Despite the overall increase in literacy for women, formal education was still limited. The education was not evenly distributed among the rural and urban people.<sup>27</sup> The educational gains that women made were mainly at the elementary level. Limited access to higher education hindered women from radical changes in their economic activities, and they remained dependent on their male kin. The education system also did little to change sex roles or women's perceptions of themselves; the curriculum supported the socialization of girls into nurturing mothers and providers.

During the 1950s a much larger group of educated women, increasingly aware of women's progress in other countries, began to form various organizations to improve the conditions for women in Iran. One of the first of these organizations was the Rah-e Now (New Path) organized by Mehrangiz Dowlatshahi in 1955. Another organization, founded by Safieh Firouz in 1956, later known as Women's League of Supporters of the Declaration of Human



Rights, actively sought equal political rights for women. The central committee of this organization had an audience with Mohammad Reza Shah in 1956. "The Shah, who was impressed with their request for political rights, promised three seats in the municipal council. Immediately a delegation of over eighty mullahs warned His Majesty against taking any favorable action for the women, saying 'if you act, you may not be here to carry out the action.' The Shah did not act."<sup>28</sup>

However, by the 1950's the women's movement became more centralized. Its activities became more compatible with the government's agenda. Mohammed Reza Shah's policy was a gradual co-optation of women's activities into the political system, so that they would all come under a central institution for women. The shah, like his father, wanted state control of all women's organizations.<sup>29</sup> In 1959 the shah established the High Council of Iranian Women's Associations, which incorporated 17 other women's groups. Ashraf Pahlavi, the shah's twin sister with a powerful personality in her own right, was appointed honorary president of the organization. In 1966 the organization was renamed Sazeman-e Zanan-e Iran (The Women's Organization of Iran (WOI)). Up until the 1979 revolution, the WOI was the only women's group campaigning for legal reforms. Unfortunately, the WOI failed to garner the interest of the Iranian intelligentsia. Although its membership was estimated at 70,000, many of the members were actually participants of other organizations that belonged to the WOI. The WOI was not meant to be a feminist organization; its existence, in fact, was meant to prevent that very thing.<sup>30</sup>

To promote women's human rights in the existing Iranian society, WOI accounted for the social disposition of power and influence. The clerical establishment wielded significant influence on various social strata and therefore needed to be counted in any policy calculation.

WOI also understood that to achieve human rights for women, it needed to transcend the discourse of the "value of woman in Islam," reaching for some rendition of global feminism that accommodated Iranians' cultural and religious disposition.<sup>31</sup> Given the history of the development of feminist thought in Iran and abroad, WOI concluded that although one could be justifiably and comfortably be a Muslim and a feminist striving to achieve full human rights, one could not achieve rights within the context of "Islamic feminism" without either subordinating them to Islamic prescriptions or rendering meaningless the Islamic adjective defining feminism.<sup>32</sup> In 1978, a mere 15 years since women had left the company of minors, criminals, and the insane in Iranian law, and a little over a decade after the creation of the Women's Organization of Iran, women were working as judges, diplomats, cabinet officers, mayors, governors, policewomen, and health and education corps members.

In the area of education, the focus of the literacy campaign had shifted to women. There were 12,403 Literacy Corps women teaching in villages. By 1978, 39 percent of all females aged 6 and above were literate.<sup>33</sup> The percentage of girls in primary schools had increased from 34 percent in 1966 to 42.55 percent in 1977.<sup>34</sup> At the university level; women comprised 30 percent of the student population. They were encouraged to take part in technical and scientific fields through the provision of special scholarships. The quota in Tehran established system to give preferential treatment to eligible girls who volunteered to enter technical fields or fields traditionally closed to women. More women had been accepted after university entrance examinations for the field of medicine than men.<sup>35</sup> In the area of employment, special programs had been established to prepare women for higher paying jobs through training classes in various areas of semi-skilled and skilled work. All labor and employment laws had been reviewed to ensure equal pay and comparable benefits for comparable work. A package of proposals aimed at

ensuring increased and continuous participation of women in the work force was approved by the cabinet. One part of the package made possible part-time work for working mothers up to the third year of a child's life. The three part-time years were to be considered equivalent to full-time work in terms of seniority and retirement benefits.

Providing childcare facilities in the vicinity of factories and offices became obligatory by law. A joint effort of WOI and various ministries made possible the establishment of childcare facilities for approximately one-third of all the children eligible in a period of less than two years after the passage of the regulation. The centers were subsidized by the government and supervised by a committee of mothers working in each office. Maternity leave was extended to allow a mother up to seven months leave with full pay. All regulations regarding housing, loans, pension, and other job benefits were adjusted to eliminate discrimination.

In 1975, the Women's Organization of Iran held a conference to mark the 40th anniversary of the unveiling of women in Iran and the beginning of the United Nations' International Women's Year. The conference passed an 11-point resolution that called for 'complete elimination of discrimination against women and equal opportunity and welfare for women from all walks of life'. The points included in the resolution were:

- Equal rights for Iranian men and women, and the improvement of laws, regulations, and methods of implementation, which may in some way prove discriminatory and detrimental to women.
- Extension of social security coverage to housewives.
- Job security for working mothers who are temporarily prevented by work from caring for their children because of working.
- Requiring public and private organizations to provide facilities for working mothers.
- Elimination of any form of discrimination in the distribution of jobs between men and women.

- Utilization of women in varied tasks, and basic measures to elevate women from low paying positions to productive jobs with higher returns, and their participation in planning and decision-making posts.
- Provision of part-time employment for housewives, and the creation of productive activities in rural areas for women during periods of seasonal underemployment.
- Application of the Labor and Social Insurance Laws to cottage industries employing girls and women.
- A multi-dimensional campaign to increase public awareness of the true status of women in the family and society and combating of unwarranted beliefs and prejudices which prevent the full social and economic participation of women.
- Extension of educational programs in order to inform women of their legal rights and the existing means for utilizing these rights.<sup>36</sup>

The resolution did not lead to government action or legislation. The demands made by the Women's Organization of Iran proved far more radical than the reforms that the state was willing to entertain. The more limited the women's demands, the more chance there was of positive government response. Some pro-establishment women, at the time, were also coordinating a campaign against sexism in society. But the shah expressed his personal views about women in saying "You're equal in the eyes of the law but not, excuse my saying so, in ability... You've never produced a Michelangelo or a Bach. You've never even produced a great chef... You've produced nothing great, nothing!"<sup>37</sup> Despite state propaganda, women's social position was not changing for better as a result of state policies.

It's widely argued that the co-opting of these women's organizations was merely an attempt on the part of the Pahlavi regime to save the monarchy. In 1958, the monarchy in neighboring Iraq had been destroyed, which was of great concern to the shah. In addition, President John F. Kennedy had declared that the United States would offer aid only to those countries that were ready to help themselves. Discontent was growing in Iran from the corruption in the government and charges of illegal election practices. It was becoming obvious that

something needed to be done quickly. And that something was the White Revolution, an attempt to appease the masses. These women's groups were merely window dressings for the regime.<sup>38</sup>

The White Revolution consisted of a series of reform programs launched in 1963 by Mohammad Reza Shah to strengthen those classes that supported the traditional system. The Shah advertised the White Revolution as a step towards modernization, but the Shah also had political motives.

