

# Women in Iran: Sassanian Period to modern times

Syeeda Rehaana Akhter\*

## Abstract

Zoroastrianism spread to become the dominant religion of Iranian people, who spoke the Pahlavi language, also known as Middle Iranian, a precursor to modern Farsi. As the religion became more wide-spread, the religious class became more powerful. Royal women retained their privileges and were equal to the men' dynasty. Two women of this era, Purandukht (630-31) and Azarmidukht (631-32), daughters of Khusra II, temporarily ascended to the throne. Their reign was short lived however, as the Zoroastrian priesthood was against it. Their rule was only accepted due to the lack of a mature male heir.

Keywords- *Iranian people, Zoroastrianism, Khusra II, Purandukht, Azarmidukht*

## Introduction

### Women in the Sassanian Period

According to the religious teachings and legal writings of the late Sassanid period, women had a lower position in society. Elite women wore a veil to be protected from non-elite men. Wealthy women did not work outside of the home as their main concern was bearing children. Rural and poorer urban women had to work with the men for economic reasons. These women had a central role in trade specialization, such as making carpets and clothing, which were major commodities across the Iranian Plateau. However, in general, women were regarded as equal to children and slaves in terms of legal protection. The legal marriage age was nine years old for women and fifteen years old for men. If a woman could not produce children then the man could get a divorce. If the wife left the house without a specific reason, the punishment for her was death. An expression uncovered by historians from this period was "Women are not smart. Do not tell them your secrets".

### The Islamic Era to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

During the latter part of the Sassanid Empire, Muslim Arabian armies conquered or assimilated smaller tribes and city-states on their way to the Iranian plateau. Before the rise of Islam, most of the Arabian people were nomadic and women worked with men. Arabic women did not wear a veil, as it had not yet been adopted from the Babylonians. Qur'anic teachings affected women in every aspect of life. Women were not equal to men

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\*Department (CCAS), University of Kashmir

in most respects, but they were obligated to religious rites and duties. During the prophet (PBUH)'s lifetime, the growing prosperity of Mecca had strengthened patriarchal influence in the city. Nevertheless, women enjoyed greater social freedom than those in the contemporary Sassanid or Byzantine empires. But by the end of the first Islamic century women's lives changed and they became gradually less visible. Women's rights and freedoms did not change dramatically in the course of Islamization. Women were still bought and sold, inherited, married at a very young age often to men much older, and generally were regarded as property.

There was an exception in this period of time from the beginning of Islam in Iran to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the sixteenth-century Safavid Dynasty came to power. Women in Royal families gained a foothold in state affairs. Like the Achaemenid and early Sassanid period, women again could administer their property and engage in cultural activities. These privileges lasted until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of the Qajar Dynasty.

### **The Pahlavi Dynasty**

In 1921, the Qajar Dynasty was on the verge of collapse due to corruption and in fighting. In 1925, Reza Khan, an officer from the Iranian Cossack Brigade instigated a military coup overthrowing Ahmad Shah Qajar, the last Shah of the Qajar Dynasty. Khan changed his name to Pahlavi in reference to ancient Iranian identity and established the Pahlavi Dynasty with the support of the Majlis, the Iranian Parliament. He created an authoritarian parliamentary government that endured until toppled in 1979 amid the Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (R.A). Reza Shah presented numerous social, financial, and political changes, eventually establishing the framework of the Iranian state which lasted until 1979. Through absolute rule, Reza Shah instituted changes that transformed the lives of Persian women fundamentally.

In 1935, Reza Shah mandated that women were no longer to wear a veil in public. He, his wife, and daughters went to the graduation functions at the Women's Teacher Training College in Tehran the following year. The women of the Pahlavi family were all uncovered, as were the rest of the women in attendance. That year, the University of Tehran admitted its first female students. Women entered areas of the economy where previously they had been formally banned, family laws were altered, and open co-instructive elementary schools were built in 1936. For many, these changes were welcomed and began resurgence in the Women's Suffrage Movement that had begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For others, a forced secularism of the government, with laws banning hijab, were seen as an affront to religious freedom. Reza Shah declared Iran officially

neutral at the start of World War II, allowing German consultants to remain in the country against the protests of the British and Soviet governments. Reza Shah's main motivation was to prevent undue outside influence of foreign governments in Iranian affairs. In 1941, British and Soviet forces invaded Iran and Reza Shah was forced to abdicate to his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who then became Shah until 1979. Mohammad Reza Shah sided with the Allies in World War II, allowing the flow of supplies, most important of which was oil.

