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Historical Review on Economic Activities of Iranian Women in Qajar Era¹

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Abstract

The study of importance and role of women participation in Iranian economic areas leading to target setting and policy making in women affairs are among the significant issues of the country. Thus, in the present study, the researchers are to, within the framework of a historical research, elaborate on the economic status of the women during Qajar era, as a historical period, in which the women presence in the society was highlighted because of the emergence of "Constitutional Movement". Accordingly, having used the library method and internet research, the researchers have analyzed the information obtained from historical evidences and studies conducted before. In this research, the economic presence of women in the intended era has been analyzed in form of modern day occupations and then classified based on a new method of classification. Under the classification and based different classes of society during the era, different aspects of women activities have taken into consideration in areas of political, social and subsistence economy.

Keywords: Women, Economic Activities, Qajar Era.

چکیده

مطالعه اهمیت و نقش مشارکت زنان در مناطق اقتصادی ایران که به تعیین هدف و سیاست‌گذاری در امور زنان منجر می‌شود، از جمله مهم‌ترین مسائل کشور است. بنابراین، در پژوهش حاضر، محققان، در چارچوب یک تحقیق تاریخی، درصددند توضیحی دقیق و کامل درباره وضعیت اقتصادی زنان در دوره قاجار، به عنوان یک دوره تاریخی، که در آن حضور زنان در جامعه به دلیل ظهور "جنبش مشروطیت" مطرح و برجسته شده بود، ارائه نمایند. بر این اساس، محققان، با بهره‌گیری از روش کتابخانه‌ای و تحقیق در اینترنت، اطلاعات به دست آمده از شواهد تاریخی و مطالعات پیشین را بررسی و تحلیل کردند. در تحقیق حاضر، حضور اقتصادی زنان در دوره‌های مورد نظر در قالب مشاغل روزمره مورد تجزیه و تحلیل قرار گرفته و سپس بر مبنای روش جدید طبقه‌بندی شده است. با بهره‌گیری از طبقه‌بندی و بر مبنای طبقات مختلف جامعه در طول این دوره، جنبه‌های مختلف فعالیت‌های زنان در زمینه‌های سیاسی، اجتماعی و اقتصادی مورد توجه قرار گرفته است.

کلیدواژه‌ها: زنان، فعالیت‌های اقتصادی، عصر قاجار.

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1. Introduction

Qajar era, also anglicized as Ghajar or Kadjar, was initiated by Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar in 1794, and excluded after dethroning the last king of Qajar, Ahmad Shah, following 31 years of ruling the country¹. During the era, based on the first article of the constitution of the first national assembly (majles-e dar-al-shora-ye melli) at the beginning of the constitutional era (Mashrutiat), the society consisted of five classes qualified to have representative in the parliament (civil rights) as follows:

Princesses and the Qajars,

1. Religious leaders (olamā) and theology students (tollāb),
2. The nobles and notables (a'yān va ashrāf),
3. Landlords and merchants (Tojjar and Malākin),
4. Peasants and the guilds (Fallahin and Asnāf)^۲.

Iran's economics at the beginning of Qajar dynasty was under influence of the fundamental principles and the economic conditions remained from the Safavids^۳. Although not considered to be among the

advanced economies of the world, the Iranian economy in the Safavid era was self-sufficient, being involved in the agriculture sector as well as handicrafts and textile industries^۴. Thus, there are two points, regarding the economic activities of Qajar era women, which must be taken into account:

First, Qajar era women played an important role in promotion of the living standards of the households, which affected the national economy more or less, through the two ways of production for the family and production to make a living. In addition, polygamy of the men was one of the common issues of the time mostly aimed at employing the labor power of women in livestock and agricultural production.

Second, the social-cultural specifications of Qajar era would require women to learn a series of skills. The result of such skills learning, in terms of economy, has been the provision of products and services with value added. However, women were hardly allowed to utilize the value added of their own activities, and consequently, they were devoid of the possibility to increase their own welfare from their own economic activities, as they deserved to. In other words, they had to work for benefits of other rather those of their own^۵.

Concurrent with historical evolutions in the world, especially the European ones, the Constitutional Movement^۶ (Nehzat-e-Mashrutiat) occurred in Iran. The movement was the beginning of many social movements in Iran, especially women's social activities and movements, so that the women activities in the economic sector accelerated after Mashrutiat within Qajar era.

