

The Historical Relationship between Women's Education and Women's Activism in Iran

Somayyeh Mottaghi
The University of York, UK

Abstract

This paper focuses on the historical relationship between women's education and women's activism in Iran. The available literature shows that education is considered to be one important factor for Iranian women's activism. The historical analysis of women's demand for education helps us to gain an understanding of the past in order to relate it to the future. This paper analyzes Iranian women's active participation in education throughout the Safavid period (1501-1722) and the Qajar period (1794-1925). Women's demand for education continued into the twentieth century and by the time of the constitutional revolution (1905-1911), during which Iranian women participated immensely in political affairs, the alliance of elite and non-elite women was clearly visible around educational issues. Women's demand for education gained particular visibility; however, the focus shifted from modernization based on Westernization during the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), towards Islamization from 1979 onwards. This paper analyzes the ways in which, during different eras, women have been treated differently regarding their rights to education and at some points they faced difficulties even in exercising them; therefore, they had to constantly express their demands.

Key words

Iran, Education, Women's movement, Historical perspective

Introduction

The historical analysis of women's activism in Iran shows that education has always been considered an important factor for Iranian women and something that they have always demanded. The right to education is non-negotiable, embedded in the teaching of Islam as well as in hu-

man rights provisions.

The historical analysis and a review of the available literature on Iranian women's education help us to gain an understanding of the past in order to connect it to the future. The historical review of who the women activists were, what kinds of activities they engaged in, and where they were located is at the core of the historical analysis. This may assist in comparing and contrasting different sets of ideas about women's political participation in Iran and it is also useful to consider various sources of history in order to gain insight into women's past practices, which is evidence to support the diversity and complexity of women's present needs (Schmidt, 1993).

This paper aims to analyze the long tradition of Iranian women's active participation in education throughout the Safavid period (1501-1722) and the Qajar period (1794-1925). In particular, it will focus on three historical figures in order to give us an explicit understanding of women's education during these periods. Women's demand for education continued into the twentieth century and by the time of the constitutional revolution (1905-1911), during which Iranian women participated immensely in political affairs, elite and non-elite women had formed an alliance around educational issues. They were fighting for the right to education, which at the time was barely available to the majority of women. Therefore, the women's rights movements gained particular visibility; however, the focus shifted from modernization based on Westernization during the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), towards Islamization from 1979 onwards. As a consequence, the relationship between secular and religious women (in connection with education) has varied from one period to the next. It is important to point out that the use of the terms modernization and Westernization side by side does not imply that they are the same thing. The concepts of modernization and Westernization are and have always been problematic when analyzing Iranian history. This is because the affinity between the two terms turns modernity as a process into Westernization as the end result. This is particularly important because, during the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), state modernization was closely associated with Westernization and simultaneously women's movements in Iran emerged through Westernization, therefore it is always difficult to separate the two terms (Paidar, 1995).

Although the circumstances have been difficult, women have continued to fight for their right to education during the twenty-first century, when they have been connected inside the country as well as with the outside world.

Conceptual framework and methodology

In this work, the number of historical sources is limited, as women's participation in education is not well documented. This is because historical texts are "largely written by men and focused upon male agencies, male activities and male experiences" (Purvis, 1994, p. 167). It is the case that: "Women, like men, have been actors in history, and yet their achievements and struggles have generally been neglected by mainstream historians who concentrate upon male subjects, male activities and male experiences" (Purvis, 1992, p. 273).

A variety of secondary sources have been used, including books and journals, because: "Secondary sources are especially useful for giving an overview of themes related to the proposed research" (Purvis, 1994, p. 168). Primary sources, even though very limited, have also been used as vital sources of information. These include women's own writings, such as autobiographies and life histories, although it is worth noting that autobiographies were only written by a few of the elite women. There are very few prior to the twentieth century, but even these can be very helpful. Autobiographies offer many advantages since, as accounts of individual experiences and events, they may be very different from the view of another observer (Purvis, 1992).

In parts of this paper may be found translations of Persian sources, as some of the information has never been available in English. Translation can lead to a loss of meaning. This problem may be caused by a lack of linguistic terms. For example, in some cases, it might be impossible to find the "conceptual equivalence" (Birbili, 2000, p. 2) of some words.

The Safavid Period (1501-1722)

The Safavid dynasty was rooted in a Sufi order led by Sheykh Safi al-Din Ardabili (born in 1252), after whom the Safavids were named.

His monastery was located in Tabriz, where his followers from different parts of Iran used to gather. After his death in 1334, and during his successor's leadership, the Sufi order played a significant role in adopting Shia Islam as its main faith; consequently, in 1501 Shah Ismail 1, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, accepted Twelver Shia Islam as the official religion of Iran. It is worth noting that when Shiism was accepted by Shah Ismail 1, there were many Sunni Muslims in Iran who were permitted to practice freely, but later in the Safavid period when his grandson, Shah Abbas (born in 1571), came to power, he only recognized orthodox Twelver Shia as the official state religion. Safavid militants adopted a twelve-sided baton cut from red scarlet silk and planted it into their turbaned headgear as a symbol of their veneration of the Twelve Imams. Many Sunnis were persecuted and fled the country and some of them were killed (Soudavar, 2002). However, there are others who argue the opposite; therefore, there is a debate on this issue.