To legitimize the White Revolution, the Shah called for a national referendum in early 1963 in which the majority of Iranians, including women, voted in favor. The reforms granted women more rights and poured money into education, especially in the rural areas. Minister Ali Amini tabled a proposal for land reform that became one of the cornerstones of the White Revolution. The clergy bitterly opposed these reforms and, with this, the peaceful relations between the Shah and the clergy came to end.<sup>39</sup> The Shah, hoping to gain more public support, included a provision in the White Revolution document granting women the right to vote and called for the public referendum on the issue. Despite Ayatollah Khomeini's call for a boycott of the referendum, and his attacks on women's emancipation, the referendum was held.

Iranian women in the early 1960s were still deprived of some basic legal, social, and political rights. They could not work or travel without the husbands' written permission. They could no longer initiate divorce proceedings except in extreme cases of the husband's illness, insanity, imprisonment, or desertion. They could not become guardians of their children even after the father's death, when, according to the law, a paternal grandfather or uncle preceded the mother. They could not serve as judges or become career diplomats. They could not transfer their citizenship to their children; indeed their citizenship was in jeopardy if they married a non-

Iranian. They inherited from a father's estate only half of what their brothers received and from a husband's estate only one-fourth when there were no children and one-eighth if there were children. They could get divorced by their husband with or without their knowledge by a simple, unilateral statement, or they could be faced with the presence of a second, third, or fourth wife in their home at any moment. Forced by economic need and patriarchal fiat, they could be contracted in a temporary marriage for periods ranging from hours to years in lieu of a fee for their sexual services with no enforceable right for themselves or any children resulting from the union.<sup>40</sup>

Iranian women's ability to control their lives at mid-century was conditioned by the strong, deep-rooted, and systematic opposition of the conservative Muslim clergy and other conservative forces, many within the government, to their efforts to gain rights. The clergy's attitude to women's rights was also a key factor in their persistent opposition to the Pahlavi regime's modernization policies. But women's objective situation had significantly changed by the 1960s, even though their rights and responsibilities appeared the same in the Shari'a and on the law books. The work of educating and organizing, which had begun before the constitutional revolution of 1906, had accelerated and expanded, producing a larger number of qualified women committed to change. This, in turn, provided the infrastructure without which the rapid transformation of women's role in the following years would have been unlikely.

By the 1960s women had become more organized and politically vocal, capable of lobbying the shah, the government, and the more moderate members of the clergy. The development culture, which included the idea of women's participation in social affairs, had

taken stronger root. And the shah, a believer in modernization, had become politically more powerful.

In spite of these changes, Islamic law continued to govern family life in Iran up until the 1960s. Matters soon changed, however. Landmark legislation called the Family Protection Law was endorsed by the shah and approved by parliament in 1967. It gave government-run Family Protection Courts on which female judges sat and had jurisdiction over marriage and family law. The right to divorce that had been the monopoly of the husband was given to the courts, and, under similar circumstances, both men and women could ask the courts for divorce. Women were granted the ability to divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. The Family Protection Laws of 1967 and 1975 increased the minimum age of marriage from 13 to 18 for women and to 20 for men and child custody was determined on a case-by-case basis.

Prior to the ratification of the 1975 Family Protection Law, a man could marry four wives and have a large number of temporary marriages. However, as a result of this law, a man could marry a second wife only by permission of the courts and after obtaining the express consent of his first wife. Thus, polygamy was restricted to a man's taking a second wife, solely with the permission of the first wife and by order of the court, and under specific and limited conditions.

The conservative clergy was vehemently opposed to this law, not only because of religious concerns but also because it wished to preserve and increase the power and material advantages it gained by their involvement in the affairs of the family.<sup>41</sup> What was strongly suppressed by the state was the political power of the clergy. The state allowed Islam to flourish at grass roots level while controlling the political digression of the institution of Shiism. The spread of literacy and the clergy's need to maintain contact with an increasingly westernized

population gave rise to a new phenomenon, the publication of touziholmasael, the book of religious instructions.

The touziholmasael was intended to regulate the lives of Shii followers and answer their religious enquiries. The clergy found it necessary to keep their hold on the family as a religious territory and to strengthen its claim over the family because of political suppression. At the time of state modernization, the clergy's renewed claim over women and the family turned this issue into an arena of power struggle between the state and the Shii establishment. Khomeini's touziholmasael was preoccupied with the protection of the Muslim community against modernization. This was attempted by means of instruction, which aimed to keep men and women in their respective places in the family. For example, incest was defined very narrowly; the age of marriage for men was low, and women were encouraged to marry before reaching the age of puberty. Men were allowed and had the right to practice polygamy, divorce was a natural right for men, women inherited half the amount men did, and the testimony of one man was equal to the testimony of two women. Women were prohibited from entering the judiciary, and they could not work without their husband's consent.<sup>42</sup>

In reaction to women's growing status in society, Khomeini and other clerics launched a crusade against the shah's progressive policies. They called those who enforced the new laws "sinners." Many women were not deterred by Khomeini's denunciations. In 1976, just a few years before the clergy launched the 1979 revolution, 2 million women had joined the Iranian workforce, with number gaining positions as cabinet members, business owners, doctors, lawyers, and engineers. More than 1,500 held managerial positions and 22 were members of Parliament. One and one-half million girls attended school and one-third of university students were women.<sup>43</sup>



The shah, however, was not a committed, strong supporter of feminism. His role as the king of kings represented the essence and personification of patriarchy. He represented the archetypal father figure for the family and nation. But he, as were many other government leaders, was conscious of and fully accepting of the argument that development was impossible without the full integration of women in the developmental process and a complete change in their status.<sup>44</sup> The queen, through a process of delicate consciousness-raising, became a feminist in the early 1970s. Her support was sought on issues as diverse as the amendment of the penal code and revision of elementary-school textbooks to eliminate sexist images. She was often under pressure to formulate her role the archetypal "mother" figure for the nation and to serve as an example of a responsible professional woman. On a trip to the edge of the Kavir (desert), she was brought a chador to wear to enter a saint's burial place. A companion gently reminded her that as a role model she ought not to allow herself to be photographed wearing a chador. The mullahs present and the local authorities stood with raised eyebrows. She finally donned the chador but folded it in half to look like a scarf--a sincere attempt at compromise that pleased neither group.<sup>45</sup> Princess Ashraf was a valuable ally whose blunt and straightforward statement of issues in the occasional high-level meetings with governmental officials was an effective lobbying mechanism that set the tone and pace for actual negotiations later followed by women activists.<sup>46</sup>

Prior to the 1979 Revolution, three patterns of work existed among women. Among the upper classes, women either worked as professionals or undertook voluntary projects of various kinds. Secular middle-class women aspired to emulate such women. Traditional middle-class women worked outside the home only from dire necessity. Lower class women frequently

worked outside the home, especially in major cities, because their incomes were needed to support their households.

