

Iranian Women: A Journey towards Education

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Abstract

The struggle of Iranian women for achieving excellence in the field of education is a discourse that needed to be endorsed. In changing social climates, the role of women, becomes central, as their representation in society becomes an indicator of larger societal transformations. Through centuries Iranian women were keen and responsive to the changes that occurred in the society by facing the severe hindrances in a male-dominated society. Iran is having the honour of an old civilization and rich culture, the educated people and learned scholars of Iran have contributed significantly towards the world culture and civilization. The importance of literacy in the modernization process is evident, for a nation to move towards Modernization, education is essential for transitional adjustment, for political indoctrination, and for providing a more skilled labour force. It has been recognized that women's literacy is key to empowering women's participation in decision making in society and to improving families' well-being. Education helps women take advantage of opportunities that could benefit them and their families, preparing women for labour force and helping them understand their legal and reproductive rights. This paper is a humble attempt to highlight the role of some main agencies and missionaries in expanding the educational facilities for Iranian women in a patriarchal society.

Key words: Education, women, missionaries, Iran, Pahlavi

Introduction

For centuries, education in Iran was in the hands of clergy. The *Maktabas* were almost exclusively for boys. A few women learned to read and write at home with their fathers and husbands. Some aristocratic families employed elderly private male tutors to teach girls. In some houses, religious women called *Molla Baji* taught the Quran, Persian reading and writing to

girls.¹ Women education was neglected parents did not send their daughters to the schools and also the state was not supportive in promoting female education. Women were supposed to live inside the four walls of the house. With the passage of time, some enthusiastic people started opening the schools for girls and in the later period of the Qajar's. The Pahlavi's were supportive in spreading the women education by crushing the power of the *ulama* who were opposing the women education.

Role of Missionaries in Spreading the Girl's Education

In the mid 19th century foreign missionaries and the religious minorities of Iran opened the modern schools. They were the first in Iran to have access in modern education and they open their own schools for boys and girls. In 1836 the American Presbyterian church missionaries established the first school for girls in *Urmia*. The British Anglican, French Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches send their own missionaries to Iran. By 1848 the French Lazarist were operating 26 Boys schools and six Girls schools. During the 1860's they intensify their activities in Christian areas. After 1870's, Iran saw a dramatic rise in educational activity among foreign religious mission and cultural organizations, as well as local officially recognized religious minorities. The establishment of foreign and minority schools in Iran was also supported by certain foreign governments with political and economic interests in Iran. The necessity of girls education for girls was one of the main demands made by many women activists and enlightened men at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most of the leading activists were educated women from upper and middle-class families. When Iranian women themselves started to open schools for girls they met with hostility from reactionary forces and sometimes from the community at large. When the constitutional revolution took place (1905-1911), many women activists realized that women's ignorance was one of the greatest obstacles to their progress. Women started their own organizations and continued their activities in favour of education. One of the first girl's schools called *Namus* (honour) was opened in 1907 by Mrs *Tuba Azmudeh*. By the early 1930s, *Namus* was one of the few schools that offered intermediate education for girls

in Iran. It had almost 400 students in eleven grades and twenty teachers, only two of whom were men. *Namus* continued to be one of the most well known Iranian private schools into the Reza Shah period. In 1918 first the Ministry of Education decided to open ten state schools for girls along with a teacher's training school for women.² The Baha'is opened many girls' schools since 1905. In 1911 the first girl's school opened by a Baha'i followed by another *Madrasaiye-yi tarbiyat-i- Banat* in May 1911, this school set the highest standards for other Baha'i and non Baha'i schools for girls. It was the most respected Baha'i modern style school and one of the most well attended girl's schools in Tehran. American female educators were instrumental in turning this school into one of the best schools in Iran. *The Sadat-i- Banat* girls school which opened in *Najfabad* in 1925, turned within a short period of time into one of the best educational institutions of the Isfahan region. The Baha'i schools were highly positioned, on the scale of modern and quality education in the early Pahlavi period.³ In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Baha'is were actively engaged in establishing schools for girls. Baha'is contributed a lot in the development of female education. In many instances, the Baha'i schools were the only schools for girls in the areas where they are in majority and in others they served a significant portion of the female pupils. In 1933, the accredited Baha'i girl's schools had a combined enrolment of 1,458 females, corresponding to four percent of all females in Iran's accredited schools. Baha'i schools had a good academic reputation. In the 1922 to 1923 school year, in a population of over 11 million, less than 9,000 females were attending modern-style schools. The literacy rate was quite low among women at the time. Modern education, which had grown in the early years of the constitutional era, underwent a massive expansion during Reza Shah's reign, and which it came increased opportunities for girls towards the end of his rule, however, in 1936 to 1937 academic year, no more than 10.2 % in primary and 1.3 % in secondary were enrolled, and males constitute the large majority of the students.⁴ The prestige factor of religio-ethnic minority schools also varied. The Tehran based Baha'i and Zoroastrian

