

WOMEN IN IRAN DURING THE QAJAR DYNASTY

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Abstract: The Qajar dynasty (1789–1925) was a time of great change and difficulty for Iranian women. This was because of their early experiences with modernity, changing social structures, and traditional patriarchal norms. Women of this period managed various identities as daughters, wives, mothers, and, at times, as political figures in royal courts and aristocratic households. Religious and cultural norms restricted women's public roles, yet women often leveraged their private lives as avenues to exert social and familial influence. Elite women, especially those in the royal harem, had a big impact on court politics, diplomacy, and cultural patronage. They did this by subtly influencing state policies and artistic expressions. In a society dominated by men, average women faced the burden of domestic work, severe gender segregation, and limited legal rights. The late Qajar era saw the beginning of socio-political change that would later pick up steam in the Pahlavi era, as evidenced by early feminist voices calling for women's emancipation and literacy, reformist movements, and educational initiatives. The social standing, legal rights, cultural contributions, and developing political consciousness of Iranian women during the Qajar dynasty are all examined in this article, along with their varied experiences in the larger framework of Iran in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Key words: Iranian women, patriarchy, gender roles in Iran, Qajar Dynasty, and women's rights

Introduction:

The Qajar dynasty, which ruled Iran from 1789 to 1925, emerged during a period of political instability and territorial fragmentation following the fall of the Zand dynasty. Founded by Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, a military leader of Turkmen origin, the dynasty sought to reunify Iran's fractured regions and establish centralized authority (Amanat, 1997). Tehran was chosen as the new capital, symbolizing a shift in political power and the beginning of a new era in Iranian history (Amanat & Vejdani, 2012).

Throughout its rule, the Qajar monarchy navigated internal power struggles, tribal rivalries, and increasing foreign intervention from imperial powers such as Russia and Britain (Avery et al., 2008). The dynasty witnessed significant territorial losses due to wars with Russia in the early 19th century, shaping Iran's modern borders and fueling domestic calls for reform.

Culturally, the Qajar period was marked by a revival of Persian arts, literature, and architecture, as well as the introduction of European technologies and political ideas through diplomacy and trade (Floor, 2001). Administratively, early rulers like Abbas Mirza attempted to modernize the army and governance structures by adopting Western models, laying the groundwork for future reform movements (Amanat, 1997).

Socially, the Qajar era maintained hierarchical and patriarchal structures. Aristocrats, religious clerics, and merchants formed influential classes, while women's roles were largely confined to domestic spheres under Islamic law (Najmabadi, 2005). However, toward the late 19th century, modernization efforts, exposure to European ideas, and the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) initiated transformations in education, legal reforms, and civic participation, eventually leading to the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the rise of the Pahlavi state (Amanat & Vejdani, 2012).

Thus, the Qajar dynasty represents a complex period of political consolidation, cultural renaissance, and nascent modernization, bridging traditional Persian monarchy and the dawn of modern Iran.

Women in Qajar Dynasty:

During the crucial Qajar dynasty (1789–1925) in Iranian history, women's lives were profoundly influenced by religious conventions, patriarchal social structures, and new experiences with modernity. Women were mostly isolated and barred from formal political and educational settings within traditional households and the andarun (women's quarters), which reflected larger gender hierarchies that characterized Iran in the 19th century (Afary, 1996; Paidar, 1997). Iranian women were frequently portrayed by contemporary observers as socially marginalized, confined "behind closed doors," and having few opportunities for public engagement or intellectual growth (Najmabadi, 1991).

However, this depiction only provides a portion of the story. Through navigating these constrictive environments, elite and aristocratic women—especially those living in royal harems—were able to exert considerable influence in courtly politics, diplomacy, and cultural patronage (Sedghi, 2007). Prominent women like Mahd-e Olia demonstrated that leadership and agency could exist in seemingly limited settings by strategically influencing political alliances and succession politics (Kian, 1997). Women also made contributions to the creation of culture, including works of art, poetry, and storytelling that subtly questioned prevailing gender narratives (Najmabadi, 2005).

Early reformist movements and the earliest hints of feminist activism emerged during the late Qajar era. Despite social opposition, educational programs arose, allowing some women to acquire literacy and intellectual training outside of the traditional maktab (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001). Despite their modest scope, these developments signaled the start of a shift that would impact women's rights campaigns during the Pahlavi era that followed (Afary, 1996).

Women's Legal and Historical Status

The legal and social status of women during the Qajar dynasty was influenced by class, religion, and new modern trends, as well as long-standing patriarchal systems and Islamic jurisprudence. Although certain female rights were formally defined by Islamic law (fiqh), women, particularly those outside the elite, were frequently left in marginalized, restricted roles in day-to-day life (Paidar, 1997; McElrone, 2005).

