

# The struggle of the iranian woman: equality



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The position and status of women has, for the most part of history, been the subject of much disagreement and confusion. As well being a social issue; the status of women has also been a political issue; and over the years, there has been much debate over what exactly a woman's status is in today's world. Across the globe, women, especially in Islamic countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, witness many instances of oppression. However, the strides that women have taken to compete with men over the years have often been ignored by many people. The struggle for women to overcome these barriers has taken a large stride over the years and many activists can be seen fighting for Women Rights on an international platform. The Islamic Republic of Iran, before 1979, was dominated by a dynasty that was heavily influenced by the West. The Western influences provided women with much wanted rights; women were now holding positions in the government, being awarded high-posts and their strife for equality was moving in the right direction. However, the westernized ideas of the Shah Dynasty did not fare well with many citizens. The people believed that Western influences were ruining the social fabric of Iran. The public rose in support of Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers in their effort to overthrow the regime of the Shah Dynasty. Religion was an important ideology used for the revolution and women were an important part of the movement. Women also rose hand in hand with men to topple over the government. The people, especially women, were told that an Islamic yet liberal Iran was to be restored. Many guarantees of equality and social justice were given to women; however, more than thirty years after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the promise of equal social and political status and freedom to women has not been fulfilled.

A look at the pre-revolutionary era of Iran gives us an understanding of the sociopolitical status of women under the Pahlavi reign. Women had previously enjoyed an elevated status in relation to men. Women were slowly but surely being uplifted by the Pahlavi regime who had taken many strides to ensure the eradication of some of the social barriers that stood between men and women. The roots of these works can be seen as early as 1928 when the Shah removed the religious judges with secular educated ones and the introduction of a modern civil and penal code. Women were also being pushed out of the depths of backwardness and suppression (some would say). In 1929, the Shah issued a law forcing Iranians to wear more Westernized clothing. In 1935, Iranians were required to wear European hats. Reza Shah, the successor to the previous Shah, took this law one step further in 1936, banning women from wearing the chadur. Many people opposed to the fact that the chadur was being banned because they saw it not as a sign of oppression but a guard from strange eyes. However, a number of professional and educated women looked at the abolishment of the chadur as freedom from oppression. Generally, the response was supportive (Girgis).

Mohammad Reza-Pahlavi replaced his father on the throne on 16 September, 1941. He soon became an indispensable ally of the West. One of the Shah's biggest moves was the introduction of the Family Protection Acts(FPA) of 1967. Under this legislation, laws surrounding women's rights were changed drastically. It made changes in several different areas, including divorce and marriage. One of the most radical changes that the FPA made was rising the minimum marriage age of women to eighteen. Under Islamic law a man is allowed to take up to four wives. The FPA made some slight amendments to

this law and hence, a man could not take a second wife without the permission of the courts. In 1975, an amendment meant the permission of the first wife would also have to be obtained. Under the FPA polygamy became legally harder to achieve without the consent of the courts or his first wife. Divorce was another important issue that was tackled in the FPA law. Under Quranic Law Muslim men can divorce their wives on a one-sided reason. Under the FPA, laws divorce was allowed only through the courts, when it was evident that no compromise could be achieved. Five conditions for divorce were also added which included imprisonment of the husband or wife for a specific duration, addiction, remarriage of the husband without permission of the wife, abandonment, or a court decision that either spouse might hurt the family reputation on either side. The FPA also addressed women's role in the work force. Previously, a husband could forbid his wife from working if he felt it would jeopardize his reputation. The FPA stated that wives, too, could forbid their husbands from accepting jobs on the identical grounds. The women's side did have an added stipulation; the court would have the final say on whether the family income would be seriously affected if the husband stopped working. Mohammed Reza Shah, the ruler of Iran, decided to legalize abortion. Married women needed the consent of their spouses first, and abortions by unmarried women could take place by their own requests. Another contentious law that was changed was the passport law. It initially stated that wives needed the written permission of their husbands in order to leave Iran. In November of 1976 a new passport law was issued, and now a woman could travel outside of Iran for six years because the permission granted by the man was valid for six years. This meant that women only needed permission once in order to travel for six

years. The Family Protection Act showed how the Shah believed that negotiation with the Shariah was important. The Shah's goal was to try to modify and not eradicate the Shariah; an example of how he tried to bring modernity and Western influences into Iran.