girl's schools had the best reputations. Their Armenian and Jewish counterparts differed in this respect. The Armenian schools do not make a major appearance in the accounts of those tracking the educational scene of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.⁵ In the first years of the twentieth century, moving beyond the earlier foreign, missionary, and religio ethnic minority schools, Iranian Muslim women, and men opened privately funded girls schools, accessible to girls from both well to do and middle to low income families. Education reformers of the turn of the twentieth century commonly referred to private girls and boys schools as *jadid* (new) or *milli* (national) schools. Individual Muslims, as opposed to religious minorities or foreign missionaries, founded these schools. In this way, a number of private girl's schools were opened in Tehran and some provincial cities, established and financed by individual women and men. Girl's schools were often located in the homes of their founders. In 1903, the *Parvarish* School was established in Tehran in the home of *Mirza Hassan Rushdiyah*, with *Tuba Rushdiyah*, his sister in law, as principal. By following a number of other girl's schools were founded by Muslims.⁶ The vast majority of the earliest modern Muslim Iranian girl's schools were opened in Tehran, some operated in provincial capitals. As the largest urban centre and the administrative and political capital of the country, Tehran enjoyed a higher concentration of wealth and cosmopolitanism and offered the potential of direct state protection for the new style girl's schools. Similar schools in the larger provincial cities, including Shiraz, Isfahan, and Mashhad, also opened in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Early girl's schools were established during the tumultuous years of the constitutional period (1906-1911), reformists and constitutionalists advocate the state's sponsorship and supervision of education and passed legislation placing education under the purview of the state. In the constitutional period, when demands for female education became articulated in the Iranian press, the Qajar state for the first time announced comprehensive decrees and passed laws setting national priorities concerning education. In 1906, the passage of an educational act made elementary schooling compulsory for

both boys and girls.⁷ Until the beginning of the constitutional revolution, the girl's schools in Tehran were solely foreign schools, and by the end of 1907, there were still only three state-run schools. Special goal of educational policies during the Pahlavi's was to encourage girls to go to school at all levels and thus eventually to change the overall status of women. Reza Shah himself saw a direct link between education for girls, the status of women and the westernization process. School facilities were made more available to girls. During this period they had more opportunities to pursue their studies at secondary and university level. During this period the women folk of Iran became more desirous of their social role. The social consciousness of women has risen.⁸

Pahlavi's Contribution towards Women Education

The Pahlavi state, as opposed to the preceding Qajar dynasty, was assumed to be an ally of women reforms. The Reza Shah period has been praised often as an era of reform and dramatic social change. His reforms with regard to women found support among secular intellectuals such as the historian *Sayyid Ahmad kasravi* and the politician *Sayyid Hassan Taqizadeh*, both of whom were clerical backgrounds. In the 1930s, for the first time women were the beneficiaries of major state reform introduced by Reza Shah Pahlavi. Reza Shah had started the process of emancipation of women by decreeing that for the first time girls should receive an education and by ordering that the chador be no longer worn. More secular-minded women's advocates celebrated this period as one in which women were emancipated and liberated from backwardness and tradition. But the religious minded women from various classes never forgave him for prohibiting veil in public.⁹ Women's education was taken seriously. The shortage of teachers was another problem, however, for education of girls, the teachers training college accepted women with only primary education certificate when primary education for all was introduced. Secondary schooling and then higher education had to open their doors to women. This process was very important in the liberation of women because women got an education,

achieved some independence and began to earn their own living. As girls became educated they joined the job market and entered certain sectors of public life. They also began to get involved in politics and joined unions.¹⁰ The exposure of the Iranian elite to European societies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their socio-economic advancements inspired many to seek reforms. Unveiled European women and their status with society highly impressed these reformers men and women who sought many changes in Iran, including improvement in the condition of women. They began demanding access to Education, changes in marriage laws, and unveiling. In 1920's and early 1930's, activist Iranian women published magazines and formed organizations to raise awareness and sensitize the public to the problems they faced¹¹.

Reza Shah was imbued with notions of Westernism or Europeanism. Westernism meant the separation of religion and politics, but more significantly, the curtailment of clerical power. Reza shah's vision for Iran was that of a society with secular educational institutions comparable to those in Europe; unveiled women wearing European clothes and attending schools, teaching and working outside the home. Emasculating the clergy through women's emancipation was perhaps one of Reza shah's effective weapons against the clerics who wielded considerable personal and public authority over gender relations and the family, specifically women's conduct. Although Reza shah's educational reforms and dress codes for both women and men provoked great discord with the *ulama*.¹² The drive to raise the status of women began in 1934, immediately after Reza shah's visit to Turkey, where Mustafa Kamal was waging a similar campaign. Educational institutions, especially Tehran University, opened their doors to both sexes. Public places such as cinemas, cafes, and hotels were threatened with heavy fines if they discriminated against women.¹³ In 1935, Reza Shah established *kanoune-e-Banovan* or ladies center and prepare a public opinion in favour of unveiling. In 1936 the shah legally abolished the veil or