Women were active participants in the revolution that toppled the Shah. Most activists were professional women of the secular middle classes, from among whom political antagonists to the regime had long been recruited. Like their male counterparts, such women had nationalist aspirations and felt that the shah's regime was a puppet of the United States. Some women also participated in the guerrilla groups, especially the Mojahedin and the Fadayan. More significant, however, were the large numbers of lower class women in the cities who participated in street demonstrations during the latter half of 1978 and early 1979. They responded to the call of Khomeini that it was necessary for all Muslims to demonstrate their opposition to tyranny.

Following the 1979 Revolution, the status of women changed. The main social group to inherit political power--the traditional middle class--valued most highly the traditional role of women in a segregated society. Accordingly, laws were enacted to restrict the role of women in public life; these laws affected primarily women of the secularized middle and upper classes. The hijab, or properly modest attire for women, became a major issue. Although it was not mandated that women who had never worn a chador would have to wear this garment, it was required that whenever women appeared in public they had to have their hair and skin covered, except for the face and hands. The law has been controversial among secular women, although for the majority of women, who had worn the chador even before the 1979 Revolution, the law probably has had only negligible impact.

During the last two decades before the revolution, the attitude of Iranian society toward its women underwent a slow but fundamental change. The change affected women in the urban

centers more than those in the rural areas. It affected those who adopted a Western style of life and those who led more traditional style of life. The increasing recognition that women could play useful social roles outside their homes without compromising the time-honored traditions of society became important.

The participation of women, politically active and the traditional, in the massive demonstrations against the shah's regime in the final months of 1978 and early months of 1979 showed that women's role did not have to be confined to activities within the house and that being out there on the streets beside the men was also their duty as Iranians and Muslims.

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## **Chapter 3**

### The 1979 Islamic Revolution

Several events in the 1970s set the stage for the 1979 revolution when the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi collapsed in the face of an organized popular revolution. This event marked the end of over 450 years of monarchical rule that had begun with the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 C.E. It also marked another serious reversal of the halting march of women's rights.

The cause of the revolution was the failure of the shah's government to address the multifaceted cultural, economic, political, and social grievances that had been building up in Iranian society since the 1950s but culminated in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The continued rise in the price of oil and influx of large sums of petro dollars in the Iranian economy produced alarming increases in inflation. The disparate increase in income continued to widen the gap between the rich and the poor both in the countryside as well as the major cities.<sup>2</sup> The presence of tens of thousand of unpopular skilled foreign workers in the country also compounded unemployment and was widely unpopular among the working class.

Many Iranians, not only, became increasingly angered by the regime's cronyism, but increasing internal corruption with a government system based on an individual's personal connections and briberies became the predominant determinants of social advances. Many were also angered by the fact that the royal family and those at the top level of the government were the foremost beneficiaries of the income generated by oil.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside growing general public discontent, increasingly, the shah's secret police

agency, the SAVAK, used its vast assets and influence in all ranks of the society to repress all forms of expression and brutally suffocate any perceived sign of opposition.<sup>4</sup>

The shah also angered pious Iranian Muslims by changing the first year of the Iranian solar calendar from the Islamic calendar to an Imperial calendar, marking the birth of Cyrus the Great as the first day, instead of the flight of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. Iran jumped overnight from the Muslim year 1355 to the royalist year 2535.

The continued ambitions of the shah to elevate his royal status and that of his monarchy culminated in the grand celebration event of October 1971 marking the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire. During this three-day celebration held on the site of Persepolis, it is estimated that over \$300 million was spent. Among the extravagances included the purchasing of over a ton of caviar and food preparation by some two hundred chefs flown in from Paris.<sup>5</sup> The foreign head of states with their entourages reveled on drink forbidden by Islam, were Iranian not only excluded from the festivities but also had insufficient food and shelter of their own.

Popular discontent gradually grew in all ranks of the society. The poorest section of the Iranian population tended to be the most religious and the least westernized. The poor were largely rural or inhabited slums outside the large cities, especially the capital Tehran. They wanted the basic Islamic lifestyle to return, in opposition to the shah's efforts for modernism and progress, which they believed to be westernization. They viewed the shah's reforms as self-serving and were skeptical of his promise of providing progress and advancement for all Iranians.

As the Iranian middle classes became more educated, and exposed to Western values, many also came to see the regime as being part of the problem. The shah's infatuation for



military build up, spending billions of dollars on equipment purchased from the U.S. while many parts of the country lacked the basic needs for sanitation, education, and electricity further angered many who saw the need for reform as the only way to address vast shortcomings in the despotic Pahlavi government.<sup>6</sup>

In 1975, the shah introduced a one-party system called the Rastakhiz party and banned all other political parties even those loyal to him. The purpose creating this consolidated political party was to tighten his grip over the country and to establish an absolute autocracy. His mandate included that all Iranians were to join and pay dues to this new political party. At an educational gathering held that year, the shah addressed the teachers impress on the younger generation the philosophy of the White Revolution and prepare them to become “ more competent servants of the Shahanshah (King of Kings, a label that was used to address him) and the Home land.”<sup>7</sup>

By mid-1977 economic austerity measures to fight inflation disproportionately affected the thousands of poor many comprised of unskilled male migrants who had left their villages and farm lands in hope of finding a better life in the thriving large metropolitan areas. Culturally and religiously conservative, many of these workers eventually would form the core of revolution's demonstrators and "martyrs". In addition, The government attempt to fight inflation with populist "anti-profiteering" campaigns, fining and jailing merchants for high prices had angered and politicized many merchants most of whom also had strong religious beliefs and were affiliated with the clerics.

In the next few years' opposition groups started to form against the Rastakhiz party. Among them was a movement of a religious reform and revitalization of Shiism that was started by a small group of intellectuals headed by Dr. Ali Shariati, who had received his degree in sociology from the Sorbonne. He was a popular and influential modernist Islamic leader who

combined Marxism and Shiism orthodoxy into a revolutionary movement inspired by the Cuban and Algerian revolutions. Shariati was aware of women's social, political, legal, and educational achievements in society and tried to provide an alternative status to women compare to the Marxist and Western concepts of women's status in society.<sup>8</sup> He offered a new and familiar paradigm of the ideal women. In his opinion, Fatemeh, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad, was the ideal women. She who was viewed in past religious depictions of her as innocent, helpless and suffering, was reintroduced as a woman that espoused all the traditional virtues: innocence, compassion, modesty, courage, and patience.

