

QAJAR WOMEN

The Pioneers of Modern Women Education in Persia

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Abstract

Modern education for women in Persia would have been nothing more than wishful thinking, had it not been brought, both in terms of thought as well as practice, by some outstanding Qajar women of the 19th century like Bibi Khanom Astarabadi and Tuba Azmoudeh, and eminent Persian thinkers like Mirza Agha and Ruhi . Historically education for women in Persia had been limited to madrassah characterizing a parochial system of education and private tuitions at home until the beginning of the Qajar period. The Qajar era witnessed a path-breaking transformation in terms of a progressive approach that women should be educated on the modern lines because they are the educators of the young generation and that their social standing determines the fate of humanity. This approach initiated a complete break with the traditional past which gradually transformed the standing of Persian women from an insignificant status – za'ifeh (the weak sex); manzel (the home) and moti'eh (those obedient to men's will), to the status of murabiyyan (educators). It has been only about a century since girls were for the first time formally admitted to schools in 1835 and only about some 75 years since they experienced higher education for the first time. Towards the end of 19th century education for women expanded slowly with female enrollment of over 7200. In this paper an attempt has been made to sequentially highlight the status, work culture, literacy and the role of Qajar women in formal-cum-modern education of women in Persia.

Keywords

Qajar Women, Persia, Muslim women, Modern Education, Women Education, Anjomans, Constitutional Revolution, Majles.

Introduction

Struggling behind the closed doors at home and prohibited from every facility i.e. education, training and social life women were treated as mindless beings in pre-Qajar Persia. They were confined to a life of household drudgery and child-bearing, and were considered slaves of their husbands as observed by Bibi Khanum Astarabadi¹ an outspoken and prominent Qajar woman.² Similarly Seyyed Jamalzadeh a noted Persian novelist while describing women's absence in public commented:

“No women can be seen in this country of men, but strangely half of the walking population in the streets is wrapped in black bags from head to the toe without even an opening to breathe.”

Clara Rice, a British orientalist, observed:³

“Most trades are in the hands of men.... All occupations followed by them [women] call for manual work rather than brainwork.”

In the late 19th and early 20th century Persia was economically backward, politically chaotic and a patriarchal society. Its women while leading a secluded life were differentiated by class and were culturally diverse. The underdeveloped economy and polity, and the patriarchal tendencies intimately defined a woman's position although a few women's political activism culminated in what might loosely be called feminism.⁴ Women's three piece dress consisting of the *chador* (a long cloth that covered them from head to toe), the *rubandeh* (a short cloth that masked the face) and the *chaqchur* (very loose trousers), signified their separate world carrying an identity as a *zai'feh* (the weak sex) and status as *moti'eh* (those obedient to men's will). Strictly forbidden the public domain, their houses or rooms had no windows facing the streets and the outside world, and their mobility was severely controlled. Elite and wealthy women, particularly, seldom went out as the men of their class would not approve. When they did, they sat in a closed carriage alone or with other women or children. Feminist activist of the time, Badr al-Moluk Bamdad, wrote that in Tehran after four in the afternoon, the streets would be segregated with men walking on one side and women on the other. In case a woman needed to cross the street to reach her home, she was required to obtain authorization from the street police. Even then she would be scolded and addressed as: “walk faster *zai'feh* and tighten up your veil,” the police would say.⁵ They spent most of their lives in the private world of the family. A common name for a wife was *manzel* (the home). Rich or poor, women were confined and devoted their entire lives to the household activities. A women's world was that of the *pardeh-neshin* - one who sat inside behind the curtained windows.⁶

Women generally experienced disapproval right from birth. Unless girls were born in well-to-do families, their birth was less enthusiastically welcomed. In some families it was traditionally a

nang (social disgrace) to give birth to girls. Wealthier families showed greater tolerance towards their daughters. They provided child care and hired private tutors to teach them reading and writing in Persian, Arabic and French as well as sewing and embroidery. In sum despite variations in different classes women were primarily confined to the private and secluded household life. Higher the women would be on the social scale, more secluded and less mobile they were. By contrast, less-privileged women were more mobile and less secluded. Class and patriarchy⁷ acted together to shape women's lives.