In the absence of a codified civil code, Ja'fariShi'a law governed legal matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Male guardianship was crucial; men (fathers or husbands) made decisions about property transfers, marriage contracts, and the significance of legal testimony. Women's personal autonomy was heavily mediated, and their voices in court were given less weight (Paidar, 1997; McElrone, 2005; Women in Iran, n.d.). According to McElrone (2005), prior to the Constitutional Revolution, Iran had no citizenship laws, and women's legal standing was determined more by tradition and elite chronicles than by official safeguards.

The social stigma, lack of financial independence, and uncertainty surrounding child custody discouraged women from seeking legal separation, even though Islamic law allowed limited female-initiated divorce under certain conditions (neglect, cruelty). Contrarily, men could end marriages more readily and with less repercussion (Paidar, 1997; Women in Iran, n.d.). Fathers or male relatives were typically given preference under custody laws, which made separation particularly expensive for women.

Although women's inheritance shares under Sharia law are normally half that of a male sibling, there is some leeway in urban and elite contexts. Some royal women ran bazaars or owned estates, frequently through endowments connected to religious foundations or the harem. However, by the middle of the 19th century, only about 1 percent of women owned property, demonstrating a high level of concentration (McElrone, 2005; Women in Iran, n.d.; Lion & Sun, 2022).

In practice, property administration was mediated through male kin or advisors, although elite women such as princesses or harem consorts occasionally used such assets to exert influence (McElrone, 2005). Working-class women in rural areas frequently worked in labor-intensive jobs like embroidery and carpet weaving, receiving only one-third of men's pay (Women in Iran, n.d.; Paidar, 1997).

Separation of gendered space was central in Qajar society. The public-facing *birun* was dominated by men, while the *andarun* (inner domestic realm) was exclusively for women. Family or community leaders discouraged or even policed women from appearing in public without a male companion (Women in Iran, n.d.). Women's mobility was restricted by this spatial segregation, which also strengthened the idea that social order depends on honor and modesty.

Elite women occasionally carved out limited autonomy, even though legal restrictions were universal. Her arranged marriage at the age of eight, divorce later in life, criticism of forced veiling, and involvement in literary salons were all documented by royal princesses such as Tāj al-Saltaneh (Tāj al-Saltaneh, 1985/2000). Even though they were exceptional, textual agency and property control were not completely impossible, as her memoirs provide unique insights into women's internal resistance and critique (Tāj al-Saltaneh, 1985/2000).

Ordinary women, on the other hand, seldom interacted with courts or official legal institutions, especially in rural or lower-class urban environments. Only 3% of people were estimated to be literate, and court petitions were uncommon. Inheritance rights were frequently unrealized because of legal illiteracy or male family control; marriage decisions were nearly always arranged; divorce carried social rejection as well as economic risk (Lion & Sun, 2022; Women in Iran, n.d.).

Reformist currents started to question established conventions by the late Qajar era. The Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911) generated public discussions about rights, citizenship, and the place of women in the country. Pioneers like Bibi Khatoon Astarabadi established the first girls' schools and wrote satirical critiques like *Ma'āyeb al-Rijāl*, or "Failings of Men" (Bibi Khanoom Astarabadi, n.d.). The rise of women's organizations and publications like *Shokufeh* (1913–1919), which promoted cleanliness, education, and eventually national political participation, was facilitated by this activism (Maryam Amid Mozayenol-Saltaneh, 1913–1919; Women in Iran, n.d.).

The foundation for civil society activism was established early on by these developments. Elite and literate women started advocating for social and legal reform through writing, education, and organizational platforms (Women in Iran, n.d.; Paidar, 1997).

Women in the Aristocracy and Royal Court

Women in the royal court and aristocracy during the Qajar dynasty occupied complicated roles that combined limited domestic responsibilities with genuine political and cultural agency. Though officially sequestered within the harem (*andarun*), elite women leveraged family status, linguistic skills, artistic talent, and strategic patronage to influence court politics, succession, and cultural life (Sedghi, 2007; Iranica, n.d.).

The Qajar harem housed thousands of women organized in a precise hierarchy. At its highest level was the Shah's mother, the *Mahd-e 'Olyā*, who oversaw harem administration, jewels, and estates through a network of female eunuchs and officials (Iranica, n.d.; Cambridge study on female poets, 2013). The daughters of ruling families who brought political connections into the royal household were frequently among the consorts beneath her, both temporary (*ṣiḡha*) and permanent (*'aqdī*) (Iranica, n.d.).

Power dynamics were associated with internal rivalries within this female domain. Mothers of prospective heirs would influence state affairs behind closed doors by participating in

court intrigues to further their sons' claims during succession crises (Iranica, n.d.; review on powerful women, 2024).