With the growing social discontent, the year 1977 was a turning point for demise of the shah's regime. The alleged murder of Dr. Shariati in the summer of 1977 in London greatly angered his followers, who considered him a martyr at the hands of Savak. This event was pivotal in removing a potential revolutionary rival to Khomeini.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the ulama were also divided, some allying with the liberal secularists and others with the Marxists. Khomeini, who was in exile in Iraq, led a small faction that advocated the overthrow of the regime and the creation of a theocratic state. In October of '77 when Khomeini's son, Mostafa, died of a heart attack, his death was also blamed on the Savak. A subsequent memorial service for Mostafa in Tehran put Khomeini back in the spotlight.<sup>10</sup>

Khomeini first came to political prominence in 1963 when he led opposition to the Shah and his "White Revolution." He was strongly opposed to the core aspects of this effort which included a program of reforms to break up landholdings including those owned by religious foundations, grant women the right to vote and equality in marriage, and allow religious minorities to hold government office. Khomeini was arrested in 1963 after declaring the shah a "wretched miserable man" who had "embarked on the destruction of Islam in Iran." Three days

of major riots throughout Iran followed, with Khomeini supporters claiming 15,000 dead from police fire. Khomeini was released after eight months of house arrest and continued his agitation, condemning the regime's close cooperation with Israel and the United States, the westernization of the country and other policies that diluted the importance of Islam in the country. In November 1964 Khomeini was re-arrested and sent into exile where he remained for 14 years until the revolution.<sup>11</sup>

In 1977, the shah, pressured by U.S. President Jimmy Carter, responded by making positive strides towards improving its human and political rights record. The shah granted amnesty to more than 300 political prisoners, allowed the Red Cross to visit prisons, relaxed censorship of the media, and reformed the court system.<sup>12</sup> This loosening of restrictions led to more campaigns from the opposition where writers campaigned for freedom of thought, and gradually demonstrations denouncing the regime began to surface.

During the period up to 1978, the opposition to the shah mostly came from the urban middle class, a section of the population that was fairly secular and would support a constitutional monarchy. Even pro-Western elements in Iran became disturbed by the increasingly autocratic style of government and increased use of the secret police. Many fled Iran before the Revolution, and others began to organize. At the same time a broader populist movement found its source of organization in mosques, where sermons denounced the wickedness of the West and Western indulgences. The collision between a young and growing population and a social structure which offered neither advancement in a modern state nor the stability of a traditional society, created the conditions, which were ripe for revolution.<sup>13</sup> But, it was the Islamic groups that first managed to rally the great mass of the population against the

Shah.

At the political level, strikes broke out all over the country. Women were among the first to go on strike against the regime in many factories as well as in government offices and schools.<sup>14</sup> Despite their different political views and social and economic concerns, men and women, of all ages and social denominations whether religious or secular agreed on one point: change was needed in the political system.

An important point to keep in mind is that the support of women was an act of primarily as Iranians, sharing the same basic complaints about the regime as men had. They too opposed the corruption and repression of the Pahlavi government and experienced the economic hardship, which accompanied increasing inflation.<sup>15</sup>

During 1978, Khomeini was the person who succeeded in uniting the diverse currents of discontent into a unified anti-Shah movement. He was a senior clergyman of Shiaism living in exile in Iraq and Paris since 1965. Khomeini effectively used popular Shi'a themes, such as the moral and religious right of struggling against oppression and for justice, to appeal broadly to both religious and secular Iranians. By 1977, His message was distributed through music cassettes, which were smuggled into Iran in small numbers, and then duplicated, and spread all around the country.<sup>16</sup> This was the beginning of Iranian revolution.

In January of 1978 the official press ran a libelous story attacking Khomeini. Angry students and religious leaders protested against the allegations in the city of Qom. The army was sent in dispersing the demonstrations and killing several students. According to the Shi'a customs, 40 days after a person's death memorial services are held. In mosques across the nation, calls were made to honor the dead students. Thus on February 18, groups in a number of cities

marched to honor the fallen and to protest against the rule of the shah. This time violence erupted in the city of Tabriz and over a hundred demonstrators were killed. The cycle repeated itself and on March 9 a new round of protests began across the nation.<sup>17</sup> Luxury hotels, theaters showing "unethical movies", and other symbols of the shah's regime was destroyed; again security forces intervened, killing many. The protests continued the following day.

The damage from the demonstrations, along with rampant inflation, further ravaged the Iranian economy. As a result, in the summer of 1978 the government introduced austerity measures, shut down public works projects and imposed wage freezes. These measures created widespread unemployment and labor unrest, mostly among the poor laborers living in the slums around Tehran and other major cities. Increasingly, the working class joined the students and middle class in the protests against the regime.

By August 1978, it had become obvious that the repressive tactics that had worked in the past no longer were effective in containing the ever-growing protest movement.<sup>18</sup> The shah sought to defuse the opposition by appointing a new government of royalist politicians who had maintained ties to the clergy. He also freed some political prisoners, and relaxed press censorship. This led to a major demonstration in Tehran, where more than 100,000 people marched through the city carrying photos of Khomeini and handing out flowers to the soldiers and police; the latter were asked to join the call for free elections. Similar peaceful but smaller-scale demonstrations took place in many other cities. Apparently frightened by the strength of the movement and the evident solidarity among religious and secular groups, the Shah declared martial law in Tehran and 11 other cities. He also ordered the arrest of National Front and Freedom Movement leaders.

The first day of martial law, September 8, 1978, became known as Black Friday because

several hundred people were killed in Tehran as troops forced thousands of demonstrators to leave the area of the parliament building, where they had gathered to demand free elections.<sup>19</sup> Black Friday succeeded in alienating much of the rest of the Iranian people, as well as the shah's allies abroad. Black Friday first stunned and then enraged the people. In response to urging from Khomeini, strikes spread throughout the country, affecting factories, shops, schools, the oil industry, utilities, and the press. By the end of October, Iran's economy was paralyzed. The shah dismantled the previous structure and reappointed a military government with authority to force oil workers and others back to their jobs. These tactics, however, failed as many army conscripts were refusing to shoot at unarmed civilians and even deserting their units, and the strikes continued.

Women were as horrified as men by the violent way in which peaceful demonstrations were dealt with by the government. They also suffered and died in great numbers in Jaleh Square on Black Friday along sidemen.<sup>20</sup> Women were, in this sense, directly attacked, and it is not surprising that they responded by expressing their outrage, not only as mothers and wives, sisters and daughters, but as individuals.

By this time Khomeini announced he would accept nothing less than the removal of the shah leading secular and religious opposition leaders supported his position. Despite the military government, demonstrations continued throughout November, and each day produced more martyrs as people were killed in cities and towns when the army tried to suppress protest marches.<sup>21</sup> It was clear that the shah's government had lost control of the streets. Fearful of more bloodshed the government agreed to allow traditional mourning processions to take place during the Shi'a religious month of Muharram, which marks the martyrdom of Husain, one of the most revered religious figures in Shiaism. On December 12 over 2 million people filled the streets of

Tehran to protest against the shah. Millions of Iranians participated in peaceful marches throughout the country, but instead of mourning the martyrdom of the saint Imam Husain, they called for the downfall of the shah. The popular slogan chanted everywhere became "Azadi, Istiqlal, Jomhuri Islami" (freedom, independence, Islamic Republic).<sup>22</sup> These terms meant political freedom from the oppression of the secret police, independence from the shah's alliance with the United States, and a republican government based on Islamic principles of justice.