Throughout the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, changes in women's rights continued, with Queen Farrah Pahlavi at the public forefront of the women's movement. In 1963, Dr. Farrokroo Parsay was elected as the first female member of the Majlis. Parsay was an outspoken proponent for women's rights, having been brought up in a household that stressed the importance of equality. Immediately after the 1979 revolution Parsay, who refused to wear a veil, was executed by firing squad by the new Islamic State. In a letter to her children she noted that, as a physician, she was not afraid of death and would welcome it over accepting the shame of forced hijab.

Other major changes in women's rights came in the form of reproductive rights, with the legalization of contraception and abortion. Women were allowed to sue for divorce, given equal access to children in the event of divorce, and eventually gained the right to vote. With free and open access to information newspapers, television, and radio -Iranians were increasingly aware of the interconnected world and adopted many western fashions and customs. Segregation laws, as interpreted from the Qur'an, were lifted during the Pahlavi Dynasty.

The rapid changes in Iranian lifestyle, including secularization and westernization, inadvertently sparked resentment among religious institutions in Iran. As a result, Mohammad Reza Shah suspended the law banning the veil, making it optional to appease those who saw it as an affront to their religious freedoms. This was not enough however, and in 1979 Ruhollah Khomeini (R.A), who went into exile to France after 15 years of imprisonment by the Shah, led the overthrow of the Pahlavi Dynasty, putting an end to over 4000 years of monarchy in Iran. Little is actually taught about the Pahlavi Dynasty in public schools, and what is taught is heavily biased against the truth. While it is true that the Pahlavi Dynasty had their secret police, the Savak, and it is true that the Dynasty suffered corruption, and numerous other ills of what may have been considered a tyrannical monarchy, in terms of women's rights it was 54 years of unprecedented development toward equality.

## **The Modern Islamic State**

The 1979 Revolution was born out of the growing desire for religious freedom, but many felt betrayed by the institution of Sharia - Muslim Law. Women are once again treated as second-class citizens, analogous to property of men, and subject to very harsh treatment for violation of these laws including public stoning. It is important to note that not all countries dominated by a Muslim population observe such a strict interpretation of Sharia, and those that do have different interpretations. For example, in Saudi Arabia it is illegal for women to drive a car; however in Iran it is legal. The two societies comprise different sects of Islam, but both societies have similarly strict rules regarding personal appearance and division of the population according to gender. It is also important to note that many of the laws instituted in countries that observe Sharia do not come directly from the Qur'an (they didn't have cars in the era of Mohammad (PBUH)) and interpretation of the intent of Qur'anic law varies not just between countries, but by populations within countries as well.

Not all members of the new regime agreed with the new supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, and many of them were also executed. Khomeini institute dimidiante and harsh sentences for anyone who refused the new law. Although the Savak of the Pahlavi era was disbanded, a new secret police force was formed the Savama, or Ministry of National Intelligence. The Revolution of 1979 started in part as a response to the brutality of the Pahlavi Dynasty, but later proved even more ruthless. Many people who took part in the Revolution were imprisoned or executed soon after, as they felt betrayed by the new theocracy and voiced their dissatisfaction publicly. All persons who served in the government of the Pahlavi Dynasty were removed from office, hunted, imprisoned, or executed. The new Islamic State government included some women, such as Zahra Rahnavard, were highly educated and took part in the overthrow of the Shah. Rahnavard, wife of Mir-Hussain Mousavi, was considered a "reformer" when in 2005 Mahmood Ahmedenijad was elected President. One of Ahmedenijad's first moves as President was a purge of all perceived reformers, and she and her husband are serving life sentences in house arrest.

Many women, who previously held prominent positions in society during the Pahlavi Dynasty, were relegated to traditional roles keeping them much closer to home. Some were able to maintain their pre-1979 positions provided there was no conflict with the law including maintaining permission from their husbands. It has been reported that there are more educated women in Iran now than during the Pahlavi Dynasty. The Islamic

State has retained the right for women to obtain an education, but under strict supervision of male family members, and all programs of study must be approved by the government.

It is a simple task to find parallels between the tactics of the Islamic Republic of Iran and those tactics used by other totalitarian regimes. The only differences are in the specific tools used. For Nazi Germany it was the scapegoat of the Jews. For present-day, Iran it is their interpretation of Islam and total control by a megalomaniacal supreme leader, purported to be chosen by Allah. It is a fact well-hidden from the people of Iran that the ruling clerics the Akhoond are extremely wealthy, corrupt, and anything but pious when not subject to public scrutiny. Such statements as this are a death sentence in Iran.

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