Women were also being encouraged to get an advanced education. Overall literacy was also increased and women made great strides especially in learning on the elementary school level. Women had also fought long and hard before 1963 in order to gain freedom and in 1963, elections took place and six women were elected to the Majlis as deputies. The Majlis, which consisted of sixty members, contained two female representatives, although neither were elected but rather appointed by the Shah. In 1965, a woman was appointed minister for the first time. A special effort was made by the government to ensure that women were not only able to vote but become officials as well. The image Iran portrayed was one of progress and modernization. Women were in the air force, holding high government positions and new jobs were being offered to women (Girgis).

With all this progressiveness, why did women rise up hand in hand with Ayatollah Khomeini in overthrowing the government? What were some of the motives that were provided by the Ayatollah to attract women into his movement? Some people thought of the Shah Dynasty's tactics to liberalize Iran as a bit too modern. Too much of a Western influence was noticed in his policies; banning the chador and asking them to wear European hats were destroying the very social and cultural fabric that Iran stood for. Some religious leaders believed that Iran needed to be established on the grounds of the Shariah and religion, which was one of the ways in which they were

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able to attract a large amount of followers in their struggle to overthrow the regime. The Shah was also more interested in an external appearance and being able to show the world that Iran was moving forward with the rest of the world; he didn't do much to enact the laws he passed through education and socialization (Gigris). In "Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic", this point is described very well in the following points:

As the Shah's regime promoted corruption and anarchy, the opposition represented moral order. Exactly what the 'moral order' entailed was neither clear nor of concern. Women who demonstrated against the Pahlavi regime agreed upon two points: that women were equal to but dissimilar from men; that Western values were 'a corruptive menace to be avoided' (Shahidian 104)

He used the suffering of women as a way in which he could show the world he was a progressive leader. If he could fix the status of women, in his eyes, Iran would be moving forward. Unfortunately, Muhammad Reza-Pahlavi was not able to achieve that because many of his policies were not being implemented properly and as a result added to the increasing disarray of the masses. Corruption added to the ineptness of his regime to effectively implement those policies (Shahidian 101-103).

It was clear by the 1970's that the masses were unhappy with the Shah regime. Ayatollah Khomeini had grown in popularity, and albeit his ideology was not moving towards gender equality, women still rose in support with the revolution. Many reasons caused them to do so. Firstly, educational advances had done little to remove the traditional beliefs and

understandings about women and they were being treated no differently than they were before - oppressed and subjugated. Women also felt like they were being misled by the government. The government favored western ways and the women were losing touch of their traditional ways. The Iranian people did not want to be puppets of the Western world; rather they wanted to be able to carry on their identity. They believed an Islamic government would respect them and so women decided to back the people against the regime. Women were also supporting the revolution not because it was an Islamic revolution, but because they were against the shah now. They were sick of the corruption, violence and incompetence of the government and just wanted to oust the existing regime. Women were also provided many guarantees by the government in regards to equality and a more Islamic and respectful environment for them. They were promised more freedom and that they would be helped to become equal as men by the leaders of the revolution (Girgis) which is well stated by Hammed Shahidian when he says, " If anything, Khomeini consistently emphasized the importance of women's participation in the future Iran" (Shahidian). All these promises and reasons attracted women to the revolution. Shahidian again explains how Khomeini misled them by saying, " In effect, Khomeini and other leaders of the Islamic movement had to make empty promises to overshadow their invidious future plans. And if they managed to gain a leading position in the revolution, it was in part because these false promises created an illusion of democratic adherence" (Shahidian).

After the revolution was over, women wondered what was going to happen. Women asked for their promises. They asked the government to fulfill and

live up to their words. But very little was done for them. What did the Islamic Republic mean for women's roles? How did their power change, and what were their new roles under the Islamic regime? In many ways, women's role stayed the same under the new regime but it changed in more ways. One of the first things that the Ayatollah did was to revoke the FPA and with that went many of the rights that were given to women under the Shah regime. A wife's rights remained the same under Khomeini's rule too and the rules of polygamy did not change much either. In 1986, more rules were passed in order to safeguard a wife's rights. Women were given the right to divorce their husband for taking a second wife without their permission, or if the courts deem that a husband is not treating his wives equally as required by Islamic law. Women also carried the same path to education as in the Shah's regime (Girgis).