The present study is aimed at elaborating on the economic role of women during the Qajar era. It is for sure that for such a study, some economic indexes including the

1. The Qajar dynasty is an Iranian royal family of Turkic origin, who ruled Persia (Iran) from 1785 to 1925. The Qajar family took full control of Iran in 1794, deposing Lotf 'Ali Khan, the last of the Zand dynasty, and re-asserted Persian sovereignty over parts of the Caucasus. In 1796, Mohammad Khan Qajar seized Mashhad, which put an end to the Afsharid dynasty, and he was formally crowned as shah (the King). The kings of Qajar Dynasty took the throne in the following order: (1) Mohammad Khan Qajar (1742 – 1797); (2) Fat'h-Ali Shah (1772 – 1834); (3) Mohammad Shah Qajar (1808 – 1848); (4) Naser al-Din Shah (1831 – 1896); (5) Mozaffar al-Din Shah (1853 – 1907); (6) Mohammad Ali Shah (1872 – 1925); (7) Ahmad Shah Qajar (1898–1930). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qajar_dynasty)

2. Gholamreza Varhoram (1988) *Nezame Siyasi va Sazemanhaie Ejtemaie Iran dar asre Ghajar* [political system and social organization of Iran in Qajar era], (Tehran: Moeen publication), P. 124.

^۳Also there is a more detailed classification of social classes as: (1) The Royal family, (2) The tribal leaders, (3) The religious leaders, (4) The state officials, (5) The tradesmen, (6) The rural people, and (7) the laborers.

3. The Safavid dynasty was ruling Persian Empire after the Muslim conquest of Persia from 1501 to 1722 (experiencing a brief restoration from 1729 to 1736).

4. Ebrahim Razaghi (1989) *Eghtesade Iran* [Iran Economy], (Tehran: Ney publication), P. 3.

5. Boshra Delrish (1996) *Zan dar dore Ghajar* [Woman in Qajar era], (Tehran: Islamic Development Organization), PP. 40-55.

6. Anglicized as Nehzat-e-Mashrutiat: A revolutionary movement, taken place between 1905 and 1907, leading to the establishment of a parliament and cataclysmic changes in Iran, heralding the modern era.

economic activities of women, women employment and income, rate of participation, and women unemployment rate must be taken into account. The study of these indexes needs accessibility to adequate information and gender-separated statistics. Therefore, due to lack of such information, the study has been conducted based on historical documents, available through sources such as internet and libraries.

Studying the historical documents, the researchers came to some dispersed and partial information on economic activities of women during the Qajar era. Thus, despite the lack of required information, the study goes through classification of women activities in the given era according to major classes of society in the period within the framework of today's occupations in order to explain the role of women, as active labor force of the society, in the economic areas. It is to be noted that different aspects of women activities have been taken into consideration in areas of political, social and subsistence economy, leading to findings, which cannot be seen in previously conducted historical studies. Accordingly, after the introduction, the article deals with classification of women's economic activities, followed by a conclusion.

2. Classification of Women's Economic Activities

In order to recognize the economic role of women in Qajar era, their economic activities, based on the main social classes of women, have been classified in areas of political, social and subsistence economy. Accordingly, some cases, extracted from historical documents, have been studied.

2.1. Political Economy

During Qajar era, in spite of restrictions imposed on women, some were involved in political affairs. Such women, mostly those of the royal families, used to get engaged in political activities, sometimes inspired by their competency and sometimes by their seditiousness and conspiracy.

Chief among Qajar women, involved in

political activities, were Mahd Olia¹ and Fakhr-al-Moluk, Naser-al-Din Shah's mother and daughter respectively. Maryam Khanum, the Jewish wife of Fat'h-Ali Shah, was also one of the politics-involved women of the era, who enjoyed high degrees of knowledge and shrewdness. Interfering in political affairs and providing her husband with her advice in governmental issues, she played a significant role in spreading Jewish propaganda all around the country.

Some of the women from the royal court were so influential in political affairs that they even managed to take some governing positions. Hosn Jahan Khanum, known as Vaalieh, was one of Naser-al-Din Shah's daughters, who ruled over Kurdistan in total autonomy for many years.

