The Trend of Women’s Movement Formation in Qajar Era under the Impact of European Communities

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ABSTRACT

Iranian women who were more subjected to various limitations compared to men found less opportunity to participate in social affairs and employ their great force to develop and change their society. Simultaneously with Constitutional Revolution, women also found the opportunity to attempt to a wisdom-based fight and propound and emphasize their social, political and cultural demands. Undoubtedly, the effort of women to change their place was under the impact of western women’s movement. Using descriptive-analytical method and using library documents and newspapers, the present work tends to investigate Iranian women’s awareness movement under the impact of European communities. According to the research findings, Iranian women get familiar with western women’s fight to achieve their freedom and rights due to the development of foreign relations during Qajar Era through Iranian itinerary, studying Persian language newspapers, communicating with European living in Iran, and studying in the schools of foreigners living in Iran. The result of Iranian women’s awareness can be observed in the creation and/or significant growth of girl schools, feminine magazines and women’s associations.

INTRODUCTION

New approaches in historical studies in historical scopes have led to the importance of social history among history researchers. A new generation of history researchers has deeply considered social history of Iran and tried to open new angels in this scientific scope. Women studies and explaining their place in civil life of Iranians is an important issue in social history studies.

In the beginning of the 19th century, the war of Iran and Russia not only showed the nature of war to people but arouse many Iranian scholars to recognize new western civil. Gradual familiarity of Iranians with global issues caused the awareness of people to change political conditions and authoritarianism.

Meanwhile, Iranian women who have been viewed as hidden, mysterious and second-class human being attempted to change their situation into a better one due to their familiarity with the activities of western women. Initially, they participated in movements with men in line with national demands and gradually, they tended to achieve their inalienable rights.

The main research questions can be presented as follow:

“How foreign relations of Iranian in Qajar Era caused the familiarity of Iranian women with women’s rights movement in European communities?”

“Whether western woman were the pattern of Iranian women to form awareness movement?”

“To what extent Iranian aware women were successful to change their situations in this period?”

The Role of Women’s / Rights in Europe:

In the 19th century, women’s right movement was born under the name of feminism. The term of “feminist” was coined by Charles Fourier in the early 19th century. In his mind, he imagined a new woman evolved both society and herself with the help and cooperation of society [22].
Women’s movement is a movement towards proving or achieving social, political and economic rights equal with men. The first wave of feminism was started in 1830. Writing the book of Vindication of the rights of woman”, Mary Wollstonecraft had a significant effect on this movement.

It can be said that the notion of classic liberal rights is basically regarded as the main context of the incidence of this wave. The development of civil and political rights, especially granting suffrage to women was the main purpose of this wave. Of course, there were also other secondary objectives such as the right of study, work, the improvement of married women’s situation in rules, equal right with men to divorce, and other issues regarding movement features [9].

The Nature of Iranian Communication with West:

During the governance of Fath Ali Shah was coincided with the first half of the 19th century. At this time, some events occurred in Europe which influenced all the word and Iran such as Great French Revolution [12]. The competition between France, England and Russia on eastern countries was raised in this period. Due to economic, significant political and geographical features, Iran was considered by great powers. In the same periods, the most sever foreign wars of Iran occurred with Russia.

One of the positive results of the war between Iran and Russia is to understand the necessity of reforms in Iran for power owners. Modernist activities and the thought of reforming Iran caused that Iranian scholars attempted to get more familiar with west.

From 1799, the communication of Iran with European countries was a continuous relation while this communication was previously a temporary relation to fulfill a certain mission. The permanent relation was created by creating embassy in Iran and subsequently, in other countries. Therefore, political agents’ boards of other European countries entered to Iran. Traffic of these boards caused that other European people travel to Iran for tourism, social and other activities. Thus, the behavior of these travelers was a kind of modeling in Iranian community.

One of the actions taken by Iranians to compensate underdevelopment compared to west was to send students to foreign countries to continue their studies. The considerable point of the present research is as follows:

How the first group of Iranians travelled to west reported western communities, in general and western women, in particular?

The situation of Iranian Women before the Constitution:

The formation of Qajar dynasty led to no change in Iranian women’s situation by itself. Social life of women remained at the same form after gaining power by Qajar. Training girls, their covering type, marriage and divorce continued at the same traditional way.

During Qajar era, the marriage age for girls was very close to the childhood age. In fact, those girls were considered happy how matured after marriage in the home of their husbands. In some high class families, girl servants perform home affairs but is was not true for all the families. On the other hand, the way of behaving with women and respecting their rights was different in urban and villages (ibid: 87).

Sometimes, women’s situation was so deplorable that they may be forced to commit immoral actions. As one of western travelers, Iranian women were treated so unfairly that they commit anything to attract their husbands [19].

Although women in some rich families with political, economic and social dignity could provide better situation for themselves and influence their husbands’ decisions, the main part of Qajar community’s women had not identical situation due to lack of political participation, low literacy, economic dependency, and the necessity of obeying them. There was also no entity to vindicate the rights of women.