However, things have not been all that positive for women ever since the revolution in Iran. The implementation of the Shariah - upon which the foundations of the new regime were based - did not show a favorable outcome for women (Higgins). Women are not given the same importance as men and are not seen as equal to men. The Shariah has been misused by the government in order to create laws and base their judicial and social system on a structure that calls for equality (Kar). In Iran, however, that equality is not provided to the women. In 1983, stoning as a punishment was introduced by the penal code of Iran. This was looked down upon by women because it had been non-existent in the penal code for a long time before that. Men were granted the power to make all family decisions, including the movement of women and custody of the children. Donna M. Hughes writes in

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her article for Z magazine about how the mindset of the men had been changed by the mullah and now they believed in the mullah's legal view of women's status which was: "Your wife, who is your possession, is in fact, your slave" (Hughes). Khomeini and his followers crafted laws and policies that are still in effect. The hejab, or dress code, is mandatory in all public places for all women. The hejab, the new regime argued was something enforced by the women themselves since they revolted to purify and bring back the chastity of the veil themselves (Shahidian). Women had to cover their hair, body and face and were not allowed to use cosmetics. Heavy punishments were also introduced that ranged from 74 lashes with a whip to imprisonment for one month to a year. Women were very much against this enforcement. Hammed Shahidian, Associate Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Sociology and Anthropology Program at the University of Illinois at Springfield, argues how women who were and were not veiled both rose against this enforcement. "They cried: 'We did not have a revolution to go backward'" (Shahidian 99). Women are banned from pursuing higher education in 91 of 169 fields of study. Segregation became an important part of society and women were sent to single-sex schools to pursue education. A woman may work with her husband's permission, although many occupations are forbidden to women. The legal age for girls to get married was dropped to 9 years. Women are not permitted to travel or acquire a passport without their husband's written permission. A woman is not permitted to be in the company of a man who is a 'non-mehram' (a man who is not her husband or a relative). Women are not allowed to engage in sports so as to avoid being seen by men. They were not to watch sports in which men were not covered properly either. So it was not before 1997 that for the <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-of-the-iranian-woman-equality/>

first time since the revolution, some women succeeded in getting into a stadium to watch a soccer match. Then again, in 2006, women were banned from soccer games (Saber). The root to these problems can be traced back to pre and post revolutionary eras in Iran. Many other rules, laws and regulations suppress women when it comes to basic rights. Women were also made sure they felt like they were second best as their testimony was declared half to that compared of a man's under the rule of law. Women have not been able to fight back against these strict laws because such actions are considered as challenges against the basic framework of a religious government. The clerics are scared that this increase in disapproval might lead to a radical change in the system or loss of powers by ruling clerics. In 1986, women made up only 6.1% of the work force of Iran. All these reforms were based on the Shariah which was misunderstood and misused by the Iranian lawmakers (Girgis).

The Shah had tried his best to try to give women what they wanted. Women were somewhat freer and were on the path to a more liberal and equal Iran. The rise of Ayatollah Khomeini has degraded the status of women who now are socially not allowed to mingle in public or get out of the house. Their education is restricted and so are their social activities. The socio-economic importance of women has degraded and men are more preferential when it comes to jobs. Women Rights have been restricted and have become an important issue in Iran. Many women today are suffering and there are movements on an international stage with many fighting for their rights. Nobel peace prize winner Ms Shirin Ebadi, a former judge in the Shah era, is a great example of someone who has been fighting for women's rights for

more than a decade. She exemplifies the voice of the Iranian women in their outcry to try to break away from the shackles of inequality that they face today. In an interview to BBC Persian on 10th February 2009, Ms Shirin Ebadi states the following words:

" Women took part in the revolution beside men. They felt their freedom and independence would be guaranteed when the country shifted into an Islamic Republic. Unfortunately, they did not obtain the freedom worthy of an Iranian woman. They are still victims of discrimination, such as having their blood money worth just half of men's and needing two female witnesses in courts to equal only one male witness."

The promises of equality and freedom, liberation and integration with males in the society have still not been fulfilled. Although, laws have been implemented with great brutality, women have always resisted. Recently, in Iran, there have been signs that women are increasingly rejecting subordinate lives ruled by the mullahs. Women have campaigned for inheritance rights equal to men's, and for more rights to custody of their children. Women keep modifying or enhancing their public dress in ways that press the limits of the hejab. More publications by or about women are appearing. Women are demanding they be allowed to participate in and view sports events. Many Iranian women want change. Shahidian mentions the determination of the Iranian Woman when he says, " Women's resistance to the policies of the Islamic state has been a constant in the post-revolutionary years - now, high and strong, now curbed and contained, but never dissipated completely" (Shahidian 99-100). It seems as though Khomeini turned a blind eye as soon as he took power and slowly made sure that

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women were oppressed and were brought back to their prior predicaments. A movement that was started by the people and backed by the women of Iran seems to have backfired because neither were the Ayatollah and his faction able to deliver their promise, nor were women able to achieve their ultimate goal, from the revolution, of equality.

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