One of the most influential women in Qajar Iran was Mahd-e 'Olyā, the mother of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah. In addition to mediating political matters and acting as guardian of royal assets, she occasionally had a significant influence on policy and appointment decisions (Iranica, n.d.; Nurollahi et al., 2024). She was in charge of the harem's money, gifts, and even diplomacy. European travellers at the time said she was a smart political player at court (Nurollahi et al., 2024; Iranica, n.d.).

Even though they weren't allowed to be a part of official institutions, elite women used family ties, religious rituals, and patronage networks to get their way. They held literary events, helped female artists, and did religious duties like ta'ziya ceremonial roles in the harem (Iranica, n.d.; Sedghi, 2007). Their support also included the creation of unofficial forums for the exchange of political ideas, reformist literature, and contemporary sensibilities, particularly during the late Qajar period when calls for constitutionalism grew in strength (Sedghi, 2007; MohagheghNeysabouri, 2020).

Non-Elite Women's Social and Economic Roles

Often referred to as "non-elite," women from lower-class urban and rural backgrounds played important and varied roles in household economies and community life. Under constrictive social norms, these women made substantial contributions to artisanal trades, agricultural production, and daily survival strategies despite being mainly excluded from formal institutions (MohagheghNeysabouri, 2020; Lion & Sun, 2022).

In rural and tribal areas, non-elite women were the backbone of agrarian economies. During peak seasons, their contributions to dairy production, livestock management, and field labor were frequently on par with or even more significant than those of men (Platform Qajar Women, n.d.; Lion & Sun, 2022). In villages, women labored side by side with men to harvest, care for crops, and process food, which was necessary for local markets and household subsistence.

The production of textiles, embroidery, carpet weaving, and other handicrafts were common cottage industries for urban women. Since these trades were usually done from home, women were able to support their families while taking care of their homes. In particular, carpets were a common female-owned business that offered flexible income despite being socially undervalued. Many women received wages that were about one-third of men's, according to Lion & Sun (2022), which allowed women to participate in the economy while also perpetuating unequal gender labor markets.

Cooking, childrearing, food preservation, and communal chores like bread baking and gardening were all supported by non-elite women's labor, even in the absence of formal wage roles. Their cycles of subsistence were maintained by their unpaid labor. According to McElrone (2005) and others, these contributions were essential to household resilience even though they were not visible in legal and financial records. Working from home became a flexible way for women to adapt to economic necessity and patriarchal norms.

The majority of non-elite women had limited opportunities to own real estate. The majority of their economic interactions were informal and facilitated by male family members. Due to social control, family interference, and literacy barriers, women's rights were rarely fulfilled, despite Islamic law's guarantee of inheritance (Etehadieh, 1994; McElrone, 2005). Except for sporadic court petitions emphasizing how property access in theory frequently varied significantly in practice, women were rarely mentioned in legal records.

Women created social networks, neighborhood camaraderie, traveling organizations, and religious assemblies that allowed for subtly expressed autonomy despite these limitations.

Women of the Qajar era used travel journals, like those examined by MohagheghNeyshabouri (2020), to document their daily tactics, which included resolving domestic conflicts, negotiating one's financial needs, and claiming small liberties in the face of rigid conventions. These autobiographies show women crossing patriarchal lines in everyday contexts, such as exchanging ideas, traveling under supervision, or engaging in community service.

When taken as a whole, these seemingly insignificant actions amount to a kind of "quiet encroachment" on male-dominated norms (Mohaghegh-Neyshabouri, 2020). Even though they were unofficial, women's networks served as vital conduits for the cultural knowledge and developing political consciousness that would eventually drive reformist and constitutionalist movement.

Selective education started to spread throughout urban areas by the early 20th century, even though literacy rates among non-elite women were still extremely low (estimated at 3% according to Lion & Sun, 2022). Education-promoting publications and girls' schools were started by reformers and activists, such as Bibi Khatoon Astarabadi and her daughter Khadijeh Afzal Vaziri (Lion & Sun, 2022; search27). Originally aimed at middle-class urban families, these initiatives eventually spread to working-class women by giving them access to education, nursing, teaching, and secretarial jobs.

Modernization, Reform, and Seeds of Change

By the late 19th century, Iran began experiencing modernization through encounters with Europe and internal reform movements. Military reforms by Abbas Mirza, the introduction of new educational institutions, and the dissemination of print culture exposed Iranian society to new ideas (Amanat & Vejdani, 2012).

Women participated in the Tobacco Protest (1890–1892) and supported constitutionalist demands for political reform. Early clandestine women's societies and informal schools for girls emerged in urban centers, challenging traditional gender norms (Sedghi, 2007).