During the Safavid Period (1501-1722), certain Islamic rights were recognized for women. Even though Islam had disempowered women for a period of time, with the establishment of Shiism as the official religion of the country, which was primarily concerned with justice, women were allowed to regain power and had the right to exercise it.

In particular, women's right to education was recognized by the Safavids, and recognizing this right was felt to be important to facilitate access to education, although education was only available to elite harem women. Having been educated, they could then gain access to their other rights, which were financial independence and power to participate in the political affairs of the country. They also benefited from this power through their connections with the king as wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers. The importance of looking at the Safavid period is to explore the fact that women were "visible and socially active" (Szuppe, 2003, p. 142). In particular, the right to education and learning for elite women was respected due to their independent means and wealth (Keddie, 2007; Szuppe, 1998).

One of the most influential and wealthy elite women during the Safavid Period was Pari Khan-Khanom (born in 1548), a highly controversial woman whose life illustrates the role of elite women in the Safavid harem. She was known to be the favorite daughter of Shah Tahmasb, who succeeded to the throne of Persia on 2 June 1524, and

as a result she was able to gain power, which she later used to influence him directly. He often sought her advice on a variety of national matters, such as financial and political issues (Babayan, 1998; Golsorkhi, 1995; Ma-sum, 1972).

Pari Khan-Khanom's distinctive role during the Safavid period can be identified through her personal characteristics as well as the way in which she exercised her power. Her intelligence and high level of literacy also caught her father's attention. Her education in the harem came mainly from private tutors and included reading, writing, and calligraphy, all of which were regarded as basic knowledge. She was encouraged to learn the Koran and was interested in studying the major sciences as well as jurisprudence and Islamic law. She mastered all of these and her breadth of knowledge made her unique amongst the women of her time. She was also taught horse riding and the art of painting, which were considered to be important skills for women at the time. Composing letters was also common amongst the harem women, who utilized the skill either for personal correspondence or for their political activities (Babayan, 1998; Golsorkhi, 1995; Szuppe, 1998; Szuppe, 2003).

Being educated enabled her to take part in the political affairs of the country. The death of her father in 1576 was the beginning of Pari Khan-Khanom's active political participation in the affairs of state. First and foremost, she played a significant role in the succession of her brother, Isma-il, who was 39 and had been away from the capital (Qazvin) for twelve years. In 1576, Pari Khan-Khanom controlled the country until Isma-il's return to the capital for his coronation and accession to control of the state. She presumed that, by helping her brother, she could retain the respect and power that she had enjoyed during her father's time, but when he took control of the Safavid dynasty, things did not work out favorably, either for her or for the rest of the royal family. Isma-il instigated a reign of terror and decided to kill every member of the royal family, believing they might take the throne from him. He believed that women's interference in governmental matters dishonored the king, but as long as he did not see his sister as a threat to his kingdom he did not kill her. Nevertheless, she was isolated and in just a year her power and influence waned. When things became difficult in the harem, she decided to kill her brother in order to regain her power, and she succeeded in 1577 with the help of her supporters

(Taj-bakhsh, 1961; Szuppe, 2003).

From this brief outline of women's participation during the Safavid period it can be seen that education was considered to be fundamental during this period and it helped harem women to exercise political power. The available literature does not show any record of women's political participation during the final century (seventeenth) of the Safavid dynasty until its end in 1722, but women's political participation began to be recorded during the Qajar Period, from 1794.

The Qajar Period (1794-1925): A Time of Feminists' Mobilization in Iran

The Qajar dynasty, like the Safavid, had a significant impact on the lives of women in Iran. Women's activism continued throughout the Qajar Period (1794-1925), during which elite women, including the king's harem and *ulama's* daughters (Ulama refers to Muslim Legal Scholars), and non-elite women simultaneously played a major role in changing the destiny of the nation, and women in particular. Education continued to be at the core of elite women's access to power. The *ulama's* daughters were allowed religious studies while elite harem women could enjoy both religious studies and foreign languages, which enabled them to look beyond Iran's national borders.

Qajar Royal Women

A significant example of an active elite woman from the king's harem is Malik Jahan Khanom (born in 1805), better known by her title, Mahd-I Uliya, "the highest-ranked cradle," which was a title given to the mothers of kings in Iran. She came from a privileged background and was deeply traditionalist. In 1821 she married her cousin Mohammad Mirza in order to protect and strengthen the Qajar dynasty; her wedding ceremony was magnificent and one of the most prestigious weddings of its time. Her husband came to the throne in 1834 at the age of 26, just three years before the birth of their first child, Naser Ul-Din Mirza, later Naser Ul-Din Shah (Tolouyi, 1999).