Her work in the household and in the marketplace was intertwined.⁸ Depending on the kinds of work they performed, working Persian women often combined child rearing with their routine house job. While the women encountered male domination both in household and marketplace, the economically secure women stayed home and experienced patriarchy more directly there. Gender subordination varied by class in so far as women's work was concerned. She performed diverse activities. Poor women worked as carpet weavers, vendors, domestic laborers, and seamstresses.⁹ In the nineteenth century, in order to maximize profits, European firms set up organizations in cities for the systematic collection of Persian carpets. The carpet industry helped the domestic economy and it partially counterbalanced the system that took place in some areas of the economy, like textile production, handicrafts, and other works involving artisans. Women played a crucial economic role for this industry whose growth is described as "fortuitous" for the economy.

Another observation follows:

"Carpet weavers worked under deplorable conditions. The factories were damp and cold; with the looms crowded in back to back, and the workers crouched on a wooden plank shelf or scaffolding. The scaffold is more or less typical picture of a number of small factories, which average from six to fourteen looms with five workers at a loom. Some of the factories are doubtless even worse".¹⁰

The typical earnings of female carpet weavers were a net wage of not more than two *Qerans* per working day. Women worked not at their own / for their interest but in the interest of the family. Carpet weaving formed an exploitative industry in which weavers worked hard, received little.¹¹ Girls usually experienced severe damage to their health as they

grew older. The struggle against poverty brought serious health hazards. But the work of poor women regardless of their marital status was often essential to the survival of the household in a fluid subsistence economy.¹² Women's work extended to other areas also. Those with superior needle skills produced embroidery, hand-crafted clothes, shoes, and fabrics, merchants who provided capital. Many women also worked as cheap domestic laborers for wealthy families, particularly, in Tehran and Tabriz. Some earned low wages, many received only food and shelter in return for their services, and a few were sexually abused by the household head or physically punished. A few drew small incomes as fortune tellers, *dallaks* (bath attendants), *rakhtshoors* (laundresses), prostitutes, dancers and singers for private parties. Some were saleswomen outside the bazaars selling jewelry, cosmetics and fabrics and travelled door-to-door. More professional women included healers, midwives, and leaders of religious ceremonies who conducted popular religious ceremonies such as the rituals of mourning, *Qoran-khani* (gatherings to read the Qur'an), *rouzeh-khani* (gatherings to commemorate religious rituals and history), and participating in *sufreh* (religious feasts). A few religious women also reached the level of *mojtahed*.¹³ Economically secure women usually spent much time at home, make sweets and *sherbets*, practice the piano and such traditional musical instruments as the harmonica or the tar, and read poetry and literature.¹⁴

Royal Women and Education

Qajar histories, biographical dictionaries, and memoirs provide some information about educated women of the court. Mohammad Hasan E'temaad-al-Saltana mentions of forty women who were well educated, wrote poetry and prose, were accomplished calligraphers and painters, and were also versed in languages like Ottoman Turkish and French. Some also had private libraries and female scribes as attested by seals and inscriptions on surviving manuscripts. Among the most important writings by women of this period is *Ma 'aayeb al-rejaal* by an author identified on the manuscript as Bibi Khanom Estarabadi (b.1858) and *Kaateraaf* by Taj-al-Saltana (b. 1883). Some medieval books on ethical instruction and counsel reveal that teaching women to read was recommended in royal families.¹⁵ Girls were sometimes sent to *maktabs* until the age of eight or nine years to be taught rudimentary reading and

writing and to receive religious instruction. However there were also a number of women who were educated beyond such elementary levels at home like Amena Baygom¹⁶ daughter of Molla Mohammad Taqi Majlesi (d.1659) and Hamida Esfahani (d. 1677) and her daughter Fatema.¹⁷ Occasionally, women were described as *mojtaheda*, *faqiha*, *'alema* and *mojaza*, indicating thereby, they had reached the highest levels of religious knowledge and had received permission to teach theology and grant their students similar authorization. One such figure in the 19th century was Nur Jahan Tehrani, author of *Nejaat al-moslemaat*, a 372 page manuscript written in 1809.