The Image of Western Women in Iranian Itinerary:

The increase of Iranian travels to west or some regions in which Europeans lived such as India and reporting about their observations, Iranian community, in general, and women, in particular, got familiar with western women who were highly different with Iranian women of those days.

Visiting European countries, the interesting thing for Iranians was high respect to women in west, a respect which caused that all men from all social class helped a woman who needed help [13, 11].

In many itineraries, the wonderful thing was the free relation of men and women and bold presence of women in men’s parties [11, 2]. Many pages of itineraries have allocated to describing dance and mixed parties [15]. However, many referred to cases which were considered against women’s virtuousness [6] or even cause of debauch [20].

Another interesting thing in itineraries was the issue of working women and their presence in society as well as their social and economic role in western societies. From the perspective of Iranian itinerary writers, western woman fulfilled various works from embroidery, sewing [16] and teaching [11] to home works [6] and selling newspaper in crossroads. Naser-Al-Din Shah also discussed women working at theater, circus and opera.
Studying in formal schools was another interesting situation of western women referred in Iranian itineraries [11]. Such institutions were particularly in girl schools and sometime in mixed schools. European girls learned several foreign languages, history and many other sciences (ibid), also, they did cultural activities of women such as writing and publishing various books with the content of important scientific issues (ibid: 339). In his travel to Russia, Nase-Ul-Din Shah referred to a female school with 800 students who were all supported by Russian Princess [17].

Naser-Al-Din Shah also referred the fact that unlike Iranian people, western people accepted the governance of a woman on them. To exemplify, he referred to the empire of Netherland whose prince was dead and he had an 8-year little girl. After her father death, she would be the successor of the empire and govern the people [17].

However, it can be stated that from the viewpoint of Iranians, western woman was a free woman without any restriction in relation with foreign men. According to these itineraries, western women easily spent their time with men in society without any objection; while, an eastern woman, especially an Iranian woman spent a restricted life.

**Foreign Persian Magazines and Women:**

During the periods before the Constitution, one of the main factors of awaking public minds was Persian language magazines published out of Iran. Publishing some materials such as comparing Iranian and European countries, these magazines tried to arouse Iranians. As one of the greatest desires of the writers of these magazines, it can be referred to Study and learn through which women can play role in the progress of their Iranian community.

According to Akhtar Newspaper, when British physician women attempted to get license to establish office, Iranians disregarded an American physician woman.

Writing about the necessity of educating girls as mothers of the next generation, Iranian journalists attempted to create a positive trend in this regard. Writers of Akhtar newspaper introduced exclusion of women from education as a foolish work and even reminded the opposites of the equity of men and women the fact the equity of men and women at the beginning of Islam. In the titers of Soraya newspaper published in Egypt, it was also blamed Iranian women due to their indolence by reoffering to European women who were studying.

**Iranian Woman and the Constitution:**

In these periods, Iranian woman, especially middle class and high class women, got familiar with western civilization through heard news and studying books and alter, through Persian magazines published outside of the Iran. From the time Naser-Al-Din Shah, Iranian women started to check their individual and social conditions.

Women’s position was consistent with the opinions of Iranian intellectuals who considered the reconstruction of political, social, cultural, and economic structure necessary. In this regard, some modernists such as Agha Mirza Kermani and Fath Ali Akhound Zade considered reform of Iranian community in the association with evolving individual and social conditions of Iranian women’s life. Nonetheless, it was not possible to clearly investigate the situation of women and girls and the necessity of its evolution since the governing political power and traditional structure of Iranian community strongly reacted to such issue.

The Constitution, the evolution of political system, and the advent of political freedoms of the constitutional periods provided necessary opportunity and facilities for men and women to clearly express their views and attempt to achieve them. The Constitution Revolution presented goals and demands of Iranian women from different limited and restricted circles.

**Educating women and female schools:**

After the Constitution, a group of women sought to develop educating women and most of constitutionalist men advocated them as well. Generally, from the perspective of active women, educating girls was the first step of reforming Iranian community [5]. When the parliament firstly considered only limited and traditional educations for women [1], women attempted in this regard without asking help from their state facilities.

The first group of Muslim girls who were officially educated was graduated from American female school of Tehran in 1907 [24]. The first girl school established by Iranians was closed after the Constitution with the inference of state officers [8].

Nevertheless, the first girl school, namely Namous was established by Touba Azmoude in 1908 (ibid) and after that, other girl schools were started to establish. The enthusiasm of women for learning was so that they demanded for omitting dowry and sending its cost to educate girls. Only some years after the Constitutional Revolution, according to the report of magazines, 63 girl schools with 2500 students were active in Tehran.
Women’s magazines:

After the Constitution, magazines and presses frequently published articles, letters and materials written by women. Followed by approving press rule in March 1908, some magazines with the subject of women were published by Iranian women. Undoubtedly, these magazines played an important role in the evolutions of Iranian women community, especially regarding learning knowledge and introducing its advantages, creating new girl schools, the plan of equality between men and women, and removing old superstitions among women.