Though women did not gain formal political rights during the Qajar era, these developments represented early feminist activism. The transition to the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 built upon these foundations, eventually leading to legal reforms and expanded educational opportunities for women (Najmabadi, 2005; Sedghi, 2007).

Influential Women of the Qajar era:

Mahd-e Olia: The Queen Mother and Regent

One of the most politically powerful women of the early Qajar period was Mahd-e Olia (1805–1873), the mother of Nasir al-Din Shah. When her son ascended the throne as a minor, she acted as regent and played a decisive role in court politics (Amanat, 1997). Mahd-e Olia used her royal status to have a say in who would be appointed as ministers, who would be next in line for the throne, and what the country's foreign policy would be. In addition to her political work, she funded religious and charitable projects that helped Tehran's urban development. Her time as regent showed that women could have a lot of political power even in a monarchy where men are in charge.

Táhirih Qurrat al-‘Ayn: Religious Reformer and Early Feminist

Táhirih Qurrat al-‘Ayn (1814–1852) was a theologian, poet, and important person in the Babi religious movement. She was probably the most revolutionary person in the Qajar dynasty. As a scholar of Islamic law, Táhirih became known for her sharp mind and radical new ways of looking at religion. In a famous act of defiance, she took off her veil in front of a lot of people at a religious gathering, going against traditional gender roles and calling for women's spiritual and social freedom (Sedghi, 2007).

Even though she was persecuted and eventually killed, Táhirih's poetry and writing became a light for future generations of Iranian feminists. Her legacy shows how women in the Qajar period started to question traditional religious structures and fight for equality.

Taj al-Saltaneh: Memoirist and Modern Feminist Voice

Taj al-Saltaneh (1883–1936), the daughter of Naser al-Din Shah, was one of the first modern feminists in Iran. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she received a private education and used her aristocratic position to critique patriarchy. In her memoirs, she openly talked about the restrictions that were put on women in royal courts and in society as a whole (Najmabadi, 2005). During the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), Taj al-Saltaneh fought for women's rights, education, and democratic changes.

Her writings show the inner struggles of a royal woman who had to deal with both privilege and oppression. They are a rare first-person account of gender inequality in late Qajar Iran. Scholars consider her a link between the old aristocracy and Iran's first feminist movement (Sedghi, 2007).

Bibi Khanoom Astarabadi: Educator and Satirical Writer

Bibi Khanoom Astarabadi (1858–1921) was a trailblazing teacher and author who spoke out against patriarchal views. In her satirical work *Ma'āyeb al-Rijāl* ("The Failings of Men"), she made fun of a well-known anti-women book that said women were less than men (Javadi et al., 1992). Astarabadi founded one of Tehran's first schools for girls, pushing for modern education as a way to give women more power. Her work marked a shift towards organised feminist activism that questioned traditional views of women's roles and opened the door for broader educational reforms in Iran in the early 20th century.

HeyranDonboli: Poet of Female Experience

HeyranDonboli (1800–1870) was an Azerbaijani-Kurdish poet from the Qajar period who wrote movingly about women's lives. Her poetry, written in Persian and Azerbaijani, looked at love, longing, and social injustice. It gave us a look into the emotional lives of women who are often left out of official histories (Karachi, 2024). Heyran's writing made Persian poetry better and kept women's voices alive in a literary tradition that was mostly male.

Other Influential Qajar Women

During the Qajar period, a number of other royal women had power. Ezzat al-Dowleh (1834–1905) used marriage to strengthen royal ties and act as a diplomat (Amanat, 1997). Fakhr al-Dowleh (1883–1955), who lived during the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods, helped charities and modern education programs. Shokouh al-Saltaneh, another princess, was known for her role in court politics, where she fought for her sons and helped decide who would be the next king.

Conclusion:

The Qajar period (1789–1925) is a strange time in the history of Iranian women. It was a time of strict patriarchal structures, but it also produced amazing women who had a big impact on Iran's politics, culture, and ideas. Even though most women were limited by the law and society, they were not passive subjects. They were kept apart and had little access to education. Elite women like Mahd-e Olia had an impact on royal politics. Intellectuals like Taj al-Saltaneh and Bibi Khanoom Astarabadi questioned patriarchal traditions, and reformers like Táhirih Qurrat al-'Ayn laid the groundwork for feminist thought.

Women who weren't part of the elite, though less well-known, worked in agriculture, markets, and handicrafts to support their families and the economy. HeyranDonboli and other writers kept women's feelings and experiences alive in Persian poetry, which added to Iran's cultural heritage.

By the end of the Qajar period, modernisation, constitutional changes, and women's activism

started to challenge long-held ideas about gender roles. This was the start of a new way of thinking about society. The women of the Qajar dynasty were not just products of their time; they were also agents of change who connected the past with the present and made it possible for Iran's women's rights movement in the 20th century.

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