Reform in Educational Thought and Reconfiguration of Muslim Woman's Identity

As cultural interactions between Persia and Europe intensified, one of the issues defining the differences between the two cultures was the status of women. Women's total deprivation from literacy as a central problem of Muslim nations was repeatedly pointed out. A commentary on a statistical report issued by the Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture in France noted as under:

*“The difference between women of the West and women of the East is noteworthy. In European countries women are engaged in any work and profession, even in sciences and literature; they are little different from men. To the contrary, in the East, women are not involved in any of this world's affairs; their work is limited to bringing up children and even in that work their low level of knowledge is well known”.*¹⁸

The social lot of women gradually came to be linked to the fate of humanity by prominent literary figures such as Mirza Agha Khan Kirmani and Ruhi who stated that women are the teachers (*murabbi*) in the household and the fountainhead of all progress of humanity.¹⁹ Though few 19th century reformers called for such radical gender parity as Kirmani and Ruhi, by the first decade of the 20th century the argument that women should be educated because they were educators of children, companions of men, and half of the nation got largely accepted. In the last decades of the 19th century education of women emerged as an important element of the modernist project. One of the biggest pushing factor behind this new thought was the Persian translation of a book “*The Liberation of Women*” translated and published by Yusuf Ashtiani

I'tisham al-Mulk in 1900 under the title *Tarbiat-i Nisvan* (Education of Women). Although it did not inspire any public debate but it was well received among the like-minded intellectuals. In its preface, Ashtiani noted that famous Egyptian writers as well as European thinkers had written extensively on women's rights to education but there were still no books in Persian that debated the advantages of women's education. Other reform minded Persian intellectuals also followed this conviction that women's education is the fundamental step in the nation's quest for civilization and expressed with regrets that Muslims have neglected this important matter and have done nothing to educate women. How could anybody hope for progress if their women, the first teachers and educators of children, are captives in the realm of ignorance.

In the first decades of the 20th century women's education came to be considered more important than men's for the fact that an entire educated nation would follow from educated women. One author is reported to have gone so far as to give women's education a higher national priority:

"The progress, uplifting, and civilization of every nation, every country, is dependent on three things: first the education of girls, second science, third law.... The education of girls... is far more important than the other two, because sons and daughters are educated by women until they reach school age".

This shift in the concept and purpose of education proved to be critical for opening the possibility of education for women. Also the concept of education now became centered on literacy. The emphasis on reading and writing marked the transition from a largely oral culture to a print culture. The literacy-centered concept of education led to new techniques of teaching and learning. As literacy became the privileged core of education, the thought of mass education got promoted. Here, religion was also invoked to promote modern mass education. For instance, Mirza Taqi Khan Kashani,²⁰ stated that after Prophets sent by God to educate people, the task of education be shared by concerned people, the wise men and kings. He also advocated people who matter, should share the government's obligation to provide education. Zuka' al-Mulk, a prominent Qajar intellectual, also argued that people should not expect the government to do everything; the dissemination of knowledge and improvement of industries are among the duties of the nation.

Towards the early 20th century it became a burning issue that women's education should be considered a national priority if the nation were to catch up with progress.²¹ Thinkers associated with the "Babi Movement" were also among the earliest advocates of women's literacy and education.²² Even thinkers who were not Babis like Mirza Fath 'Ali Akundzada, praised the Isma'ilis and the Babis for educating their daughters and sons in similar fashion. 'Abd-al-Rahim Talebof in his *Ketab-e Ahmad*, depicted Ahmad's sisters Mahrok and Zaynab as participating in his educational regime and benefiting from it.²³ Muslim leaders like Hajj Mirza Hadi Dawlatabadi, father of Sadiqa Dawlatabadi; Shaikh Hadi Najmabadi, father of Aaqa Beygom and Bibi Najmabadi; and Shaikh Mohammad Hosayn Yazdi, husband of Safiya Yazdi, supported establishment of new schools for girls, and female members of their own families turned out to be active educators. They realized that one of the central ways through which women could claim citizenship, was to take charge of female education by finding educational and occupational establishments for girls.

