

## An Overview of the Women's Movement in Iran

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**Abstract:** The present paper elaborates on the Iranian women's movements starting from the earliest documented records in the early twentieth century when Iranian women acted as a major support for their male counterparts during the years leading to the constitutional revolution in Iran. It further follows women activists through the Pahlavi Era and later, before and after the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The paper then explains how the tension between modernity and tradition has affected Iranian women and their approaches towards women's issues. Lastly, the weaknesses and the achievements of the Iranian women's movement are briefly elaborated on.

**Keywords:** Iranian women, women's movement, modernity, tradition.

### **Early History**

The earliest records of organized and purposeful social activities by Iranian women date back to the early twentieth century when women activists in many other countries had already started their fight against gender discrimination. During the Iranian constitutional revolution, which took place from 1905 to 1907, Iranian women had an unprecedented active role. They organized street demonstrations and had regular meetings to regulate their activities and support the constitutional movement, which led to the establishment of the first official parliament and the first constitution in Iran.

During this time Iranian women were exposed to concepts such as democracy, socialism, and gender equality (Navazani, 2007). These new concepts were mainly introduced by upper-class educated women who had been to foreign countries, France and England, for example, where women were already trying to expand their social presence. However, it is necessary to mention that these concepts hardly found their way beyond major cities; most women in rural areas, where patriarchy was more prominent, remained uninformed of the new social trends. As discussed later,



this issue was among the main reasons for the lack of solidarity among Iranian women when issues were concerned.

Although women's presence during the constitutional revolution was mainly inspired by anticolonialist sentiments rather than by gender issues, it can be said to have generated the foundation for a relatively coherent and organized movement by the Iranian women in the following years. As stated by Mahdi (2004), women's struggles during the 'Tobacco Protest'<sup>1</sup>, which began in the late nineteenth century, and the constitutional revolution compelled women to realize their potential for organized activities and led some open-minded liberal women to bring other women's attention to the oppressive situation of women in Iran.

As a result, several women's associations were formed during the following years. These affiliations were generally concerned with women's right to vote and schooling for girls. Although some religious leaders were against the idea, women finally won the battle and more than a few schools for girls were established in Iran's major cities. This success was notable because it paved the way for more organized efforts by women activists and guaranteed education as an empowering tool for many Iranian girls and women.

### **Major Constraints On The Early Movements of Iranian Women**

Despite the early success of the Iranian women activists in winning schooling for girls, their work was subject to several constraining factors over the following years. This section provides an overview of the main obstacles that Iranian women faced in their early fight for equality.

#### *The Patriarchal Nature of Society*

Patriarchy was so prevalent in Iran that any opposition from women was regarded by society as radical in nature. Women activists thus had generally very little support from most middle- and lower-class men and women, and their only source of support was from upper-class educated families.

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<sup>1</sup>(1891–92), a protest by Iranian men and women against granting monopoly of tobacco sales and exports to the British.

### *The Wide Gap Among Between Traditional and Modern Women in Terms of Ideological and Social Views*

As briefly indicated earlier, a wide undeniable gap existed between Iranian women in terms of their ideological and social views. Women in small towns and rural areas, where patriarchy was most prominent, were mostly uninformed of women activists' movements in Iran and the rest of the world. Although the Iranian women activists had their own journals and magazines, such publications could hardly reach areas far from major cities, and even if they did, most women in rural areas were illiterate.

So at one end of the spectrum, we had educated upper-class women who were generally more liberal in terms of religion, and at the other we had traditional women generally uneducated and essentially conservative in terms of religion and even social values, such as men's domination in families. Therefore, there was limited common ground on which Iranian women could unite and pursue a shared goal.

### *Dependence on Supporting Men and Political Parties*

Most women's movements during the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties were generally powered by political parties and the few men who supported them. This means that women could hardly claim their own peculiar ideology and agenda that would define their approach and guide their activities.

### *Adopting Overly Moderate Strategies*

The array of factors explained above made women activists adopt nonconfrontational strategies in pursuing their demands. On the one hand, they were facing a conservative society with a strong religious background that they could hardly openly challenge. On the other, they were reliant on political parties that were mostly concerned with their own issues. Most of these political parties were using women's power to further their agendas, rather than to support women in their independent demands.