Mahde-I Uliya was remembered as a shrewd and intelligent politician in the Qajar harem; her personality and political participation made her

the most famous woman of her time. She had the gift of intellectuality and morality, she was an expert in Persian literature and the Arabic language and her interest in history and poems was irresistible. Having said that, she was not the king's favorite wife, which may have caused her difficulties. Also, her son was not the only one in the harem, there were other sons from different wives of Mohammad Shah who might come to power as king; therefore, there was no guarantee that the throne was secure for her son. In Iran there was no primogeniture and it was always the king who nominated a crown prince. He had the choice of nominating whomever he wanted, so the harem could become very influential in directing the king's attention to a particular son. With all these difficulties, Mahde-I Uliya began to intervene in national policies during her husband's illness, when his ability to govern the country was weakened. Then, when he died in 1848, she came to power as the king's widow and became his regent. She was clever and talented enough to control the political situation of the country to ensure the crown for her son, Prince Naser Ul-Din. Finally, her political reliability helped his succession (Adamiyat, 1975; Afshar, 1991; Amanat, 1997; Tolouyi, 1999).

Although Mahd-I Uliya was a traditionalist, she supported women's right to education and her concept of culture and tradition included the obligation to pursue learning, which was essential for any woman who wanted to exercise power. In a sense, the commitment to education was fundamental across the board for the elite, but also for middle-class women. It was mainly provided by religious establishments, and Islam, *ulama*, and the harem worked together very well. The religious establishment was considered to be the guardian of life, recording births, marriages and deaths and also providing education.

Ulama's Daughters

Education was an important factor, and at that time it was mainly the *ulama's* duty. Different groups of *ulama* had different attitudes towards education; some of them were dynamic and others not. Those who were dynamic let their daughters gain knowledge; therefore, educated women from the families of *ulama*, like the elite women from the king's harem, were active. According to the available documents, Zarin Taj (Crown of Gold) was the first woman from such a family in the modern history

of Iran to rebel against the conventions of her time: “she was an independent-minded woman whose intellectual interests went beyond the standards of her time” (Amanat, 1989, p. 298). Zarin Taj, or Fatemeh, better known by her title, Qurrat ul-Ain (Solace of the Eyes), was born in Qazvin in 1814 into the family of a prominent mullah. She was brought up in a strictly religious environment; her father was a doctor of law and an expert in Koranic exegesis and jurisprudence (Amanat, 1989; Mahdavi, 2004).

Qurrat ul-Ain obtained her early education at home from her father, who encouraged her to advance her studies beyond the elementary stage. This was considered a novelty for a woman of her time. She then took courses in different branches of theology from other relatives while she mastered Persian literature, Arabic and Islamic studies. She achieved sufficient expertise in religious matters to enable her to participate in theological discussions with religious authorities and to teach and write treatises on religious subjects (Bayat, 1978).

Qurrat ul-Ain was married to her cousin, Mulla Mohammad Baraghani, who was one of the most famous Usuli religious leaders. The Usuli School enables the *ulama* to give legal opinions and it insists that, in religious matters, every ordinary Shia needs to follow the judgment of one of the *ulama* who has striven to perfect himself in religious jurisprudence (Momen, 2003). This was different from Qurrat ul-Ain’s beliefs; she followed Shaykhism, which was a combination of Sufi and Shia doctrines. It was an Islamic religious movement founded by Shaykh Ahmad in early 19th-century Qajar Iran, whereas in the mid 19th century many Shaykhis converted to the Bábí and Bahá’í religions.

In 1828, the couple moved to Iraq and resided in Najaf and Karbala for nearly 13 years. Being in Karbala gave her husband the opportunity to broaden his religious education under the supervision of Usuli Mulla Muhammad Baghir Qazvini. In contrast, living in Iraq allowed Qurrat ul-Ain to become familiar with Shaykhi teachings and to meet other Sheykhis, including Seyyed Kazem Rashti, who was the most prominent Sheykhi supporter. Later, she became familiar with the ideology of Seyyed Mohammad Bab, Rashti’s successor, although she never met him (Amanat, 1989; Hamadani, 1893).

In 1841, after 13 years of living in Iraq, her husband decided to move back to Qazvin but, as a result of marital religious differences, Qurrat

ul-Ain left her husband and returned to Karbala to the Sheykhi circle. In 1841, when she arrived in Karbala, the leader of the Sheykhi, Seyyed Kazem Rashti, was dead. She took his place and subsequently gave a speech to a large audience from behind a curtain. Inside the house she also held classes that impressed both Arab and Persian women because of her knowledge and proficiency in Persian and Arabic. Most importantly, she was the first Iranian woman to appear without a veil before mixed audiences who gathered to hear her speeches, which were usually political as well as religious. She continued to follow her beliefs until she was arrested by a secret agent of the Qajar and, in 1852, she was strangled to death at the age of 38 (Etehadiyeh & Sa-adoniyan, 1983; Nashat, 1983). Although elite women took a very significant part in political activities, the Qajar period was not solely their domain; non-elite women were also participating widely. Although education was considered to be an important factor, a lot of non-educated women were politically active, especially during the constitutional revolution (1905-1911).

The Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911)

The constitutional revolution of 1905-1911 was a time of alliances between elite and non-elite women. One of the significant features of elite women during the constitutional period was their demand for education. During the pre-revolutionary era there was a transformation amongst elite harem women, who tended to be more secular. They experienced a kind of upward mobility, which, as much as anything, came about through education; therefore, the pivotal change was education and the result was quite remarkable because it opened up the world to all kinds of women. Mostly elite women started to look beyond the country's borders, seeking alliances where they could find them. They "began to open their eyes and look beyond the narrow confines of their environment" (Bamdad, 1977, p. 26). Their movements became internationally known and moved towards arguing more clearly for women's rights.

The concentration on educational activities and learning was one important priority for elite women. When it came to the constitutional revolution, the whole concept of justice was developed and it enabled women to exercise their Islamic rights and entitlements. This could only

be done through education and: “It was only with the Constitutional Revolution that a grassroots campaign for women’s education began” (Afary, 2001, p. 182). Elite women held conferences in Tehran, especially to discuss and plan women’s education. In 1907, the first official meeting of elite women was held. It adopted ten resolutions, including officially establishing girls’ schools. In 1907, when the Iranian school for girls, Madreseye Doshizengan (Maiden School), was opened it met with opposition from some of the *ulama* of the time, such as Sheykh faz-lo-lah nori, who clearly announced that the “establishment of the girls’ school is contrary to Islamic rules.” In contrast, there were a number of enlightened clergy who supported girls’ schools, such as Sheikh Mohammad Hassane Yazdi, who supported his wife in opening a girls’ school in 1910. In one of these schools, which was named Effatiyeh and was opened by the *ulama’s* wife, students could benefit from lectures on the status and rights of women in addition to the usual lessons (Bamdad, 1977).

In 1910, when the women’s congress on education took place, many girls’ schools were beginning to open in Tehran and other cities. The Ministry of Education was also established in 1910. This was a pattern that was repeated across the nation but there is little record of it. Girls’ schools worked in close relationship with women’s secret societies. For example, in 1910, the head of the Mahdiyeh elementary school, Bibi Vaziri, invited women to attend political meetings at her house.

Some societies worked primarily as an educational forum. Others gave lectures on social and political issues. Gradually, educated elite women from the secret societies became strong advocates of women’s rights and they reached the point where, by 1911, women’s rights activists were visibly arguing for the right to vote (Afary, 2001; Paidar, 1995).

Certain measures regarding women’s education were introduced. In 1917, a girls’ school was founded by Sedigheh Dowlatabadi in Isfahan, where up until then no educational facilities had been available for girls. Sedigheh Dowlatabadi was born in Isfahan and fought against the restrictions imposed by the traditional life of Iranian women. In 1920 she published a journal, Women’s Voice, *Zaban-e Zanan*, with four-page fortnightly issues. This was the first journal to be published under the editorship of a woman and is known as the first to refer to “women” in its title. She faced opposition from the clergy in Isfahan, and this re-

sulted in the closure of her publication. After ending the publication of *Zaban-e Zanan* in Isfahan, she went to Tehran and once again started publishing the periodical, this time as a monthly magazine.

In 1918, the first official aid for women's education was reported in a small announcement in the newspapers. They reported that the Ministry of Education had decided to establish a Department of Public Instruction for Women, which resulted in the opening of ten girls' primary schools, and also the establishment of a Women's Teacher Training College, hereinafter WTTC, which was a secondary school open to girls who had a primary education certificate. Thirty girls were admitted to it. The WTTC was run by French women at the time (Bamdad, 1977; Sedghi, 2007).

In 1922, The Patriotic Women's League, which was founded by Mohtaram Eskandari, aimed to spread women's literacy and to promote the education and moral upbringing of girls. Its members made fervent speeches encouraging their listeners to demand legitimate rights for women. Mohtaram Eskandari (1895-1925) was the daughter of Prince Ali Khan, known as Mohammad Ali Mirza Eskandari, a nationalist and a founder of law and society. Her education began at home, and under the supervision of her father she was educated in Persian and French literature. Before the founding of the League in 1922, she was the principal of a girls' school in Tehran. An important objective of the League was to convince families of the propriety of sending their daughters to the few schools that had been set up with so much difficulty to make literacy accessible to girls. The League also organized adult literacy classes for women (*Madreseye Akabere Nesvan*) and published 10 issues of its journal, *Jamiyate Nesvane Vatankebab*, between 1923 and 1925. Although it emphasized continuing respect for the laws and rituals of Islam, the activities of the league were condemned by clerics. With the death of Eskandari in 1925, the League lost its impetus and the publication of its journal was terminated. Mastureh Afshar succeeded as the League's president and she attempted to continue Eskandari's tradition of activism (Bamdad, 1977; Sedghi, 2007).

