
Considering its topic and approach, this work is a timely publication. Parvin Paidar develops a critical, historical, and interdisciplinary approach that challenges the prevailing misconceptions and generalizations about gender relations that are found in "malestream" Iranian studies. These new approaches include essentializing Islam, identifying either Islam or capitalism/imperialism as the sole cause of women’s oppression, treating gender equality as a Western discourse, and placing women's oppression in the sphere of tradition. While many writers characterize Muslim women as passive creatures of Islam, scholars of Middle Eastern origin often show them as victims of imperialism, cultural invasion, political despotism, patriarchy, and class oppression. These studies are often skewed by ideological, political, and nationalistic biases. Their gender-blind methodologies and inaccurate assumptions result either in ignoring or underestimating women's contributions to political and economic processes.

While many of these studies have a hint of truth, for Paidar, none can fully explain the complexity of gender relations in the Middle East. She calls for a "specific approach" to social change and political transformation, which identifies multiple causes of change by taking into account cultural, social, economic, political, and historical factors both indigenously and exogenously. Such an approach begins with the analysis of specific social and economic forces and processes that have shaped the ideological and policy discourses on women in twentieth-century Iran.

Identifying the discourses of modernity, revolution, and Islamization as broad determinants of the position of women in the political processes in twentieth-century Iran, the author examines the position of women in the context of these discourses and shows how each discourse emerged, evolved, and affected the position of women in the political, economic, and social spheres. The discourse of modernity went through three distinct phases of constitutionalism (1905-1920s), nation-building (1920s-early 1940s), and nationalism (1940s-mid 1960s). The first stage dealt with the relevance of modernity to Iranian society and introduced the Iranians to Western ideas on democracy, socialism, freedom, and technological progress. While most secular reformers accepted some of these ideas, most of the clerics rejected them. The outcome of their debates was a synthesis, which was represented in the first Iranian constitution. The debate then was not about tradition versus modernity, but about which tradition and what kind of modernity obtained. The constitutional movement marked a turning point in women's contributions to mass politics. New ideas were articulated, opportunities for political participation were developed, and the ground was prepared for the development of a woman's movement in Iran. However, women's participation in the movement and support for it were varied, and so its achievements were also mixed.

The second phase began with the rise of Reza Shah to power. At this time people equated modernity with a strong, centralized state, imitation of the West, secularization, economic development, and the emancipation of women. The state took an active role in changing women's position. Characterizing women as the hallmark of modernity and progress, the Pahlavis incorporated women into their notions of nation-building and national progress. Again, the results were mixed; independent women's activities were banned, patriarchal family was preserved, shariat laws continued to be applied to family by the clergy, women were integrated into social life, veils were removed forcefully, the judiciary was secularized, and women's participation in education and selective employment was encouraged. By the 1950s, this notion
of modernity, which had received support from many secular nationalists, came under attack by both secular and cultural nationalists. During 1978-1979, these attacks culminated in the discourse of revolution and created much hope for a new social and political structure.

Although the revolution of 1979 ended the dominance of the discourse of modernity, it did not result in total rejection of modernity for a return to an Islamic past. The discourse of Islamization combined elements of Islam, modernity, and Iranian culture. Deriving from contradictory sources and responding to diverse needs and demands, the outcome was paradoxical. It produced a repressive state that saw women as the foundation of the society and the symbol of an Islamic alternative to the Western notion of womanhood. While most of the secular advancements of the Pahlavi era affecting women's lives were eventually abolished, efforts of the Islamic, feminist women, as well as the exigencies of the political formation of a state in modern times, forced the theocratic state to reinstate them, albeit in a modified form.

Twentieth-century Iranian women have neither understood nor fought for their rights uniformly because of the weight and importance factors that varied in different historical and social circumstances. The struggle for raising women's status has gone through different stages and has acquired different meanings. The outcome has often been mixed, affecting different groups of women dissimilarly and eliciting conflicting reactions. Advances made in an area during one stage were sometimes accompanied by retreats in other stages or areas. None of the discourses on women have been monolithic or fixed. Each changed from time to time; meant different things to different groups; and had varied impacts on women depending on their social class, ethnicity, place of residence, role in production, and religion.

For the author, the complexity of gender issues; the multiplicity of factors involved in political change; the evolutionary and revolutionary aspects of social transformation in Iran; the diversity of women's affiliations and interests; and the interaction of local, regional, national, and international factors make it very difficult to treat gender issues in Iranian politics with the reductionist explanations that are commonly found in the social sciences. Paidar is to be congratulated for her in-depth, thorough, and multi-layered analysis.

Ohio Wesleyan University

Ali Akbar Mahdi