### **Women's Support of the Islamic Revolution (Fight Against the Shah)**

The Iranian women's presence in the pre-Islamic revolution demonstrations was remarkable. Women from various social categories, who could hardly come together for feminist causes, all came to the forefront and joined the demonstrations against the Shah. This unprecedented presence of women in antigovernment demonstrations was a result of several

factors, which collaboratively brought Iranian women into the streets. The following section lists the two most important factors behind the presence of Iranian women in the demonstrations that led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

*For Religious Women It Was a Religious Obligation*

Motivated by Ayatollah Khomeini's rule, religious women from various social classes who were formerly passive in social arenas poured into streets to support their male counterparts in demonstrations against the Shah. Some of these women from patriarchal religious families, who had formerly been secluded in their homes, were now openly invited by religious leaders to take part in demonstrations. Women thus got the approval to step to the forefront.

*For Women Activists It Was a Fight Against Dictatorship*

Inspired by their religious women counterparts, many Iranian women activists joined the demonstrations to fight against the Shah's dictatorship. Some of these women had demands that had not been met by the Shah, and some had problems with the foreign policies of the Pahlavi government. Whatever the reason, many women activists joined demonstrations and provided a great source of support in the fight against the Shah.

### **Women's Presence after the Islamic Revolution**

Immediately after the Islamic revolution, the Iranian women took part in the general national referendum on March 30 and 31, 1979, immediately following which the Islamic Republic of Iran was established on April 1.

During the early years following the establishment of the Islamic republic, an order was issued demanding that all women must dress in line with Islamic principles. Along with other similar efforts to create an Islamic state, such as the separation of male and female students in university classes, this received mixed reactions from women. Although conservative religious women found the new social setting a better fit for women, secular modern women were not so happy about it.

With the government's emphasis on the Hijab as a protection for women, many traditional families who were previously against women's social presence found the new social setting better and safer for women. As a result, religious conservative women stepped up and entered social arenas, replacing secular women who could not conform to the Islamic obligations.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian women showed an even stronger presence in society. In the absence of men, many women became the family bread winners and began to work in various sectors, from education, to medical, to government.

During the post war years, Iranian women continued to increase their social presence despite the obstacles many women activists condemned. The number of female students entering universities increased dramatically, and the literacy rate among women increased to more than 96 percent in 2013 (“96% literacy Rate,” 2013).

### **The Current Situation: Tradition Versus Modernity**

The clash between modernity and tradition is a major issue for many contemporary Iranian women. On the one hand, they have modernity with its promise of a better and probably a less restrictive life. But on the other, they have tradition that has penetrated into their souls over the years and is now an inescapable part of the social construction of their identities.

Based on identity theories, “the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and the expectations associated with the role and its performance....” (Burke and Tully, 1997; Thiots, 1986, cited in Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 225). How Iranian women define themselves and whether modernity has had any effect on them in how they view their roles in society and in family is thus of substantial importance if the current situation of women in Iran can be understood.

Unfortunately, very limited research on Iranian women in terms of their identities and how they define themselves is available. Nevertheless, the author attempts to refer to what limited findings are available. Based on a research by Sarookhani and Rafat Khah (2004), the majority of Tehrani women aged 25 to 45 referred to mothering as the most important role for women. The role women play as wives came in second. For the women included in the study, education and working were considered less important compared to what women do as mothers and wives. It is interesting that while these women almost unanimously chose the mothering role as the most important role for women, more than half of them were more inclined toward modernism as opposed to tradition.

Based on this study, the higher the level of women’s education, the more modernized they were. In other words, women with higher education demonstrated a higher tendency towards modernism and a stronger opposition to traditional gendered roles. The interesting point about this

research is that in spite of the subjects' inclination toward modernity, for most of them the mothering role that is traditionally assigned to women is still considered their most important role. This may imply that although modernism may have had some impacts on Iranian women in such areas as women's right to work and to become educated, it has had less impact on the main role the Iranian women identify themselves with, which is motherhood.

Navazani (2007), in another research on 210 Iranian women from various social classes, found that the subjects' family-related issues had the highest priority for them. Based on this research, women were more concerned with discriminatory family laws related to child custody and divorce than with rules barring women from running for presidency or becoming judges. This again may apply to Iranian women's preoccupation with their roles as mothers and wives. The importance Iranian women attach to family issues and women's rights as mothers and wives can be regarded as evidence of the Iranian women's preoccupation with motherhood and marriage as indispensable parts of their lives, as well as to their identities.