Mastureh Afshar was the daughter of Majd al Saltaneh Afshar, a nationalist and intellectual. She was educated in Russia and could speak Turkish and French. The presidents of the PWL were always chosen from amongst those who had long experience of living outside Iran and

knew other languages in addition to Persian, such as Russian, Turkish, French and some others (Bamdad, 1977; Sedghi, 2007). As a result, at the time of the constitutional revolution (1905-1911), both elite and non-elite women shared the same interests and elite women clearly started to fight for the right to education for all women; therefore, their alliances became visible.

The Pahlavi Era (1925-1979): The Emergence of Women's Movements through Westernization Policies

The whole political situation changed dramatically in Iran after the constitutional revolution (1905-1911) and this had a direct influence on women's movements. This section considers the rapid transformation of Iranian women's movements during the Pahlavi era (1925-1979) from the perspective of education. It also analyzes the way in which the relationship between secular and religious elite women, in connection to education, has varied over time. In December 1925, Reza Khan succeeded to the throne as monarch and founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. From that point, the Pahlavi governed the country as a "Centralizing Patriarchy" (Sedghi, 2007, p. 62) for 54 years (Reza Shah: 1925-1941 and Mohammad Reza Shah 1941-1979), and this dramatically affected women's movements (Vatandoust, 1985). "The ideology of the 'Great Civilization' in Iran was supported and applauded by the majority of Western governments and it was reflected in Western media" (Paidar, 1995, p. 150).

In 1925, when Reza Shah came to power, Iranian women's movements gained momentum because of his modernization policies, which required education. However, the necessary requirement for creating educated women was unveiling, which caused tension. I shall discuss whether Reza Shah's modernization and Westernization policies, through education and unveiling, widened the gaps amongst elite women (between those with religious and non-religious backgrounds) and between elite and non-elite women.

From 1941 to 1979, during the reign of Reza Mohammad Shah, elite women activists tried to be much more systematic about how to fight for their rights and also about prioritizing their goals. Women became more conscious of their political and legal rights. The right to education

was considered to be the foundation of women's emancipation. In addition, the foundation of charitable and social organizations as well as political organizations facilitated women's movements.

Reza Shah Era (1925-1941): Westernization Policy

The process of modernization based on Westernization improved women's situation, but it widened the gap between elite women from religious backgrounds and those from non-religious backgrounds. This became very significant in the context of the ban on the *hijab* and the secularization of education because women had to make very difficult choices; they had to be uncovered if they wanted to enjoy a public education.

From the late 1920s onwards, Reza Shah responded to women's demands, which at the time fitted well into his secularist policies. Although he was keen on the greater involvement of women in national programs, the precondition for this was to eliminate all visible symbols of traditionalism; this included a reduction in the power of religious *ulama*, who exercised considerable influence on the populace at large. He attempted to "disempower the clerics whose social, cultural and political power over women and gender relations was formidable" (Sedghi, 2007, p. 66), because he viewed them "as obstructions to his secularization and modernization scheme" (Sedghi, 2007, p. 65). He was influenced by the modernist vision of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, President of Turkey, who encouraged the unveiling of Turkish women.

During the 1920s, women's activism was almost free of governmental interference and this was "a direct result of women's growing consciousness, arising out of their attempts to challenge and struggle against domestic tyranny and foreign incursions" (Sedghi, 2007, p. 76). In 1926, when Sedigheh Dolatabadi returned to Iran from the Sorbonne University after the completion of her education, she refused to wear the *hijab* and began her cultural activities as a government-appointed supervisor within the Ministry of Education. She left Iran with the hope of gaining a higher education in France. She wrote articles about the rights of Iranian women to the independent management of their own property for French newspapers. She also wrote about the general superiority of the legal status of Iranian women compared with that of

European women. These articles attracted interest and provoked controversies in the French newspapers (Bamdad, 1977; Sedghi, 2007).

During the 1930s, unveiling was very important because, due to the imposition of compulsory unveiling, elite religious women (*ulama's* daughters) who had always been educated, had to make difficult choices. They had to be uncovered in order to be educated. Therefore, suddenly a group of elite religious women had to deny their faith in order to participate in education. As a result, the whole category of elite women from religious backgrounds became invisible. Another reason for the invisibility of elite religious women was the neglect of historians, who did not look at them because they were not part of the modernization process. Also, the problem with much of the writing was that they had to present themselves as uncovered Westernized elite women in order to have access to education and to gain their freedom; therefore the identity of Muslim women became invisible (Paidar, 1995).