Depiction of Girl Education in Books

Girls began to appear as characters in books designed for the education of the young. A book of parables from 1876 highlighting good and bad character had as many female as male characters in its stories. One of the stories depicted a boy named Mas'ud who's New Year's present to his parents was to demonstrate that he could read any text they chose. Simultaneously, Kawkab, a frivolous girl was disliked by everyone because she was undisciplined and shameless, laughed a great deal for no reason, opened her mouth in front of people and made awful noises, ran around and paid no attention to others, did not greet people properly, talked nonsense, and eavesdropped on others' conversations. On the other hand, Khawrshid Khanum, a four year old exemplary girl is depicted to be impeccable, obedient, and well mannered. Everyone liked her. She got up in the morning with her parents without a fuss, dressed and cleaned herself, performed her ablutions, and prayed. She spent her whole day doing only good things, played by herself, did not bother adults, and was already in a Qur'anic school where she could read the Qur'an and other texts as well, and did not do anything without her mother's permission. This pattern of moral example continued throughout the book.²⁴ Other educational texts of the period similarly

marked gender distinctions through inclusion of girls. Miftah al-Mulk's *Ta'lim al-atfal* (Teaching Children) in 1897, a manual on teaching the alphabet more efficiently, had drawings of both boys and girls schools. A female character named Fatimah Khanum teaches fundamentals of religion and the names of the twelve Shi'i Imams. Subsequently Mirza Muhammad becomes a prayer leader for his classmates. Fatimah Khanum invites her classmates on a Friday to play with dolls and to sew, and thus they learn the science of housekeeping and the necessary arts.²⁵

Identity of Muslim Woman Redefined

As educational thought got redefined, the institution of family also got reconfigured. It got relocated in relation to the national community rather than in relation to the kin and families. As family now became the foundation of country, the role of the Muslim woman also got reenvisioned. Within the family, woman as a mother, became its foundation and was no longer a *za'ifeh*. Henceforth her intellectual development became the primary factor in determining the development of the country. Woman's role as nurturer and educator began to take precedence over her pre-modern function as a petty household runner. She became a mother both to her children and to the country, and replaced the father as the manager of the children's upbringing. It can be said that in a way the call for women's education was oriented more towards rearing an educated citizenry, and in order to fulfill this function adequately, a woman herself first had to have a broad education, immense experience and a wide range of knowledge. Also the goals of men's and women's education were different. Whereas man was to be educated in the new sciences so as to fulfill the demand of national politics, economics and modern industry, the woman was, above all, to be educated in the science of home management, this all stands argued by the following:²⁶

"A woman cannot run her household well unless she attains a certain amount of intellectual and cultural knowledge. She should learn at least what a man is required to learn up through the primary stage of education... It is important for a woman to be able to read and write, to be able to examine the basis of scientific information, to be familiar with the history, and to be able to acquire knowledge of the natural sciences and politics... A woman who lacks this upbringing will be unable adequately to carry out her role in society or in the family"

The reconfiguration of the family thus empowered women by putting them in charge of making themselves, their daughters, their sons and husbands as the civilized citizens of a nation.²⁷ The redefined role of the Muslim women as a mother and wife and the proposition that the progress of the nation depended on the education of women, was discussed repeatedly in the constitutionalist press in the first decade of the 20th century. In the same period the establishment of new schools for girls started gaining momentum as women took charge of girls' education.²⁸ All of the girls' schools were initially established by women often in their homes. In 1907 women from Tehran presented a petition to the Shah asking for provisions to facilitate women's education. They wrote tirelessly in the press on female education, encouraged women of means to put their resources into the cause, organized fund-raising events, and provided free schooling for girls who could not afford to pay for their education.

Qajar Women - Founders of the Constitution

Studies on the Constitutional Revolution for the most part have hardly mentioned women's role. Such works have created an illusion that the revolution was strictly men's affair which it certainly was not. Indeed women were not only participants in transforming the essentially political revolution of 1906 into the beginnings of a social revolution but they were the very architects of the constitution. The secluded and veiled women exhibited political power that eventually changed the course of history for Persian women as well as men. The constitutional revolution discloses significant information regarding women's lives, their perspectives, national liberation struggles and aspirations for women's progress. Morgan Shuster, the American Treasurer General observed, "*Iranian women became almost at a bound the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world.*"²⁹ He became convinced that the veiled women of Persia who with little or no experience had overnight become teachers, newspaper writers, speakers on political subjects, and accomplished what the women's movement in the West had taken centuries to achieve. Despite the persistence of seclusion and gender inequality women managed to leave their homes, organized *anjomans* and led the constitutional revolution. Torn and caught between the world of tradition and the tumultuous world of change, some women rose against patriarchal polity and society. Women wanted a constitution, education and enfranchisement. By 1906 some

women had organized separate women's societies that were first secret but subsequently became public. According to Morgan Shuster, about a dozen semi-secret women's societies existed in Tehran whose activities were coordinated by a central committee. Janet Afary's study, "*The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906-1911*" documents several such societies that were formed in 1907-1911. A few also made donations to the nationalist cause. In 1906 a large number of women protesters stopped the carriage of the monarch asking him to respect the wishes of the clergy and not succumb to foreign powers.

