

From Shah to Ayatollah: How Women in Iran Lost Their Rights

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By Vedrana Maglajlija

After Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power in Iran in 1979, women's rights - established during the Western-oriented dictatorship - were significantly reduced. Still, it's important to note that many women participated in the opposition protests at the time, supporting the Islamic Revolution. Why did Iranian women side with Khomeini, whose rule later diminished their status in society?

Prominent Iranian author Haleh Esfandiari left Iran before the revolution and built a notable academic career in the U.S. She later returned to Iran to research the impact of the revolution on Iranian women's lives and spent several months in a Tehran prison after being arrested. Through interviews with women whose careers began or changed under the Islamic Republic, she wrote a book that illustrates the gap between the goals of women who participated in the revolution and the aims of the regime that came to power afterward.

The roots of this issue, however, run deeper in the country's history. Although veiling was officially abolished in Iran in 1936, the regime had for years encouraged women to appear in public without a chador or to wear a simple headscarf. As Esfandiari explains, this decision was both a victory and a tragedy for women, as it stripped them of the right to choose. The Shah ordered the police to forcibly remove such clothing. Many traditional Iranian women no longer wanted to leave their homes out of shame or simply refused to give up something they saw as part of their identity.

The most significant social changes in Iran occurred under the rule of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose policies were heavily influenced by the West. He opened schools for girls and gave women access to higher education, thereby paving the way for them to hold important positions in society - something previously impossible. During this period, many women became highly educated, seeking change and full participation in political life. In the early 1960s, when the Shah consolidated his power, he aimed to project an image of progressive Iranian women to the world due to his international reputation. Women were granted the right to vote and to be elected to Parliament, and several entered political life.

A Family Protection Law was also passed, allowing the state and courts to intervene in “private family matters” previously handled only by families or religious authorities - primarily concerning divorce and child custody. Women were now allowed to file for divorce in court and obtain custody of their children.

Still, on the eve of the revolution, many women supported Khomeini, expecting progress to continue. A large number joined the protests demanding the end of the monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic republic, fully believing it would bring them equality. The revolution

created a sense among both women and men that they were participating in something monumental. At marches, businesswomen without headscarves stood side by side with women in chadors - the traditional black full-body veil. There were women from both lower and middle classes walking together, hoping the revolution would bring them better economic and social status.

Although Khomeini initially promised full rights for women, few paid attention to his frequent statement that women would have a role in society - but only within an Islamic framework. As Esfandiari notes, no one questioned what that actually meant.

She explains that in the Iranian society leading up to the revolution, there was a growing tendency for people to seek security and refuge in religion, amid Western cultural trends they could neither understand nor accept. In the streets of Tehran, advertisements featured women in swimsuits, and for citizens who adhered to Islamic traditions, this was simply too much.

The division in Iranian society before the revolution was also due to the emergence of a Western-educated elite that became the middle class. Before 1979, Iran had the highest number of students enrolled in Western universities. These individuals were highly secular and followed Western trends in fashion, culture, and politics—many were supporters of liberalism, socialism, or communism. Thus, in Iran both developed an urban middle class and a traditional middle class, or *bazaaris*, who had close family or ideological ties to religious leaders and scholars. They adhered to what they considered Islamic values, including specific dress codes and the veiling of women.

Hostage Crisis

The rapid changes under the Pahlavi family, excessive enrichment, and allowing foreigners to drain wealth from Iran - especially capital from oil sales - as well as income disparities between classes, even though incomes generally increased, led to social dissatisfaction and resistance. Khomeini soon emerged as the leader of the opposition, which opposed the Shah's autocratic rule and his de facto alliance with the U.S., Great Britain, and Israel. The mass demonstrations he led resulted in his house arrest in 1963, and later exile. Since then, he continuously attacked

what he saw as laws and practices inconsistent with Islam, essentially pursuing a populist policy relying on Islam in terms of socioeconomic justice and anti-imperialism.

The extent of anti-American sentiment in the country is illustrated by one of the key events in American diplomatic history, known as the Iranian Hostage Crisis, which occurred a few months after the Islamic Revolution.

In November 1979, hundreds of students and Khomeini supporters protested against the U.S. outside the American embassy in Tehran. The protest ended with an invasion of the embassy building where embassy staff were taken hostage. This crisis ended only in January 1981, immediately after Ronald Reagan took his presidential oath following an election that many believed he won over Jimmy Carter precisely because of the events in Tehran.

Before that, the protesters released some embassy staff, mainly women, African Americans, and the sick, citing sympathy for the oppressed. Since the U.S. attempted two rescue operations, the Iranians moved the remaining hostages to different prisons to complicate rescue efforts, and many later testified that they were tortured.

The Iranians' demands for releasing the Americans were that the Shah be returned from the U.S. to Iran to face trial and execution, and that the U.S. apologize for decades of interference in Iran's affairs. The Shah fled to the U.S. in January 1979, just before the Islamic Revolution, and Washington told Iranians seeking his extradition that he was receiving cancer treatment in the U.S. The Shah died in July 1980.

Husbands' Permission for Ambassadors

On International Women's Day on 8th March 1979, the state radio announced that women working in the public sector must be covered. Many women opposed this decision, but it nevertheless became the norm through violence and repression. Two years later, it became mandatory for women to wear tunics or coats covering their bodies and scarves covering their

hair when leaving the house. Violating this obligation became punishable. A law was also passed allowing polygamy, enabling men to marry up to four wives.

A mother's custody rights over her children were revoked. Although women can hold high positions, a decision was made that a married woman cannot travel without her husband's permission, leading to paradoxical situations. Iran had female ambassadors who had to have written approval from their husbands to travel.

According to the constitution, women cannot become president of Iran. Although there is no legal restriction on female ministers, the country has had only one female minister - responsible for health. Among about 300 members of parliament, only around ten are women.

Iran is today considered a theocracy, where a religious leader rules on behalf of a higher power. In Iran, this is the Supreme Leader, chosen by a small group of religious officials in the Assembly of Experts. He has enormous constitutional powers, although the country has some elements of democracy, including a president and parliament elected by popular vote. However, they have limited powers and candidates can be disqualified from running.

All constitutional institutions in Iran are effectively controlled by a minority religious community that is not directly elected by the people. Some citizens tried to bring certain changes through protests after the death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was detained by the morality police for wearing an "inappropriate hijab". But many experts emphasize that in Iran, this is only possible through fundamental system change, as happened during the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

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