The shah agreed to introduce a constitution and appoint the moderate Shapour Bakhtiar as prime minister, but it was too late for compromise. The majority of the population was loyal to Khomeini, and when he called for a complete end to the monarchy the shah was forced to flee the country on January 16, 1979. Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1, 1979, invited by the anti-shah revolution already in progress. Ten days later Bakhtiar went into hiding, eventually to find exile in Paris. Processes against the supporters of the shah started, and hundreds were executed.

Once the old regime was swept aside, everyone, including women, assumed the future could only get better. Women felt certain that because of the role they had played in the revolution they would have an active voice in determining this bright future for everyone.<sup>22</sup>

There was great jubilation in Iran at the ousting of the shah, but there was also much disagreement over Iran's future path. While Khomeini was the most popular political figure, there were dozens of revolutionary groups, each with a differing view of the proper direction of Iran's future. There were strong liberal, secularist, Marxist, and anarchist factions, as well as a wide array of religious groups looking to craft the future of Iran.

It is clear that women had experienced many changes by the Pahlavi's reforms. Such as increased opportunities for education, the right to vote, and family law was changed to their

advantage, allowing women greater rights to initiate divorce and making it more difficult for a man to take more than one wife. The effectiveness of these measures in changing women's daily lives is another matter. There was the question of how valuable voting rights were where elections were viewed as rigged, and men often found ways to get around the newly liberalized laws governing family relationships by taking advantage of a wife's ignorance, illiteracy, or economic dependence.<sup>23</sup> The fact that some women were educated and employed meant that they experienced the same dissatisfactions as men. It is also worth noting that many women had never lived under any other form of government in Iran than that headed by the Pahlavis, who had been in control since 1925, therefore they would be unlikely to compare conditions favorably with preexisting circumstances.

At the time, the military, economy, and foreign relations of the nation all were in turmoil. The early years of the revolution saw the development of a government with two centers of power. Bazargan, the Freedom Movement leader, became prime minister, and the Freedom Movement worked to establish a liberal secular government. The clerics led by Khomeini formed a separate centre of power, the Islamic Republic Party. The groups tried to cooperate, but tensions grew between the two factions.<sup>24</sup>

It was the theologians who were the first to bring order to the nation, as revolutionary cells became local committees. Becoming known as the Revolutionary Guards in May 1979, these groups soon were running local governments across Iran and wielding most local power.<sup>25</sup> They also gained control of the judicial tribunals that were passing judgment on the former officials in the shah's security services and the military.

In June, the Freedom Movement released its draft constitution; it referred to Iran as an Islamic Republic, but gave no official role to the ulama or Islamic law. The constitution was sent



to the newly elected legislature for review, dominated by allies of Khomeini. The chamber rejected the constitution agreeing with Khomeini that the new government should be based "1000% on Islam."

Khomeini founded the fundamentalist Iranian Republican Party (IRP) to squeeze opposition parties out of the provisional government and at the same time established the Revolutionary Guards or Pasdaran, a political police force to marginalize the secular left within the armed neighborhood committees called komitehs, which it wanted to mobilize as a supporter bloc. The Pasdaran were soon forcibly liquidating shoras or council, purging komitehs and repressing ethnic Kurdish separatists and women's organizations, while the Party of God, Hezbollah, was created as a strike-breaking force of thugs. The IRP also created a public works project to divert the energies of the most militant councils and replacing them with fundamentalist councils and Islamic societies. The true spirit of the revolution with thirst for democracy and individual rights was destroyed and diverted as Iran once again fell under the grips of a new autocratic regime, this time with strong fundamental religious beliefs.

On April 1, after a landslide victory in a national referendum in which only one choice was offered (Islamic Republic: yes or no), Ayatollah Khomeini declared an Islamic republic with a new constitution reflecting his ideals of Islamic government. A new constitution that was made created a powerful post of supreme leader for Khomeini, which would control the military and security services and could veto candidates running for office. A president was to be elected every four years, but only those candidates approved indirectly by the supreme leader (through a council of guardians) were permitted to run for the office. Khomeini himself became head of state for life, as "Leader of the Revolution," and later "Supreme Spiritual Leader."

By 1979, at the time of the revolution, women were active in all areas of life in Iran. The

number of girls attending schools was on the rise. The number of female candidates for universities had increased sevenfold during the first half of the 1970s.<sup>26</sup> Women were encouraged to participate in areas previously closed to them. Women were police officers, scholars, judges, pilots, surgeons, and engineers. They were present in every field except the clergy. In 1978 there 333 out of 1,660 candidates for local council were women. Twenty-two were elected to the parliament, two to the Senate. There was one female cabinet minister, three sub-cabinet undersecretaries including the second-highest ranking officials in Ministry of Labor and Mines and the Ministry of Industries, one governor, one ambassador, and five mayors.<sup>27</sup>

Ironically, many Iranian women during the revolution came out onto the streets to show their support of the revolution. Iranian women were active in all areas of life in Iran. These women came from diverse social and political backgrounds, feminist, human right activists, judges, lawyers, physicians, workers, teachers, and students were fought and marched against the shah's government and for the revolution. Among them were also secular women from urban professional families of the middle and upper middle classes that had been educated in European or American universities. The women, by demonstrating in very large groups, had tried to achieve their own goals and aims and demanding more rights, not less. The participation of large numbers of women and their massive demonstrations were important to the success of the revolution and its largely nonviolent character. The women's presence served as the most important factor in disarming the soldiers placed there by the shah's regime to shoot at the crowd if necessary. The women all covered themselves in black veils as a sign of solidarity regardless of their political and personal beliefs concerning the hijab.

Playing a very important role in the success of the revolution, Iranian women expected that their participation and efforts would be recognized and that their status would improve as a

result. But, their expectations and their hopes were short lived, for soon after the revolution Khomeini instructed the Justice Minister to review the Family Protection Law and eliminate all sections that were judged contrary to the Shari'ah. The marriage age for girls returned to puberty and men could divorce whenever they chose and take multiple wives.<sup>28</sup>

Almost immediately thereafter, Khomeini declared that all working women had to wear the hijab. Moreover he said:

It is obligatory that all of a women's body except the oval of the face and hands up to wrist be covered from namahram (those not permitted to view her). The aforementioned garment is allowed if it can cover the obligatory parts. However, the chador is preferable. Those garment that attract the attention of the namahram, should be avoided.<sup>29</sup>

Khomeini's veiling decree was forcibly imposed on women, disregarding the rights of those Iranian women who did not support veiling. During the reign of Reza Shah the harassment had been limited to forceful removal of the veil and occasionally physical assaults. After March 1979, the veil became a shari 'ah obligation, God's law, and of course those Iranian women who refused to veil or were improperly veiled were arrested. They were arrested and tried in the Islamic courts and subjected to lashing. Veiling became the duty of every Muslim woman and thus became the concern of Iranian women.