Since politics and economics are interdependent within the framework of a monarchy system, it can be presumed that inference of women with political influence, has somehow affected the political economy. In other words, following women's interference in activities related to political economy, they could get engaged in activities such as granting economic advantages and monopoly to some special individuals including the representatives and intermediaries of foreign countries.

As regards, the involvement of women, from or out of the royal court, in Tobacco Protest² and obeying the Fatwa³ of Great Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi⁴ to boycott tobacco use is another example of women's role in political economy. The participation of women in the publicly supported tobacco

1. Mahd olia, for many years, was the most influential woman figure of Iranian politics. She is known for playing critical roles in many governmental decisions of the time.

2. A national boycott of tobacco consumption, led by religious leaders, to protest to a tobacco concession (monopoly over the production, sale and export of tobacco for fifty years) granted by the king of Iran to the western imperial power of the time, Great Britain in 1890.

3. A legal opinion or ruling issued by a recognized religious authority in Islam, who is supposed to be knowledgeable and base their rulings in knowledge and wisdom. Such rulings are certainly obeyed by Muslims.

4. Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammed Hassan Al-Husayni Al-Shirazi (1814-c.1896), famously known as "Mirza Shirazi", a famous cleric, widely known for his fatwa against the use of tobacco.

protest, resulting in the foundation of "Women Frontier", consequently led to nullification of monopoly granted to British Talbot to trade tobacco products, in which women played a noticeable role. Such a great achievement, with many economic and political impacts, can be considered an example of women activities in political economy.

2.2. Social Economy

The emergence of constitutional movement (Nehzat-e-Mashrutiat) in Qajar era was the origin of many changes in women activities, especially those at political, social and cultural levels. At social level, journalism and publication of women magazines, establishment of girls' schools and training centers, as well as involvement in charity activities are some instances of women presence in that era.

2.2.1. Publications

Journalism is inter-related with literature and other types of art from different aspects. However, its range of activities and its social impacts are more distinctive than other fields. This is why it holds a significant position in women's fields of activity. It is to be noted that activities of women journalists are highlighted within a period in which women were devoid of formal education and learning how to read and write. Thus, entering a field of activity like journalism can be considered a remarkable cultural evolution. The publication of magazines and periodicals and managing related affairs by women out of the meager income received from a limited circulation can also be classified in women's economic activities. It is noteworthy that even some of the periodicals such as "Women's Words" initiated selling its stock, each worth 100 Rials, to the public in 1927 for the first time, under the support of "Ladies Center" (Kānoon Bānovan).

2.2.2. Establishment of Girls' Schools and Training Centers

Within the Qajar era, education was mostly done in traditional ways and in places such as

Maktab Khane¹ and Howzeh-ye Elmieh² or by employing private tutors. Gradually, western style of education along with traditional methods of education prevailed the society because of increasing interactions between European and Iranian explorers and merchants. After Constitutional Movement, women, by themselves, launched widespread training and educational activities to promote women's knowledge and insights through establishment of schools, specifically for women.

These girls' schools were mostly established in Tehran and few of the cities. "Dooshizegan School" (Maidens School), established by Bibi Khanum Vazirof³, Naamoos School (Chastity School), established by Ms. Tooba Azmoode⁴, Tarbiat Banat School (School of Girls Education)⁵, established by a cultural board including Mesdames Kaamyaab, Vafaeiye Madhat and Lillian Glips, and Tehran's Iranian Girls School (Dokhtaraan Irani Tehran School), managed by Ghamar Khaanum are known as the oldest schools of this type. Later, the number of girls' schools, receiving tuition for education, increased.

2.2.3. Economic Activities for Charity Purposes

Such activities, mostly done individually and not within the framework of an organized activity, were conducted by rich women from the royal family. Chief among these activities are those of Zobeide Khanum, Fat'h-Ali Shah's daughter, for public-beneficiary purposes in Hamedan⁶; participation of Homa

1 . Maktab Khane or House of Writing was an old and outdated primary education method done in one-class buildings mostly to teach reading Quran, religious issues and some traditional custom.

2 . Howzeh-ye Elmieh is kind of a religious university to educate clergymen and those who want to be mullah (religious scholar).