chador. Many educated upper and middle-class men and women welcomed unveiling. Soon Iranian women appeared in public unveiled. Unveiling presented a new image of Iran. For the shah and modern Iranians, the image of veiled women was synonymous with backwardness. The image had to be removed from the Iranian stage. Modern educated women emerged as a symbol of the new Iran. With their Education and modern looks, they were well suited for government jobs. Veiled women, even if educated, were not allowed to work wearing the veil, not even the head scarf. Teachers were not allowed to teach if they wore the veil and some of them left their jobs. Likewise, conservative advocates of girl's education who did not support unveiling no longer allowed their daughters to attend school. Unveiling in some cases effectively undermined education. The compulsory unveiling provided modern women with the choice of identity and access to education and employment. Yet it simultaneously deprived veiled women of the same choices and opportunities. The whole period of forced unveiling lasted for four to five years. When Muhammad Reza Shah became the king he showed more flexible approach towards the veil, thus compulsory unveiling came to an end.¹⁴ The Iranian women during this period are adding a social role to her traditional family role. Women played their role almost in every sphere of life social, educational and economic participation in the rural development process. These educated women played a very important role in village improvement, teacher training, health and education and agriculture.¹⁵ For centuries, women's place had been their private home, and public life had been the territory of men. In 1963, in the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah, women were given the right to vote for the first time in Iran's history. This increased opportunities for women to participate in public life. In the same year, six women were elected to parliament and two were appointed to the post of senators. In 1968 women's literacy corps was established, and female high school graduates were sent to villages to combat literacy. The girls recruited into the literary corps were to teach the rural girls and their mother's better home economics and thereby promote modernization. The very recruitment of

girls into a branch of the army was also, in the eyes of the Shah, a major contribution to secularization and towards improving the status of women.¹⁶ The universities expanded and the number of women in higher education increased. By 1978, 28 to 30% of the students in universities were women. Many doors that had shut women out of public life were now opened to them.¹⁷ In 1960's the modern Iranian women has found employment open to her in a number of fields. Women worked in factories, offices, banks, stores, hospitals, and schools and they held jobs as secretaries, clerks, physicians, chemist's, nurses, pharmacists, laboratory technicians and engineers, social workers, writers, business women etc. After 1962 the modernization was encouraged especially in case of women, and an effort in the domain of education. Women's place in Iranian society improves rapidly after 1963 in all sectors. In 1964 eighty women were the members of parliament and Senate.¹⁸ Women were pivotal to the political construction of the authenticity movement of the 1970s, whose image was shaped by Dr. Ali Shariati, a French-educated Iranian sociologist. By setting Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), as a role model, Shariati inspired women to emulate her modesty. He encouraged women to distance themselves from the ideology and fashion that objectified them, to challenge traditional customs and to take active roles in the pursuit of Education.¹⁹ Later on, Educated Women were the major participants in the Iranian revolution against the shah. The concept of freedom and the principles of constitutional rule were the input of highly educated class.

Percentage of Female Students in Selected Years from 1926-1977

Year	Primary	Secondary	Higher
1926-27	21.4	5.7	—
1936-37	25.5	12.3	5.0
1946-47	26.0	20.8	8.0

1956-57	30.0	24.6	18.0
1966-67	33.0	31.5	24.0
1976-77	38.4	35.03	28.1

Source: www.encyclopaediairanica.online, accessed on 12-08-2015

Pahlavi's were the protagonists of women emancipation, during their rule they advocated education for women. They tried to bring women out from the traditional society and put them at the forefront through education. From time to time they made laws in favour of women by abandoning the veil and change in the marriage law. The Tehran University first time admits women for higher education in 1934. A special goal of educational policy of Reza Shah was to encourage girls to go to schools at all levels and thus eventually to change the overall status of women. Mohammad Reza Shah accelerated the expansion of education of girls and women in the 1960's and 1970's. Before the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, the female enrolment has increased at all levels especially in higher education. However, the vast number of women remained illiterate and did not attend the school because their parents did not want their daughters to be in the coeducation in this way a large number of women remained out of the educational system. Mostly these women were from rural and poor, as well as ethnic minorities. This urban-rural and socioeconomic discrepancy illustrated how the Pahlavi's educational agenda benefited only a small portion of women in Iran than those from upper and middle-class families with access to education.²⁰

Conclusion

The number of women attending schools, colleges, and universities has steadily increased in Iran. The efforts made by the missionaries and other native private individuals have make it possible for women to receive modern education viz a viz the role played by the Pahlavi's for women education is itself a great effort. Pahlavi's were supporters of women education and bring the women in the schools and the campuses of the universities. They believe that any kind of

development be it social, political or economic is impossible without women empowerment and their modernization policy was best served by the women education. During the Pahlavi period women were visible in every field they worked as teachers, health workers, village development and other social works.

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