Therefore, right after the Khomeini's decree, many Iranian women who went out on the street unveiled were attacked and beaten up by the authorities composed of both men and women. From the very start, when the Islamists attempted to impose their laws against women, there were massive demonstrations, with hundred of thousands of women pouring into the streets of Tehran protesting against the new laws. When Khomeini announced the imposition of the veil, there were protests in which women took to the streets with the slogans, "Freedom is neither Eastern nor Western; it is global" and "Down with the reactionaries; Tyranny in any form is

condemned.”

Those Iranian women who marched against the veiling decree were brutally beaten by the pasdaran- a Inqilab, Guardians of the Revolution. The slogan of the attackers was “ya rusari ya tusari,” either “a head cover or a hit on the head.” Iranian women realized that once again they had to take action in order to protect their rights. On International Women’s Day, March 8, 1979, thousands of women rallied at Tehran University and protested against Khomeini’s declaration. They demanded equal pay for equal work, the right to choose what to wear, and the preservation of the Family Protection Law.<sup>30</sup> They received no support from men. Not even those who belonged to socialist and Marxist associations, or liberal or radical groups, all of whom had in the past claimed to support women’s rights. The Islamic vigilantes attacked women with knives and scissors, and acid was thrown in their faces. Yet they did not surrender, and it was the regime that retreated for a short while.

In addition, the Revolutionary Government took serious measures to suppress women’s rights, resulting in the dismissal of women’s judges, the prohibition of women for legal practice, the abolition of the Family Protection Law, and a ban on abortion. The regime made the veil mandatory, first in workplaces, then in shops, and finally in the entire public sphere. Yet, Iranian women did not give up and they continued their protests, despite the fact that many were arrested, incarcerated, and some even raped and executed.<sup>31</sup> A sad example is Farrokhrou Parsa, the former Minister of Culture and an outspoken supporter of women’s rights in Iran was executed after a summary and secret trial on charges of prostitution and being a Baha’i.<sup>32</sup> Although women’s heroic efforts restored some rights to them, such as attending schools and being able to pursue higher education, women were still under bondage and most laws, such as divorce and polygamy would be to their disadvantage.

Iranian women responded to these setbacks in a number of ways. To mobilize the masses in support of their cause, they turned to the power of the print media.<sup>33</sup> Following the revolution, feminist press served many functions, including disseminating information, confronting issues, and making dialogue accessible to millions. The weekly newspaper *Zan-e Ruz* served as a platform to challenge family laws and government policy toward women. Shahla Sherkat was a contributor to it and subsequently founded a women's magazine, *Zanan*, in 1991. Both publications provided a crucial link between secular and Muslim women, and advocated "gender-egalitarian" approaches to government and Islam. Where before the revolution, these two groups would have been divided; they now found common cause in decrying the regime's repression of women's rights.

Women combated the loss of the Family Protection Law through a mass letter-writing campaign. Through heavy petitioning, the government was forced to make some concessions. Gradually, special courts were reinstated to address familial and child custody cases, as well as to deny men automatic divorce rights, and eventually encouraged fairer marriage contracts.

The mandatory veil, in the other hand, was an attempt to force social uniformity through an assault on individual and religious freedoms, not an act of respect for traditions and culture. The veil no longer represented religion but the state; not only were Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and peoples of other faiths deprived of their rights, so were the Muslims, who now viewed the veil more as a political symbol than a religious expression of faith.<sup>34</sup> Other freedoms such as freedom of the press were no longer practiced. There was censorship of books including the works of some the most popular classical and modern Iranian women and men poets and writers. There was even a ban on dancing, female singers, music, films and other artistic forms, and systematic attacks against the intellectuals and academics that protested the new means of oppression.

By 1981, parliament had reinstated the veiling law as well as the Islamic Law of Retribution. The latter provided for traditional Islamic punishments, such as stoning for adultery, and up to 70 lashes for women whose hair showed from beneath the veil. The new government's treatment of women was unwavering. Segregation was strictly enforced in schools, workplaces, and on the streets. The Revolutionary Guards acted as the regime's security service and arrested women who were not escorted in public by a male relative. The treatment of women was such that they were not allowed to sit in the back of public buses. Any interaction between the sexes at coed universities was strictly prohibited. Women were even forbidden from certain areas of study such as veterinary science, various fields of engineering, technology, and business. The Islamic constitution prohibited women from the presidency, religious leadership, judgeship and entering certain educational fields. Although women retained the right to vote and hold office, many were encouraged to return to a life at home. The Part-Time Work Law gave women a full-time salary for part-time employment. Day-care centers, which were crucial in enabling women to work outside the home, were shut down. As the time passed only eight women were elected to parliament in 1992 and the Ministry of Women's Affairs established under Reza Shah was abolished.

Women were not only segregated in public, be it in the workforce, classrooms, and public transportation, and they were even barred from soccer stadiums.<sup>35</sup> While women's football in Iran has existed since 1970, female players are required to adhere to a strict dress code. Since the 1979 revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, women have had only restricted and segregated access to public places, and they have specifically been banned from attending men's sporting events. Iranian women are allowed to compete in sports that require removal of

the hijab, but only in arenas that are all female. They are banned from public events if spectators include unrelated men.

From the first day of the revolution, the result was that ordinary Iranian citizens, both women and men, inevitably began to feel the presence and intervention of the state in their most private daily affairs. It was the state that controls the people, to jail them for wearing nail polish, lipstick, playing sports and it was there to watch over young girls and boys appearing in public.

Despite imposing these limitations under strict adherence to Islamic laws, after the revolution, the state and especially the revolutionary grass roots organizations attempted to harness women's tremendous mobilization potential. The Iranian Republican Party (IRP) took control of the mass mobilization of mostazaf women (Mostazaf, is a term in the Islamic Republic for describing the very lower classes of people and its literal translation means "weak").<sup>36</sup> It set up the Committee for the Celebration of Women's Day, which organized mass, rallies every year to mark the birthday of the Prophet's daughter, Fatimah, which had been named as official Women's Day by Khomeini. The IRP's main focus of slogans and demands at these rallies was to support of the policies of the hardliner clergy. In the early post revolution period strictly religious women were mobilized against the secular women and those demanding more freedom. These women often lead a band of hooligans against the secular women's anti-hejab demonstrations in March 1979.<sup>37</sup> State official praised these Hezbollahi women (Hezbollahi women and men are fanatical supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini that believe they do not belong to earthly political parties and only follow God's word by following their leader Khomeini).

In later years, Hezbollahi women's demonstrations continued to be used to prepare the ground for new policies or rejuvenate old ones. The state also needed the women's support in two areas, elections and the Iran-Iraq war, in order to survive. Women's participation in the

elections was of prime importance for the Islamic Republic's populist image. This was especially so in the context of the number of times people were asked to vote in the first decade of the Islamic Republic: two referendums, two elections for the Assembly of Experts, three Majles elections, and four presidential elections. *Zan Ruz*, a women's magazine, published articles and editorials which described the women's vote as a national, political and Islamic duty. Khomeini held audiences with women supporters and made speeches, appealing to women around the country to vote.<sup>38</sup> A survey of women voters showed that the majority of them were illiterate and many were accompanied by their men when voting. Another study of voting patterns demonstrated that the number of voters had gone down substantially in later years compared with early elections.