3 . Maryam Fat'hi quoted in Fakhri Ghavimi (1973) *Karname Zanan Mashhore Iran* [Iranian Famous Women's Activities], (Tehran: Ministry of Education), P. 96.

4 . www. iichs.org, Badr-al- Moluk Baamdad, quoted by Niloofar Kasraa.

5 . www. iichs.org, Homeira Randjbar Omraani.

6 . Hamadān or Hamedān is the capital city of Hamadan Province of Iran. The special nature of this old city and its historic sites attract tourists during the summer to this city, located approximately 360 km southwest of Tehran.

Khanum, Fat'h-Ali Shah's granddaughter, in construction of mosques and schools in Tehran; and maintenance and repairing of Anis-Al Dowle's¹ and AVecina's² mausoleums by Negaar Khanum, Abbas Mirza Nayeb-Al Saltane's³ daughter, in 1875.

2.3. Subsistence Economy

Urban and rural women in Qajar era were engaged in various economic activities such as production, supply and sale of agricultural and livestock products, manufacture and sale of handicrafts, working in carpet weaving workshops, services units and medical practices. Thus, they are believed to play an essential role in promotion of families' living standards, whose impacts on national economy cannot be ignored⁴. Different kinds of women's subsistence activates in the given era are as follows.

2.3.2. Medical Practices

Since a very long time, women have been granted the monopoly of midwifery or obstetrics. Among the most well known women of Qajar era was Dr. Kahal, who learned medicine under American religious missionaries and used to practice midwifery, similar to that of the modern days, in Ahmad Shah's kingdom period⁵.

2.3.3. Handicrafts

Given the social-cultural characteristics of Qajar era, engagement in manufacturing handicrafts was a customary activity for women. For instance, rural women would weave fabric from wool, silk or canvas to make clothes for their family members. Some women, who enjoyed more artistic abilities such as crocheting, embroidery and sewing, used to design and embellish clothes. Learning such skills for illiterate and common women was sometimes worth more than acquiring a kind of art or involving in production activities. Earning a meager income, these types of women, especially the widows or aged women, would manage to run small workshops and mills at their homes and supply their products in local markets. For example, based on historical documents, in 1906-1907, there were around three thousand velvet-weaving mills at houses closets in Kashaan⁶. Widows and aged women in Hamadaan and Isfahan⁷ are also good examples of women who used to make their livings through braiding and cotton spinning respectively⁸.

The most important and the most common activity of women during Qajar era was carpet-weaving, as one of the branches of handicrafts. Women were so skilled in carpet weaving that any girl used to weave a carpet to take it to her husband's home after

1. Naser al-Din Shah's most favorite and also most influential wife, who played a key role in Constitutional Movement.

2. Avicenna, (born 980, Bukhara, Iran—died 1037, Hamadan). Islamic philosopher and physician of Persian origin. He was the most renowned philosopher of medieval Islam and the most influential name in medicine. He is known for his great encyclopedia of philosophy, *The Book of Healing*. His other writings include *The Book of Salvation* and *The Book of Directives and Remarks*. His interpretations of Aristotle influenced European Scholasticism

(<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Avecina>).

3. Son and Crown Prince of Fat'h-Ali Shah, known as Persia's most valiant prince, who was a military hero, a poet and mystic by inclination and temperament, and a great exemplar of the virtues most associated with the ideal of nobility, honesty and loyalty.

4. Some believe one reason for polygamy was exploit women in agricultural and livestock activities.

5. Fariba Eftehage & Maliheh Mahbobnejad (2005) *Zanan dar Astarte Jonbeshe Mashrutiat* [Women at the beginning of the constitutional era], *Payame Zan Journal*, 168, P. 54.

6. Kāshān is a city in Isfahan province, around 250 km south of Tehran, which is known as a fine example of traditional Persian architecture. The city is internationally famous for manufacturing carpets, silk and other textiles. Kaashaan today houses most of Iran's mechanized carpet-weaving factories, and has an active marble and copper mining industry.

7. Isfahaan (Originally: Sepāhān) is the capital of Isfahaan Province, located about 430 km south of Tehran, which is known to be one of the most attractive cities of the world with many historical monuments. The city was long noted for its fine carpets and silver filigree. Today textile and steel mills take over their place. Its architecture, tree-lined boulevards and relaxed pace make it one of the highlights of Iran's cities. The stunning mosques of Isfahaan, such as Imam Mosque and Sheikh Lotf Allah Mosque, are among the most beautiful and interesting in the world. In short, the Persians call it "Nesf-e-Jahaan", meaning "Half of the World".