The revolutionary movement succeeded in compelling the monarch to sign a proclamation to create the *Majles* (the National Consultative Assembly) on October 7, 1906. Bayat Phillip and Morgan Shuster, unanimously agree that a large number of these women, particularly, those active in the *anjomans* and those who had formed the nucleus of resistance, came from wealthy urban classes and included daughters and wives of the king, princes, *ulama* and *Majles* deputies. Sultanzadeh suggests that this women's movement consisted of wealthy women without any participation by proletariat. It is probable that their class background played a significant role in their participation. Higher was the women's socio-economic background, the more extensive were political activities. The extent to which the Qajar women became assertive in the course of the constitutional revolution can very well be gauged from the below given quote:

*"We shall make laws, coordinate the police, appoint governors, dispatch rules and regulations to provinces, uproot oppression and autocracy and do away with the unmerciful. We shall break into the wheat and barley soils of the rich and set up an organization for distribution of bread. We shall forcibly enter into the vaults of the ministries who sucked the blood of the nation and we shall set up the national bank. We shall expel the Ottoman forces, return the enslaved peasant women of Quchan to their homes, arrange the affairs of the city, give clean water to people, clean up streets and alleys, and set up an organization for the city's affairs, and after all this... tender our resignation and publicly announce that others should carry on the remaining reforms."*³⁰

After the constitution got established, in order to uphold the country's economic independence the creation of a national bank

became a prerequisite. For this the collection of funds for the national bank became an issue around which women began to form societies and associations. But 1906 constitution enfranchised only men, not women. It denied women their political rights although it guaranteed equal rights and protection to all Persians. Article 5 of 1906 Supplementary Fundamental Law stated that Iranians are to enjoy equal rights before law. But equal rights applied to men only. Article I of 1906 Electoral Law identified the electors as men of various propertied and non-propertied classes. It implicitly excluded women. Article 3 of the same law explicitly prevented women from voting rights. Furthermore, Article 2 excluded women's representation in the *majles* on the pretext that they failed to be participants in the economic and political affairs of the country. But these discriminatory laws failed to pacify women who even called for the *majles* representatives to resign and hand over the reins of government to women for a short period of 40 days. They insisted on an educational reform that guaranteed the right of all women to education. As early as 1906, a woman whose identity remains unknown, tried to convince one of the prominent *ulama* delegates to the extent that such schools would train girls to become superior mothers and wives. Unable to receive support from the conservative parliament members and a faction of the *ulama* that was antagonistic to their education, women turned against the established authorities and began their own independent initiatives. On January 20, 1907, a women's meeting took place in Tehran and ten resolutions were adopted including the call for setting up girls' schools and abolition of onerous dowries since many believed that the money saved for a girl's dowry should, instead, be spent on her education.

Their next step was to file a petition and ask the *Majles* to officially recognize their *anjomans*. In 1908 they submitted their request but their action created uproar and a number of conservative *ulama* and wealthy merchants declared the *anjomans* as anti-Islamic and heretical. Supporting women, few argued that women's organizations had existed throughout Islamic history and could not be considered un-Islamic. However, the parliament did not discuss women's suffrage until 1940 although women continued their struggles by concentrating on their own specific gender interests. But these struggles cultivated the seeds of feminism indicating that women's real struggle had just begun.

Muslim Women and the Revolution of Modern Education

Initially, it was the American Presbyterian missionaries who established the first modern elementary school in Urmia in 1838 for Assyrian Christian children. However, two Muslim girls entered the school in 1891 and their numbers gradually rose to 120 in 1909. In 1865 “Daughters of Charity” opened schools for girls in Urmia, Salmas, Tabriz, and Isfahan and in 1875 one in Tehran. In 1895 the American school for girls was established in Tehran. Various other missionary denominations also sponsored schools for girls. For instance, the Armenians opened such schools in Tehran in 1870, in Qazvin in 1889, in Soltanabad in 1900, and in Isfahan in 1903. Ettehad, the first Jewish school for girls in Tehran was established by the Alliance Israelite Universelle in 1898. In Kerman Zoroastrians established *Enaat-e jamsidi* for girls in 1902. *Tarbiat-e banaat* was established in Tehran by Bahais in 1911.

