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Armenian women in general, and Armenian women in Persia more specifically, have received very little scholarly attention for a variety of reasons, from a lack of available sources to a lack of scholarly interest. Yet their contribution to the life of the Armenian community of Persia in the middle and late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in terms of education and charitable work, is noteworthy and certainly deserves a greater scholarly examination.

Armenian women were part of a large minority dispersed throughout the Ottoman and Persian empires and concentrated in Anatolia, Azarbaijan, in/near the city of Isfahan, and, after World War I, in Arab lands. Throughout the 19th century and during the early part of the 20th century, the majority of Armenian women, like their male counterparts, belonged to the rural lower

classes, with notable exceptions in larger urban areas. However, very little is known about the everyday life of the majority of Armenian women in Iran. The sources that have come down to us focus predominantly on women's activities and roles in the propagation of the Armenian nation, whether through the education of Armenian children, charitable organizations, or participation in the nascent nationalist and reformist movements that originated from the Ottoman Empire and Russia-ruled Caucasus. Nationalist writers have often singled out such activities, perceiving the progress of Armenian women in the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian empires, and praised them for their contributions to Armenian national development.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Iranian Armenians were concentrated in Azarbaijan and Isfahan, and their population was estimated to be between 63,000 and more than 70,000 at the turn of the 20th century. When demographic studies included the numbers of women, these were noticeably smaller than those for men, most likely because male heads of families were less apt to report about female family members. Well into the 20th century, the majority of the Armenian population in Iran were peasants. Generally, men and boys—from as young as six or seven—worked in the fields, while women and girls took care of the household and the livestock. Women spent their evenings doing needlework; older women spun wool and prepared threads to weave rugs in the winter (Mamian, p. 186). They were the chief carpet weavers in Čahār Maḥāl (see ČAHAR MAḤĀL wa BAḴTIĀRI; Yedgarian, p. 46). In urban areas, most Armenians were involved in trade, with a great number of artisans working as goldsmiths, blacksmiths, gunsmiths, carpenters, and a significant number being wine-makers and wine-sellers. Armenian commercial firms in Azarbaijan and Isfahan, as well as in other towns, played an important role in the trade between Iran, Europe, and Russia (Goroyiants, pp. 130-34; Frangian, pp. 185-89; Ter Hovhaniants, p. 288). The significance of Armenian merchants in this period pales in comparison to the important role they played in the 17th- and early 18th-century Safavid Iran (see Aslanian). Interestingly, the wine trade was in the hands of women, as alcohol could not be sold openly and was, therefore, sold out of the home, the seat of female authority (Frangian, p. 56; Raffi, p. 549). Some nationalist writers raised objections to the predominance of women in the wine trade, which they considered detrimental because of the connection of women's honor with national well-being (Frangian, p. 56; Raffi, p. 536; for a more detailed discussion on the Iranian Armenian community see Berberian, 2001, pp. 34-66).

Culture. Iranian Armenian women, as members of a religious and ethnic minority, preserved their cultural distinctiveness far more than Iranian Armenian men, who were much more likely to come into contact with Muslims. For instance, women retained their distinctive dress and head-cover well into the 1930s, while men by that time had adopted the Iranian hat, tunic/cloak (*qabā*), and loose pants(*šalvār*; see Minasian, p. 376; Yedgarian, pp. 158-62; Yeremian, pp. 122-23). Women's dress generally consisted of several layers of undergarment, shirts, long skirts, aprons, ornamental belts, *riāl* coins in place of buttons, necklaces and other ornaments of beads and silver coins, head-covers decorated with *rial* coins and hanging down from the forehead, and mouth-covers, usually white (Minasian, pp. 376-78; Yedgarian, pp. 162-67; Yeremian, pp. 123-26; Lima, figs. 12, 14, 15, 16). Not surprisingly, the dress and other social customs were often not distinguishable from those of Muslim women (Berberian, 2000, p. 74).