In the face of the current clash between modernity and tradition, Iranian women can be generally classified into three categories. It is interesting that these three categories can also be used to categorize various groups of Iranian women activists in terms of their approaches to women's issues and rights.

*"Embracing" Women*

The embracing women are those who have adopted modernity in its entirety. From religion, to individuality, and sexual freedom, it seems that these women have absorbed modernity. Such women in Iran are those labeled as "Westernized," "nonconformist," "rebels," and even "victims of cultural invasion."

The women activists in this category usually use a secular discourse to ask for gender equality and criticize the current situation of women in Iran. Drawing on humanism, they condemn the women's situation, which they believe is the result of both tradition and religion.

These women may talk about homosexuality, women's rights in divorce, abortion, women's inheritance rights, and other controversial issues, and though some of their demands are seen as justified by mainstream traditional Iranian men and women, they are generally not much welcomed in society. That's a result of their support of such issues as homosexuality and abortion, considered taboos there, and their use of nonreligious discourse to articulate their demands.

### *“Selective” Women*

“Selective women” is the term used for those who have embraced some of the manifestations of modernity, but not all of them, and their selection seems to be a planned and controlled decision in line with their social, cultural, and religious viewpoints. These women support women’s rights in child custody and divorce, but they are clearly against such issues as homosexuality and abortion in the Iranian society.

Usually using religious discourse to ask for gender equality, they demand focus on women’s rights under Islamic principles. They may ask for reinterpretations of the Quran and Hadith in line with the current situation of society and women’s strong presence in social arenas.

These women, who may be generally labeled as “Islamic feminists,” are those who fight for women’s rights in line with the principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and because of their conformity to social and cultural norms, they generally gain the support of mainstream Iranian women. Their emphasis is on the importance of education for women to be active members of the society, and further, on the importance of women’s awareness of their rights in challenging unfair social and cultural practices.

### *Resistant Women*

There is yet another group of Iranian women who resist modernism and deem it as a threat to the distinct religious and cultural identity of the Iranians. Such women, who are essentially conservative and religious, may view modernity as a form of invasion against the Islamic societies. Labelling it as a “cultural invasion,” they question ideas that challenge the religious and cultural identity of the Iranian society.

For these women, homosexuality and abortion rights, which they believe have emerged from the West, are not applicable to Iranian society. They believe that the true form of gender equality is achievable only in a truly Islamic society where Islamic rules are observed to the letter. They praise the security brought up by the Islamic society and the Islamic dress code as the main reasons behind the Iranian women’s strong social presence.

For most of these women, a woman’s role in families is pivotal. Thus they place emphasis on educating women as the pillars of the family and believe that education is a tool to better prepare women for their main roles as mothers and wives.

### **The Current Situation: Achievements**

This section lists the two most important achievements made possible through efforts made by Iranian women activists during recent years.

#### *Increased Presence of Women in Social Arenas*

The increasing social presence of Iranian women has been remarkable. Based on some reports, female students account for over half of the university students in Iran, and Iranian female enrolment in science and engineering fields makes up around 70 percent of total enrolments (Masood, 2006). The percentage of women working in the scientific, technical, and specialist fields increased from 13 percent in 1976 to 32.8 percent in 1986, and to 39.7 percent in 1991 (Women's Employment Situation in Iran, 2001). The number of women working in education fields has also increased dramatically in recent years. The largest percentage of government-employed women is in the Ministry of Education; they comprise more than half of the employees (Women's Employment Situation in Iran, 2001).

Apart from that, Iranian women have demonstrated a strong presence in sports despite the concerns and problems regarding the issue of Hijab for female athletes. In 2013, the Iranian national women's Futsal team won the silver medal at the 2013 Asian Indoor Games League. Iranian women's Wushu national team won three gold medals in the world championship in Malaysia. In 2012, Iran's first female canoeist won the silver medal at ICF Canoe Sprint World Cup, and Iranian female Kabaddi players claimed second place in the first Women's World Cup Kabaddi Championship in Patna, India, in the same year. These outstanding achievements and many more simply imply that Iranian women have stepped up and are ready to challenge the social and cultural stereotypes that limit women's social presence and reinforce traditional gender roles.