Khomeini encouraged women's participation and supporting role in the Iran-Iraq war that was started in September 22, 1980. The type of support expected from them was to join the revolutionary guards and mobilized into the Medical Aid, Literacy Campaign, the Construction Struggle and play a role in relief operations in the war zones.<sup>39</sup> Women revolutionary guards were taught how to use arms but were not expected to use them but in case the state needed them in future. As the war spread to civilian zones and civilian areas became the target of air raids, the Iranian army, which lacked arms and expertise, was gradually pushed back and defeated by Iraqi forces. The war became more and more unpopular with urban and later rural citizens. The number of volunteers dwindled, war refugees rioted and those whose homes had been destroyed by Iraqi air raids openly demonstrated their discontent.

Under these circumstances, the Islamic state, seeing its own survival at stake, attempted a military mobilization of women. The change of policy was justified by Khomeini and in a speech to a group of women revolutionary guards in April 1985, he asked women to take arms in



defense of Islam.<sup>40</sup> The Society of Al-Zahra, a women's organization in Qom, called for a mass demonstration in support of the Khomeini's call for women's active participation in the armed defense of the Islamic country.

In April 1986, the Revolutionary Guards Corps announced its program of military training for women, which started by training 500 women. Later in 1986, a number of training camps were set up specifically for the purpose of women's military training. However, women did not need to take up arms in defense of Islam. One Year later, Khomeini presented the only solution left to the Islamic Republic and agreed to end the war.

Although Islamist women took part in the war effort during the (1980-1988) Iran-Iraq war, the state still viewed them only as wives and mothers and did not recognize their role in society. According to Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud, a journalist for the international paper, *Le Monde Diplomatique*:

Gradually, a number of women who had joined the fight against secularism at the start of the revolution realized that the regression was affecting all women, irrespective of their convictions. Having come to the fore during the revolution, these militant women now joined the struggle against sexual segregation. An activist who calls herself an "Islamic feminist" (and who prefers to remain anonymous), describes this new consciousness: "Women's rights have suffered setbacks, and even (Islamist) women revolutionaries have been kept out of the public domain. The authorities only needed us to hold street protests: once the revolution was over they wanted us go back to our homes. I realized then that revolutionary social activity loses its meaning when women lose their rights. That is how I came to defend women's rights."<sup>41</sup>

The very efforts of the government to involve women in defense during the Iran-Iraq war, to educate girls at all levels, and to promote family planning and reduce births helped awaken many girls and women to new ideas. Increasingly, there has been a continued trend in the rise of awareness among all classes of women; whether poor or educated, secular or religious, urban or

rural. This wave has gradually transformed women's activism for demanding more rights even within the tight grip of the Islamic Republic.

In many cases, the resistance has been most successful when issues related to women's right have been interpreted in the context of the Quran, thereby giving it a strong religious and Islamic flavor to resist some of the more conservative dogmatic laws that had permeated during the period of Khomeini's rule. To this day, women have continued to resist the laws imposed on them both by subtle means of expression and also openly defying the authorities.

An example that illustrates this is in relation to sports and sporting events. When the Iranian football team narrowly defeated Australia in the 1998 FIFA World Cup qualification on November 29, 1997, millions of Iranians celebrated the victory by dancing and singing in the streets, despite multiple government warnings against any secular-type celebrations. The most notable event on that day was that women breached the police barrier and entered the stadium, from which they were banned.<sup>42</sup> They wanted to use these events as a message to Islamic fundamentalists in Iran.

At a subsequent event when Iran defeated the U.S. soccer team 2-1 during the actual 1998 FIFA World Cup, on June 21, 1998, similar celebrations continued several days, with some women taking off veils and mingling with men. This started a chain of events as Iranian women's rights activists started fighting for the right to enter stadiums, often violently breaking into them. In April 2006 President Mahmud Ahmadenejad lifted the ban on women entering stadiums despite the objections of conservatives, commenting that women and families help bring morality and chastity to public venues. However, the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, reinstated the ban on May 8, 2006. This tug of war has continued as further restrictions were enacted to restrict women from participating in international and national competitions.<sup>43</sup>

In December 2007, the vice president of the Iranian Olympic Committee, Abdolreza Savar, issued a memorandum to all sporting federations about the "proper behavior of male and female athletes" and that "severe punishment will be meted out to those who do not follow Islamic rules during sporting competitions" both local and abroad. Men are not allowed to train or coach women. Iran's female volleyball team was once considered the best in Asia, but due to the lack of female coaches it has been prevented from international competition.<sup>44</sup>

Progress has been slow but significant even with the current climate of religious conservatives. Despite the barriers imposed by the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have gradually penetrated the labor force and have been working in a variety of areas such as politics, law enforcement, transportation industries, and research. Universities tend to be dominated by women in Iran and female legislators have gradually been getting more representation in the Iranian parliament.

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## Conclusion

**Treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers.**

-The Prophet Mohammed

When evaluating the role of Iranian women in society and their contributions to the many upheavals that the Iranian society has witnessed over the last century, it is clear that everything needs to be viewed within the framework of Islam and how it defines gender relationships. Most scholars of Islam will argue that Islam provided many rights for women in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. that were previously non-existent. Many of these laws were to address the pre-Islamic barbaric Arab society in which women were considered the property of men, females infanticide was common practice, and forced marriages were the norm. Despite the significant positive changes that were brought about by Islam for women during the early centuries as Islam expanded, lack of any meaningful progress for women in all other aspects of civil life has continued to be dominant in most Muslim countries.

The introduction of Islam to Iran in the 7<sup>th</sup> century brought with it a set of codes that addressed marriage, civil rights, education, dress codes and by and large defined the role of women in society. Throughout centuries these laws were interpreted and reinterpreted by the patriarchal religious leaders to prevent any meaningful progress for women's rights. The actual reforms for women's rights that evolved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran were shaped by the gradual rise in secularism in the period surrounding the Constitutional Revolution of 1907. Through the reign of the Pahlavi Dynasty, women continued to see their status in the society raised only to be pushed back once again by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This return to

fundamentalist Islam hijacked a fully democratic Iranian revolution of 1979 to impose strict laws under the jurisdiction of Islamic courts. These laws, often enforced by the regime's hooligans, have once again redefined the boundaries for women's progress with every attempt to maintain the patriarchal hierarchy.

The mass participation of women in the 1979 uprising in Iran marked a turning point in the history of their struggles for freedom and comprehensive equal rights with men. Women's active and visible presence in the 1979 revolution added a significant impetus to the mass demonstrations leading up to the uprising. Iranian women were already active in the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) and other major political events of the century. But it was the expansion of Iranian capitalism under the shah that drew women more fully onto the political stage.