Educational institutions for Muslim women did not exist until the turn of the century. Learning at home from tutors was primarily available to well-to-do women until the establishment of the first modern Muslim school for girls. It is these privileged Muslim women who became aware of the value of education from tutorials at home although they could not use it for public services immediately. Some young girls received insignificant training through *maktab khaneh* (informal educational system) under which the clergy taught classes but most teachers were nearly illiterate. Teachers offered some lessons from the Qur’an in Arabic but girls rarely learned to read or write. Moreover, a widely spread superstition was there that educated women would threaten the morality of the society, or once women learned the art of writing, they would write love letters and generally undermine the existing social order. Although, most women were unschooled, their education even though minimal represented a challenge to many men who were anxious not to lose their privilege over women’s mind.³¹ Nevertheless, Muslim women realized that education is a key to their advancement. Hence in an effort to restrain and confront the patriarchal control, they decided to establish schools for girls.

The first modern Muslim school for girls was *Parvaresh*, established in the Tehran home of Mirza Hasan Rosdiya in 1903 with Tuba Rosdiya his sister-in-law as its founder and first principal enrolling 17 students. However the government officials objected to the foundation of the school because of which it was forced to be closed. Then was *Dusizagan*

in 1906 established by Bibi Khanum Astarabadi. This school also faced a lot of opposition following which Astarabadi referred a complaint to the ministry of education but they responded that it was advisable to close the school. She then met Sani-od-dowleh the then minister of education and this time her request was granted on a condition that only girls between 4 to 6 years of age would be accepted and the word girl should be dropped from the board of the school. Ultimately it was *Namus* (Honor) established in 1908 by Tuba Azmoudeh near Hassanabad for 20 girls which grew into a large middle school for girls with 400 pupils.³² This institute inspired the creation of many more girls' private schools in Iran and consequently similar schools were opened in provincial capitals like *Banaat* in Qazvin (1908), *Banaat-e eslami* in Rast (1911), and *Fatemiya* in Shiraz (1920).³³ By 1911 there were 47 schools for girls in Tehran alone with an enrollment of 2,187 pupils compared to 78 for boys with an enrollment of 8,344.

Daughter of a colonel, Azmoudeh, married at the age of 14 and learnt Persian, Arabic, and French from tutors hired by her husband. Devoted to women's education with no financial or moral support from the government, she held the first classes at her own house. She saw no contradiction between women's education and Islamic teachings. She incorporated religious texts and the study of Qur'an into the curriculum and with the teaching help of her female friends, her school offered women well-rounded education in Persian studies and home economics. Her opponents soon destroyed her small school and harassed her students in the streets with accusations of immorality and unchastity. Despite her fears she persisted in her ambitions of breaking away from the social norms and cultural traditions regarding women. Shortly afterwards she moved *Namus* to a larger building and even added secondary school classes and evening classes for adult and working women. She expanded the school to six more branches in Tehran with the help of her supportive husband. In absence of regular teachers Azmoudeh invited elderly men as substitute teachers because the employment of young male teachers would have caused a scandal. In a few years a number of well-trained and educated *Namus* graduates became teachers. This made Azmoudeh a pioneer in women's education.³⁴

Impact of Educational Revolution

From this period modern female education got formally institutionalized

and recognized for the first time in Iran's history. An immediate outcome of the independent initiatives towards female education was that within a few years of the establishment of *Namus*, a number of well-trained and educated *Namus* graduates became Iran's first official female teachers. This revolutionary development intensified the challenge to the pre modern system of female education as now more women and men followed Tuba Azmoudeh's path. For instance in 1908 a notable Yusuf Khan Reyshahr Moa'ddab al-Mulk founded the *Ecole Franco-Persane* at his home for his daughters and relatives.³⁵ By 1910 more than 50 private girls' schools, literacy and night classes got established in Tehran alone with an enrollment of 2,187 pupils compared to 78 for boys with an enrollment of 8,344. The number of women teachers, journalists and activists in women's organizations increased. However schools encountered serious obstacles from hostile men especially conservative factions of the religious community who cursed, stoned and insulted teachers and students in public. Despite harsh opposition women persisted in their endeavors.