Despite the fact that Reza Shah was illiterate, he agreed to women's demands for educational reform. It was argued in the previous section that education was the foundation for change in women's lives in Iran. Initially, the educational system was mostly in the hands of *ulama*, who ran the traditional schools. There was also a range of other schools, from state schools to those that were foreign-run. However, the Pahlavi era was the first time in the history of Iran that "women's education was institutionalized and legitimized" (Sedghi, 2007, p. 73). During the 1930s, a number of educational changes were made, by elite women, of course, under the supervision of Reza Shah. Women's organizations mainly aimed to facilitate women's education, in particular in the southern part of Iran where basically non-elite women were located. Also, every available means was used to spread educational activities in the provinces.

It is worth noting that the educational process, the establishment of women's organizations and the founding of women's publications were all interconnected because, once women were educated, their publications and organizations came to the fore. The High Council of Education was established in the 1930s to improve coordination between the government and the non-governmental organizations that had the responsibility of managing the educational system. Initially, school buildings had to be constructed following the secular European style:

non-sex-segregated schools with secular institutions that could be compared to European schools, which at the time existed only in Tehran. Also the teaching methods and subjects being studied were changed and French texts were introduced. While European professors were hired, Iranian teachers were also trained as professionals (Bamdad, 1977).

“Naturally, women who had tasted education, and in particular those who had been able to become university graduates, were all strongly in favor of freedom and human dignity and equal rights for women” (Bamdad, 1977, p. 115). Women’s international relations were constantly growing within the women’s organizations and their connections with the outside world during the Pahlavi period were shaped in different ways, either through education or by attending international events such as conferences.

In 1932, following the Second Eastern Congress, Reza Shah agreed with women’s demand that the speed of Iranian women’s advancement in education must be accelerated. Parliament accepted laws for the formation of a number of additional teacher-training colleges. The remarkable point is that, at the opening of Tehran University in 1934, Aminah Pakravan, the first woman lecturer, was appointed to teach the history of art. She had spent most of her life in France and spoke French, German, and English as well as Persian (Bamdad, 1977).

The advantage of Reza Shah’s educational reform was an increase in the number of women who were qualified to enter higher education, although the opportunity to do so was limited to secular women. The problem for religious women was that participation in the modernization process for women, which had an impact on attitudes to education, was mediated by dress code. Although attending primary schools became compulsory for girls, statistics suggest that there was a high level of illiteracy amongst girls from religious families. Even those who attended primary school did not extend their education because Reza Shah’s Westernization policies limited education to those who could appear unveiled in public and this forced the majority of religious girls to remain at home in great ignorance.

Reza Shah’s Westernization and modernization policies, in particular regarding unveiling and education, were supported by his daughters, Shams and Ashraf Pahlavi. In 1935, *Kanun-e Banovan* (The Lady’s Center), a state-sponsored organization, was established by Reza Shah

and supervised by his oldest daughter (Shams). It promoted education as well as unveiling and all its members were encouraged to attend meetings unveiled. It also waged a campaign to influence public opinion in favor of unveiling with the help of women's advocates (Zahedi, 2008). The initial impetus for opening this center came from the Minister of Education, Ali Asghar Hekmat. He began to promote teachers who ventured out uncovered, and later he sent inspectors to give lectures to schoolgirls on the need for political participation and on the harms of veiling. Later, the Lady's Center became an adult and young women's educational and welfare center, but its main focus remained on campaigning against veiling. Furthermore, the Women's Cultural Center in Tehran, which was inaugurated by Reza Shah's daughters, welcomed unveiled women at a tea party given by the Prime Minister (Bamdad, 1977; Sedghi, 2007).

Eventually, on 17 January 1936, Women's Emancipation Day, Reza Shah held a ceremony at Tehran Teachers College and the order was made to all women teachers, as well as the wives of senior military officers, government officials and ministers, to appear unveiled and wearing European clothes and hats. Reza Shah's compulsory method for unveiling was entirely different from the approach in Afghanistan and Turkey, where they did not have any law to enforce women's unveiling or to punish veiled women. He believed this order would allow Iranian women to escape from seclusion and connect them with women in the rest of the world. In a historic speech he said: "I have no desire to draw distinctions between the Iran of today and the Iran of other days. But, ladies, know that this is a great day, and use the opportunities, which are now yours to help the country advance" (Bamdad, 1977, p. 96).

Mohammad Reza Shah Era (1941-1979): The Effect of Women's Organizations

In comparison with his father, Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) took a different approach to women's rights because he had the support and help of elite educated women who were much more vocal about their demands. Also, he had the complete support of his sister, Princess Ashraf Pahlavi. Mohammad Reza Shah was more respectful towards religious *ulama* and also less strict about women's unveiling.

By the 1950s, the number of women's organizations and their unified

activities had grown considerably. The 1950s are known as the time of “centralization and co-optation” (Sansarian, 1982, p. 81) of various women’s organizations, a move commenced not by the women’s groups themselves but by the government in order to have full control over women’s activities. Some organizations found it more convenient to change their name in order to be accepted by the government. For instance, the Women’s Party changed its name to the Women’s Council.