The presence of Iranian women in high-ranking governmental jobs is not as straightforward because it has been mostly dependent on the ruling government and its political and social attitudes. During Khatamayi's presidency (1997 to 2005), for example, the number of women appointed to top administration posts increased. In this period, women were given high governmental roles, including the roles of vice president and the presidential adviser (adviser is preferred). Also during Khatami's term, the parliament had the largest number of female representatives since the revolution.

The new president of Iran, Hasan Rouhani, who had the support of many Iranian women during the election, has pledged to promote women's rights and advance gender equality. He

appointed two women as vice presidents and also the first female spokesperson for the foreign ministry. Among Rouhani's commitments to women's issues is his promise of setting up a ministry for women.

### *Increased Social Awareness of Women's Issues*

The scattered but forceful efforts made by Iranian women during recent years have had a tremendous impact on increasing social awareness in women's issues. The increasing number of published works, movies, and scholarly debates on the subject, along with the large number of women actively working on the issue, have had a powerful impact on sensitizing the Iranian society to women's issues.

According to Mashini (2004), a considerable number of Iranian women have begun to realize that many of the problems women face have to do with women occupying subordinated positions in families and in society. Sarookhani and Rafat Khah (2004) found that among Tehrani women aged 25 to 45 under study, about 76 percent were opposed to occupational gendered stereotypes, more than 80 percent were against educational stereotypes, and about 59 percent opposed family-related stereotypes imposed on women. Abollahian (2004) found that there had been a change in Iranian women's attitudes toward their roles in social arenas. According to this researcher, most of the Iranian women who took part in the study were willing to focus on education and employment as a means to challenge the gendered social rules.

As a result of this recent social awareness, some religious leaders have begun to comment on women's issues. Ayatollah Sanei<sup>2</sup>, for instance, has published a series of writings on women's issues, most of which center around gender equality. He has also issued some Fatwas in support of women's inheritances and stated that a woman's legal age should be changed from 11 to 13. There is no doubt that such measures by religious leaders who are highly respected in the religious society of Iran can have a positive effect on challenging patriarchy and improving the status of women.

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<sup>2</sup> An Iranian politically renowned Shia Islamic jurist, politician, and theologian who is widely recognized in Iran as a pro-human-rights cleric.

### **The Current Situation: Weaknesses**

As explained above, Iranian women in general and Iranian women activists in particular have adopted various stances toward the issues of women's rights and gender equality. Although some women have adopted a secular discourse in articulating their demands for gender equality, others have preferred to use a moderate, conservative approach to pursue their goals.

Apart from different discourses used by various groups of women activists, these women also have different priorities and concerns. Although secular women activists may target various issues, from family laws, to abortion, to women's stoning, conservative (or the so-called Islamic feminists) have mainly focused their efforts on child custody and women's rights in divorce. This situation implies that while all these groups may have the same underlying motif, i.e., removing gender inequality, they do not necessarily adopt a similar approach. This lack of coherence, though not a bad thing in itself, can slow the pace of the efforts made and the success achieved.

Another issue has to do with most Iranian women activists seeming to focus their attention on upper- and middle-class women and their issues. In fact, there seems to be little or no organized effort to consider women in remote rural areas who may have limited understanding of their social rights. They are possibly more vulnerable to gender inequality and need to be educated not only about the rights they currently have, but also about the issues specific to their social and cultural settings. If such women do not learn about the rights they are entitled to, they may never dare to challenge their situations.

Last, but definitely not least, though the issues discussed above have been highlighted by Iranian women activists of various groups, the issue of women's health seems to be a neglected issue for Iranian women activists, regardless of their ideology and stance toward women's issues. Some efforts have been directed at educating women on major women's health issues, but they lack the intensity needed. Many reasons are probably behind this situation. First of all, women's health issues in Iran seem to be overshadowed by more charged women issues, such as family laws and women's rights in divorce. Apart from that, there seems to be a lack of cooperation between various groups of women activists and authorities in Iran when it comes to women's health. Although an issue such as women's health can be seen as a shared concern for all groups of women activists as well as the government, little attention is paid to defining common plans to tackle it. No doubt a collective effort by women activists and government authorities can play a valuable role in raising awareness about women's health issues in the Iranian society.

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