During the 1979 revolution, women as organizers and leaders broke through centuries-old patriarchal walls. For the first time, women felt that they were alongside men as equal contributors and not as mere numbers. Throughout the 1970s, secular Iranian women had certainly regarded themselves as full partners in the worldwide struggle for equality. But to many, the revolution appeared offer a chance to find an independent voice as Iranian progressives, as socialists and feminists.

It is one of the cruel paradoxes of that revolution that women played an important role in toppling the shah's regime as frontline fighters in charge of barricades, demonstrations and strikes. Yet today, women in Iranian society occupy an oppressed and subordinate position.

One of the first actions against women after the 1979 revolution was Khomeini's decree for reinstating the mandate of veiling. On March 10, 1979, women organized a massive



protest against the hijab imposition. This was savagely crushed by the regime, an important turning point was reached as progressively more and more aspects of women's private and public lives were violently invaded. Islamic law (Shari'ah) now legitimated state violence against women. The regime created "morality" patrols that were dispensed in the streets to observe and enforce the codes. Repression of women and young men from anything that was even perceived as against the strict Islamic codes became one of the main building blocks of the Islamic regime's ideological identity. This has become a dominant theme in all public domains, including the work place, universities, schools, recreational centers, beaches and buses. The Islamic regime created numerous institutions to actively interfere in all spheres of women's lives, including sex. The way women dress, conduct their sexual life in the privacy of their homes, eat or drink, choose which subjects to study, travel or look after their children became issues for the Islamic state to decide, not women themselves.

Women's rights were further curtailed by the newly written Islamic Republic constitution which prohibited women from the presidency, religious leadership, judgeship and entering certain educational fields. All civil courts were replaced by Islamic courts. The Law of Retribution (Qisas) and its barbarically archaic practices were re-introduced into Iran after 13 centuries. Under these barbaric laws, overseen by the Guardian Council, the value a woman's life is deemed to be as half of a man's life. This is called blood money exchange (deyeh) in Islamic cultural term. Stoning adulterers to death, torturing women for not observing the strict hijab and showing some strands of their hair, punishing them by cutting parts of their body (including blinding by gouging an eye out), raping virgin women in prison before execution (so they are excluded from 'heaven') has become codified as part of the observed law.

The discriminatory religious laws against women do not just limit women's rights: They also confer privileges on men such as polygamy (which gave men the Islamic blessing to have up to four permanent wives at a time and unlimited temporary wives, *sigheh*). The right to divorce and custody of children after divorce was again exclusively granted to men after many centuries.

Thus, in Iran, religion saturates all the legal, political, economic, cultural, social and private spheres and processes of society. Any basic demand from women is regarded as a threat to the male-dominated Islamic regime as it questions the validity of Islam and therefore the regime. Women's resistance against the compulsory hijab, for example, is seen by the Islamic regime as an open political confrontation. If women want to object to the fact that they do not want to live with their husbands in a polygamous relationship, their objection is regarded as subversive.<sup>1</sup> For even basic demands, women have to confront a mighty religious state rather than the traditional family patriarchs.

The potentially explosive nature of women's rights in Iran is illustrated in the regime's handling of one section of the women's movement in particular. One of its most successful 'counter-insurgency' strategies over the 31 years has been to indirectly empower the Islamic sections of the women's movement in order to marginalize the secular and left tendencies. Through this, it was clear that an active women's movement and the Islamic regime are not necessarily incompatible. Now, the regime's repression has reached a point that it cannot even tolerate these women's restrained demands for piecemeal reforms within an Islamic framework. By imprisoning them, the regime has made them martyrs.

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<sup>1</sup> Amin Ahsan Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1986), p. 278

The continued presence of women in all aspects of the demand for reform has been an amazing reflection of the courage these women have expressed. Even harsh punishments, systematic violence, discrimination in public and in private, constant harassment, imprisonment, torture and execution have not managed to silence women in Iran. In the last 30 years, women have defied the reign of the Islamic regime and have managed to exhibit a splendidly imaginative and innovative repertoire of resistance.

Women now constitute 60 percent of admissions to universities. Iranian women have occupied a prominent position in arts, literature and cinema. The feminization of art is a new phenomenon in Iran and has been part of this strategy of resistance. Women have created influential websites and blogs and, like others in the grassroots of progressive movements, use the technological revolution to devise new resistance strategies.

These gains women have made have made gradual inroads to obtain their rights despite fierce opposition from the regime. It's been 31 years since the Iranian revolution; in June 2009, during the presidential election, Iranians came on the streets once again. There are similarities between what happened in 1979 and what's happening in Iran these days, but there are also important differences. The Green Movement isn't history repeating itself; it's what Iran's new history is going to look like. In the winter of '79 the main chant on the streets of Tehran and other cities across Iran was, "Esteqlal, azadi, jomhoori-e Eslami" (independence, liberty, Islamic republic). In 2009, in the days after June's fraudulent presidential election, "Ray-e man kojast?" (Where is my vote?) became the slogan of choice for Iran's green protesters.

For about 150 years, in most of the popular social movements in Iran, anti-colonial and anti-imperial tendencies have been more pronounced than demands for civil and political rights. But in the years since the 1979 revolution, especially beginning in the 1990s and now with the

Green Movement, the main demand has become recognition of civil and political rights of all Iranians. A few weeks before the June 12 election the "Iranian Women's Movement Coalition" was formed to make particular demands from all the presidential candidates. The coalition included representatives from a diverse range of groups including women's organizations in Tehran and other cities, professional women's associations, secular feminists and Muslim feminists. One of these was individuals was the head of Muslim Revolutionary Women's Society, Azam Taleghani, who was also the first woman to register as a presidential candidate, once in 1997 and again in 2009. Both times she was disqualified by the Guardian Council. The coalition also included Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, and Iran's first female publisher, Shahla Lahiji. What the coalition called for in its public statement still captures the essence of the demands made by Iran's civil rights movement: "Women have always, alongside men, struggled to achieve democracy, individual and social freedoms and civil rights. Thus, today like any other day we, in solidarity with other social groups, demand the recognition and fulfillment of our constitutionally asserted public freedoms, such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, etc. We also demand the halt of various pressures on women, students, workers, teachers and ethnic and religious groups."<sup>2</sup> The statement then adds: "We know very well that gender equality is the prerequisite for the fulfillment of democracy, sustainable development and reaching a healthy, humane and violence-free society—one without poverty and injustice."<sup>3</sup>

The 1979 revolution still remains a defining moment in the trajectory of social movements in Iran. Nevertheless, in its third decade, a popular, indigenous and peaceful movement to gain civil and political rights is writing a new page in the social and cultural history of Iran and the Middle East. The Iranian women have proved that they are capable of playing a

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2. [www.iranrights.org/english/document](http://www.iranrights.org/english/document)

3. Ibid.

dominant role in the resistance, redefining the traditional role ascribed to them. It is naïve to disregard their conviction to overturn centuries of prejudices that has been imposed on them in the name of chastity and Islamic obligations and to think the men who want to control them will give up power.

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