Although women’s organizations merged together, they were still effective in promoting women’s rights. They included both charitable and non-charitable organizations; but whatever their status, the requirement for recognizing a legitimate organization was that it showed loyalty to the shah. Charitable organizations formalized their support for poorer women. Their focus was more on grassroots women in the provinces who were involved in charity work rather than political participation. Non-charitable (political) organizations focused on both political and international issues. The fight for the legal and political rights of women continued. For instance, in 1955, the New Path Society, founded by Mehrangiz Dowlatshahi, a graduate from Germany, opened a welfare center in the southern part of Tehran which provided literacy classes, domestic science, and childcare, but the main contribution of the New Path Society was in promoting women’s political and legal rights (Bamdad, 1977).

Elite educated women were able to find their way to higher positions in society. In 1965 the first female Minister, Farrokhrou Parsa (1922-1980), was elected as Minister of Education. She was a vocal proponent of gender equality who had petitioned the shah for suffrage for Iranian women (Paidar, 1995; Sansarian, 1982).

To sum up, this analysis of the Pahlavi era shows that education enabled women to find a basis for participation, but there was a divide between religious and secular women. Although the Pahlavi era helped women in some ways, it also hindered them in others, such as limiting their choices in areas such as dress code and education. Different elite groups had different motives for opposing the government. Women’s dissatisfaction resulted in their mass participation during the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The Islamic Revolution (1979 onwards)

Iranian women continued their active presence throughout the 20th century. They were active participants in the Revolution in 1979. Different groups of women (elite and non-elite), with many different motives, were involved. After the 1979 revolution, it appeared that women had lost all the ground that they had gained during the previous century; however, a closer examination reveals that they did not lose everything, and they have been very effective in regaining the lost ground by locating their arguments firmly in the context of Islam. Their active presence was pivotal in fighting for women's rights. Their demands were shaped by Shia Islam and its concern with justice, which enabled women to ensure that they could exercise their rights, such as financial independence, as a non-negotiable Islamic right. They also wanted to extend their demands for justice, which would actually indicate an entitlement to political participation. So they demanded the right to political participation and to education. One of the impacts of the revolution on women's rights in its immediate aftermath was the segregation of schools. The right to education is a non-negotiable right, embedded in the teaching of Islam.

In May 1979, all elementary and high schools were segregated by gender in order to purify the educational system from Western influence. Blame was placed on the secularized Western educational system that had been in place for 50 years, and had produced an un-Islamic intellectual elite. Thus, in 1980, in order to purify the educational system and to eradicate secularism, the High Council of the Cultural Revolution, a group of seven men, was established and given the responsibility to revise educational materials to eliminate any hint of anti-Islamic ideas. Its initial step was the closure of all schools and universities. However, the "demand for ideological purification and integral Islamic education, which was central to the cultural revolution, had to be accommodated in the context of increasing numbers of students, and deteriorating conditions in the schools" (Omid, 1994, p. 158).

The required number of schools could not be secured immediately; therefore, some schools had to have classes for boys in the morning and for girls in the afternoon. In addition, girls-only schools had lower standards than boys-only schools. In some instances, schools did not

have enough female students to set up some classes (Tabari, 1982).

The Cultural Revolution also affected universities. From 1979 to 1983, all the universities were closed in order to be purified of Western influences. Even after they were re-opened, many faculties excluded women and many subjects were banned for women and restricted to men. Only those women who chose religious studies could easily find a place at university. On the whole, women were severely discriminated against because they were barred from 97 academic subjects. Women were banned from vocational training schools and excluded from studying engineering, mining, and agriculture, with no regard for the fact that two-thirds of Iran's women who live in rural areas perform much of the agricultural labor. It is worth noting that those women who were entitled to the few available places topped the marks in the entrance examinations and achieved high levels in some subjects (Goodwin, 2003; Omid, 1994).

One of the most important discriminatory measures in women's education was banning them from the faculty of law. This proclamation, which was a big failure, had two significant outcomes. One could argue that they indicated the opposing ideas of leading religious figures about women's rights because Ayatollah Beheshti, the post-revolutionary head of the judiciary, was absolutely against this policy. He set up informal classes to teach Islamic law to graduates, which enabled female graduates to achieve the necessary Islamic legal training. It can also be argued that this discriminatory policy was the initial step towards further changes in women's personal law, in particular, Family Protection Law and the judicial system (Afshar, 2002).

Women parliamentarians and activists fought for women's rights to education. In 1982, women parliamentarians succeeded in increasing the age of marriage in the Civil Code as they argued that early marriage for girls runs counter to the social and economic plans of the government. They argued that there is a direct correlation between age of marriage and education for girls. The core aim of the Islamic Republic was to facilitate education for all its citizens, but if a girl is allowed to get married at the age of nine what will happen to her education? Based on Koranic instructions, all Muslims must be educated; therefore, any barriers placed in the way of women's education must be removed. If a woman's role in society is to be a good mother, she should be educated

to raise a good family. They also repeatedly referred to Imam Khomeini's support for women's education, as his daughter, Farideh Mostafavi Khomeini, revealed: "he personally taught my mother and asked my late brother to teach me. At a time when women were viewed as unsuited to education, the late saint Khomeini told my late brother [Ahmad] to teach me, which he did for many years" (Afshar, 2002, p. 6).