The first women specific magazine called Danesh (knowledge) was published by Dr Kahal in 1910. Afterwards, Shokoufe newspaper was published in Tehran. The owner of this newspaper was Maryam Amid Semnani (Mozayan-Ul-Saltane) and three years after closing Shokoufe, Sedighe Dolat Abadi published Woman’s language newspaper in Isfahan. Moreover, in the same period, other female magazines such as women’s letter managed by Shahnaz Azad were published. Interestingly, in its first number, the newspaper of Danesh reminded that it had nothing to do with political and national issues and dealt with family subjects. However, in the newspaper of women’s language, political issues were clearly discussed, indicating that this newspaper seriously followed political events of the society (e.g., refer to the heading of women’s language newspaper with the subject of: “election”, no. 23, 1 May 1920).

Women’s associations:

Establishing feminine associations to participate in society affairs was one of the activities done by women after the Constitution. Forming associations was the most important action in institutionalization during those periods. These associations firstly belonged to men but gradually, the context of creating women specific associations was also provided by the presence of women in associations.

The association of women’s freedom was formed in 1907. At the same time, Women’s Secret Union was formed. It, in fact, was a secret association with sever tendencies against conservatisms and traditionalists. Afterwards, many associations were established in Tehran and other cities of Iran, including Homeland Association (Anjoman Mokhadarat Vatan) and the Union of Women’s Happiness Promise (Jameiat Peyk Saadat Nesvan) (ibid).

Many women had the membership of these associations and even participated in their secret meetings, discussed social and political issues, and provided solutions to solve them (ibid: 23). All women from courter dependent women to foreign women living in Iran participated in the activities of these associations.

Cultural activities of women:

Sometimes, women performed theater and drama to criticize the behavior existing between men and women. They had a critical view to the place of woman in family and society. In the drama of the doctor in spite of himself by Moliere, dowry of women was sold by their husbands and girls were forced by their fathers to marry to rich men. Occasionally, some dramas were performed to gather money to progress other affairs of women. In one case, 5 thousand women including some European women gathered in Atabak Park to perform a drama and collected 4000 Rials to establish a school for orphaned girls and educational classes for adults, and establish clinic for women.

Women’s magazines considered story writing as a means to promote their ideas and object to patriarchal culture.

The presence of women in protests:

Women did not play a significant role in events led to the first constitution; only their supporting role has been referred regarding their constitutional demands.

After the Constitution, women frequently attempted to progress the goals of the revolution even more than men. Approving the establishment of Bank Melli by the parliament, most of women endowed their jewelries or even their home furniture to financially help this trend (ibid: 55). Even in the process of constitutional restoration, women financially supported the revolution and resisted against despotism.

To accelerate the affairs’ progress, women attempted to arouse men. Women were aware of various issues across the country. Daily, they send several telegraphs to the parliament or newspapers, asked agents to rapidly solve the problems of the country and complained about some men who were nerveless (ibid: 35 and 36).

During the small despotism periods, women played direct and active role even in the military fights between people and Mohammad Ali Shah. As reported, one of the trenches of Tabriz was handled by veiled women of Tabriz. Of course, the presence of women in the back of fight front to do some works such as cooking, nursing injuries, etc. has been referred.

In the second constitution, when Russia gave the parliament ultimatum, women wear shroud and announced their readiness to fight against Russia and defend their country. Sending telegraphs to other women’s organizations around the world, women’s associations called for their contribution and help (ibid: 59). To fight against Russia, women began to boycott Russian goods (ibid: 60 and 61).
Accordingly, interest to religion and country was significantly seen in all women’s activities and efforts for the Constitution. Women had no individual demand and preferred to achieve and maintain national and religious values over their feminine demands.

Conclusion:

Qajar era coincide with the first wave of feminism. In these periods, Iranian seriously got familiar with western civilization and subsequently, they attempted to achieve such progress. Iranian women got familiar with new image of western woman and women’s rights under the impact of these communications, tending to have their rights.

The Constitutional Revolution not only was a great event in political and social issues of Iran, but also it can be considered as a revolution directing women from homes to the middle of the society. Although they played role in some cases such as Tobacco Movement but they totally attempted to vindicate their rights in some periods of the Constitution. However, even in the second Constitution, women help to the progress of the goals of the revolution, regardless of their feminine demands. Indeed, it is the same thing which has been well known in feminism theories as anonymous protests and women in collective action.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the roots of Iranian and western women’s effort was different in defending their rights. In the west, feminism was rooted in the growth of capitalism and exploitation of women in factories and it was formed in some intellectual schools such as liberalism, socialism and Marxism. But in Iran, other issues such as wide deprivation of women from studying, high financial dependency on father, husbands and sons due to lack of any job and income, and importantly, the religious structure governing Iranian society caused to the creation of feminism ideas.

In spite of such difference, the wide communication with the west and getting familiar with another world caused that Iranian women attempted to change their situation. Such a change was so rapid that western observers such as American Morgan Shuster were surprised, so that the rate of achieving to demands by Iranian women was recognized more than their western fellows. In fact, historical events indicated that Iranian women can help the progress and excellence of their community in case of flourishing their talents.

REFERENCES