The most path-breaking outcome of the establishment of these schools was the pressure which they put on government to sponsor schools. In 1911 the constitutionalist government proposed subsidizing five elementary schools for girls with a large portion of the total of 4,000 *tomans* although it is not clear whether this scheme was ever carried out. In 1917-18 the first ten state schools for girls were established with a total enrollment of 938. In the same year a teachers' training college for women *Dar al-Mu'allamat*³⁶ was opened with Yusuf Khan Richard Mo'addeb-al-Molk as its principal. It was oriented towards training women to become teachers as there was a severe shortage of female teachers.³⁷ Two years later the first government intermediate school for girls was opened with a three year program. 45 girls graduated from this school in 1924. Many private girls' schools also began to extend their curricula beyond the elementary grades, though there was no state support for secondary education for girls beyond the three intermediate years until 1939.

At the same time the issue of female education became a point of contention between the pro and anti-constitutionalist forces. For instance, Shaykh Fazl'allah Nuri, a prominent anti-constitutionalist cleric associated the opening of schools for women's education and elementary schools for young girls with breaching the Islamic law and

this statement aimed at closing down the new educational institutions. Nevertheless women educationists defended girls' schools in the most articulate manner. Addressing Shaykh Fazl'allah Nuri directly, one of the women questioned his religious credentials. She insisted that her God unlike his was just and had not created men and women in such a way that one deserved the blessings of education and the other deserved to remain like an animal; that the prophet of her God had made it obligatory for all Muslim men and women to seek education, whereas his God had forbidden women to seek education. She challenged him to name a single woman close to the Prophet who was illiterate or ignorant, and also questioned his right to speak in the name of *shari'a*. She defended the structure and curriculum of modern schools over *maktab* explaining the benefits of education for women and eventually concluded that nothing in Islam forbade women's education. Unless he could answer all her arguments, he had to admit that he had spoken thoughtlessly.³⁸ The generation of teachers of the Qajar era was also instrumental in inspiring the later generations of women in becoming activists during the late Pahlavi period until the 1979 revolution.

Conclusion

The aforementioned analysis of events and facts leads to the observations that how the invisible Qajar women gradually made themselves known to the Persian society and the outside world. Their secluded and regressive life made them inwardly assertive rather than compliant to the societal mores. Even though struggling to live behind closed doors and windows, they were in wait of a spark that would ignite their otherwise hidden ambitions – schools for girls, constitution and enfranchisement though the latter vision had to wait many years to be achieved. The graduated women that the schools produced emerged as Persia's first official female teachers who carried on the legacy and mentored some eminent female educationists in the later years. As for the constitutional revolution, it was truly a landmark for the Persian women as for the first time in the history of Iran, women from all walks of life joined to promote national causes and advocate educational rights for women.

References & Notes

- 1 Astarabadi also opened one of the first elementary schools for girls.
- 2 Yet these invisible women were capable of action as amply proved in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11.

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- 6 Sattareh Farmaian, Farman. (1992): “*Daughter of Persia: A Women’s Journey from Her Father’s Harem through the Islamic Revolution*”, New York: Anchor Books, pp. 6–7.
- 7 Patriarchy denotes a system of male control over women’s labor and sexuality, both in the private and public spheres.
- 8 The narrow methodological approaches often adopted by scholars of Iranian political and economic history have neglected the value of women’s domestic work for the society and economy because it was wage less and contained no exchange value. Thus women’s work and their contribution to Iran’s economy of the early twentieth-century remain underestimated. During the early 1900s Iran’s overall economy experienced a slow transformation from subsistence to a market economy. One of the features of societies undergoing such a change is that household production is still united with production for the market unlike the advanced capitalist systems. As a result in such situations women’s work in the market remains an extension of their work at home.
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- 25 Ibid.
- 26 I’tisam al-Mulk. (2005): “*Tarbiat-i nisvan (Education of Women)*”, in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, University of California Press: U.S.A, p. 194.
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