In April 1985, a law was ratified allowing married female students to travel abroad for higher education with governmental funding. Although this law was a significant achievement for women, its conditions created other problems, such as marriages of convenience. Although every step forward in defending women's rights was priceless, women parliamentarians had a long and difficult way to go.

Because women activists had criticized the government's performance on women's issues, the Bureau of Women's Affairs (BWA) was created in 1991 within the Presidential Office. It became the Center for Women's Participation in 1997 and the Center for Women's and Family Affairs in 2005; each had a different ideology around the protection of women's rights. The BWA reported directly to the President and its aim was to improve conditions for women through the reform of laws affecting them. The idea to create the BWA came from Marziyeh Sadighi, a reform-minded woman, who was an engineer educated in the West and who was elected to the third and fifth *Majlis*, and Shahla Habibi, who became the President's advisor on women's affairs during the fourth *Majlis*, and later joined the cabinet. Masoumeh Ebtekar, a Western-educated woman who was known for her revolutionary activities during the Islamic Revolution and became the vice president in charge of protection of the environment during the fifth *Majlis* in 1997, was appointed as the Bureau's education and training program advisor. In order to be effective and to examine women's issues, the Bureau opened offices in different Ministries, such as the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Labor. Most importantly, it tried to work closely with the WSCC and SCCR, and it was as a result of this cooperation that women's bureaus were established in different Ministries. Women's education and their economic situation were important programs for the BWA and SCCR; therefore, most of the cooperation was on education (Afshar, 2002; Omid, 1994).

In 1991, although the education of women remained a contested area

in politics and there were many restrictions, the WSCC submitted a project to the High Council of the Cultural Revolution proposing that the disadvantageous treatment of women in higher education and in the selection of degree courses be eliminated. This proposal was considered and ratified but it did little to reduce the discrimination against women that barred them from studying 119 university subjects (Afshar, 2002; Omid, 1994).

On the other hand, one of the great achievements of the time was the reform of education law. In 2000, after almost a decade of lobbying, unmarried female students were permitted to study abroad. Also, the establishment of a women's studies program as a university subject was a great step forward. In 2000, the first women's studies institute, the Iranian Society for Women's Studies, was established. In 2001, through the efforts of women's rights advocates, Allameh Tabatabai University, Tarbiat Modares University and Al Zahra University, all of which were government universities, set up women's studies programs at the Master of Arts level, and shortly thereafter Tehran University organized a similar program. Three subjects were offered: women and family, the history of women, and women's rights under Islam.

Since 2005, many attempts have been made to limit women's education; none of them have been successful. The roles of women as mothers and wives were advertised and celebrated while attempts were made to limit their presence in the public sphere. The rumor spread that the government's strategy was to eliminate women from the public sphere altogether and hardliner women parliamentarians facilitated this process.

Conclusion

This paper has conducted a historical analysis of women's education and its relationship with women's activism in Iran. Women's demand for education continued through different eras and has never ceased. The long tradition of women's demands for education is evidence of the current movements and needs of Iranian women. A brief overview of the presence of active Iranian women, who already had over a century of struggle for their right to education, has been presented. During different eras, women have been treated differently regarding their right to education and at some points they faced difficulties even in practicing

their rights.

At the present time, 2015, there are different understandings and attitudes towards women's education in Iran. There are some groups who believe that it should be limited to certain specific subjects and that women should study subjects that suit them most because if we do not limit women's education, all the men's jobs will be taken away from them. There are others who have a slightly different view, believing that education is an Islamic right and cannot be limited. However, if there is a need in society to have more female ophthalmologists or gynecologists, why do we not encourage women to study these subjects? Despite different attempts to limit women's access to education, the mood is very clear: the majority of women feel very strongly that the Islamic right of women to education must be protected.

Although the circumstances were at times extremely difficult, women have always continued to fight for their right to education, and recently there has been an easing of circumstances and a growing optimism amongst Iranian women's activists. Women's activists seem to be very cautiously optimistic about women's movements inside Iran. The process is hard, it is over a century old, and it will be much older still before we get there. However, as women gain a broader and more effective presence the future becomes brighter for them.

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Biographical Note: The author, **Somayyeh Mottaghi**, received Ph.D. degree in Politics from York University. Most recently she published an article (in Farsi) that offered a new theoretical and methodological outlook to women's barriers at workplace in Iran. Currently she teaches across a range of modules on the Politics undergraduate degree programmes. I have recently supervised a number of master students at the University of Westminster London. E-mail: mottaghi.s@googlemail.com