8. Eirage Afshar (1973) *Khaterat va Asnade Zahiroidoleh* [Zahiroidoleh's Documents and Memories], (Tehran: Ketabhaie Gibi), P.73.

marriage^۱. Even common people used to believe that the precision, delicacy and the patience used in weaving a carpet implied the patience and royalty of the weaver girl towards her prospective husband. The reputation and quality of Iranian carpets woven in Qajar era was so remarkable that they were exported to other countries (mostly via Turkey) and earned foreign currency income for the Iran.

2.3.4. Agriculture

During the era under study, women were remarkably involved in an immense part of the production process in the traditional agricultural economy. Such activities were mostly in the cultivation and livestock areas. For example, in north of Iran, the active role of women would start after preparation of lands to plant rice, as the most important crop of the region. Women, without being assisted by men, would toil away to grow rice, from planting seedlings to harvesting rice and then cleaning the husk from rice.

Rural women, besides doing daily activities such as housekeeping, baby-sitting, farming and livestock breeding in farms, would take the responsibilities of taking care of the entire process of agricultural production^۲ when men would be summoned by government of the time to join the army troops^۳.

In spite of women's high efficiency in agricultural activities and livestock sub-sector, unfortunately there are no statistics of the economic value created by women in the national economy. In addition, there is no data available, indicating that women used to be paid as much as the value of marginal products they would create. As regards the customs and conventions dominating the society in Qajar era, it is sensible to claim that women did not personally receive financial gains out of such activities. They only benefited as much as what they needed

(accommodation, food, clothing ...) from the economic value of their activities. In fact, women were used as labor force in the agriculture sector and livestock sub-sectors and the owners of lands or livestock (sometimes their husbands) would benefit from additional economic value created out of women's production activities.

2.3.5. Gendarmerie (The Police Force in Qajar Era)

In the last years of Qajar dynasty and during the kingship of Ahmad Shah (1909 - 1925), women entered the police force (called gendarmerie then) and used to act as secret police.

2.3.6. Other areas of Activities Associated with Subsistence Economy

- Occupations exclusively intended for women such as midwifery, hairdressing, administration of women baths,
- Peddling self-manufactured products or second-hand goods on streets;
- Door-to-door sales;
- Beggary;
- Prostitutions and panderism;^۱

3. Conclusion

Studying the existing historical documents about women in Qajar era, the researchers can make the following conclusions as regards women's economic activities:

- a) Women, in compliance with their main social classes, used to play roles in three areas of political, social and subsistence economy. For instance, women from the royal court were engaged more in political affairs. Thus, they are considered associated with political economy. Rich and aristocratic women (mostly from Qajar kings' families) were also involved in economic activities for charity purpose. Educated women, from or out of the royal court, used to play roles in publications of periodicals, published specifically for women, and establishment of schools for girls. Educated women, not related to royal court, and common or illiterate

1. Such a practice was the custom in many parts of the country, and is still a custom in rural areas and small towns.

2. Activities including ploughing, seeds and seedlings planting, irrigation, etc.

3. Aghababa Dastjerdi (2009) Zanan va Faaliathie Eghtesadi dar asre Ghajar (3) [Women and Economic Activities in Qajar era (3)]. <http://anthropology.ir/node/4092>.

women were active in subsistence economy.

b) Engaged in various economic sectors such as agriculture (including cultivation, livestock farming and handicrafts especially carpet weaving) and service sectors (for example, barter activities, working as servants, hairdressing, medical practices, management women baths and cooperation with police force), women would play significant roles in national economy. Accordingly, it can be concluded that women, in the era under study, were included in the labor force of the country and used to manage to earn their livings, if needed, and even further, they participated in national production¹.

1. Cyrus Sdvndyan (2000) Daramadi bar Jamiat Shenasi Tarikhi Iran dar asre Ghajar [An introduction to historical demography in Qajar Iran], (Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Publishing Organization), PP. 150-160.

In case there were statistical data available, the researchers could calculate the economic value of women's production activities and then, percentage of women's share in households and national economy.