There were several categories of women's dress depending on age and marital status. For example, younger girls wore a distinct head-cover; unmarried older girls did not have a nose- or mouth-cover, while new brides covered both with a white cloth. Middle-aged women dressed simpler, in darker colors, sometimes mixed with white, and wore no ornaments, while elderly women dressed even simpler and wore a white head-cover and often did not cover their noses or mouths (Minasian, pp. 378-79). Girls often married at the age of fifteen or sixteen; the bride and the groom did not see each other until the wedding ceremony. The new bride, whose mouth was covered, could not speak or eat in the presence of her husband's family. She could only speak through younger boys and girls, who would relay messages for her. If, however, no children were present, the bride would speak with her hands or facing a wall. Women's dress and behavior, including segregation during mealtime and church services, remained basically unchanged in the rural Iranian Armenian communities until the mid-20th century (Minasian, pp. 383-84; Yeremian, pp. 98-99). Women, therefore, did not merely physically reproduce their children, but—as mothers who were the major influence in the lives of their children—they were also the socializers of children, reproducing the culture through dress, behavior, and use of language, as well as culinary and other customs (FIGURE 1, FIGURE 2; Berberian, 2000, p. 75).

In contrast to the above, women began to make appearances on the theater stage in Iranian cities from the late 19th century (Berberian, 2000, p. 86). Starting in the 1880s, women also began to establish their own theatrical

groups, traveling and performing in Istanbul and parts of Iran and Egypt (Navasargian, p. 43).

Education. Until the advent of missionary schools and, later, Armenian girls' schools, only a small minority of Armenian girls from wealthy families received an education, albeit a limited one. The first access to Western-style education by Armenian girls outside the home came with the opening of the missionary girls' school in Urmia (Orumia) in 1838 (Arasteh, p. 128). In Tabriz, an Armenian girls' school opened about four decades later, in 1879, after much opposition and debate. New Julfa (see JULFA) had a girls' school from 1858-60.

Religious and lay community leaders opened Armenian boys' and girls' schools for two reasons: to counteract the influence of missionary schools and to prevent further acculturation. For example, Armenians of Urmia communicated only in Turkish or Kurdish rather than in Armenian, and there were cases of conversion to Islam in Khoy (Berberian, 2000, pp. 78-79; Raffi, pp. 501, 533, 535; Frangian, pp. 25, 52, 93,117; Pahlevanyan, pp. 192-93, 203). Proponents of education argued for girls' education by placing it within the context of national progress, emphasizing its connection to transforming the Iranian Armenian community and society by means of educating women and preparing them for their primary roles as wives, mothers, and the first teachers of future generations of the community (Berberian, 2000, pp. 82-83).

In 1879, the first girls' school, named "Annayian," opened in Tabriz. Its curriculum included Armenian and Persian languages, religion, mathematics, Armenian history, geography, natural sciences, and needlework, with the addition of French and Russian when it became coeducational. More girls' schools opened in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in both urban and rural Iranian Armenian communities, some of which later became coeducational, primarily for financial reasons (Berberian, 2000, pp. 80-83; Hakovbiants, p. 98; Pahlevanyan, pp. 200-1; Mamian, pp. 361-62; Goroyiants, pp. 124-25; Abrahamian, II, p. 241). Iranian Armenian women, who organized into charitable organizations, helped to establish new schools, especially girls' schools, and often provided students with tuition, clothing, and school supplies (Berberian, 2000, pp. 83-85). Women's charitable groups in Tabriz, New Julfa, and Tehran comprised mostly of members of the wealthy strata of the Iranian Armenian community, who often saw to the community's expenses and even paid house calls in order to convince families to send their girls to the newly opened Armenian girls' schools rather than to the Protestant missionary schools. Their efforts in helping hundreds of girls attend school cannot be

underestimated. They also saw to the opening of the first kindergarten in Iran (in the street of Leylavā in Tabriz) in 1896, as well as vocational schools and workshops for sewing and carpet weaving (Berberian, 2000, pp. 83-85; Hakobian, I, pp. 8, 83; Grigorian, pp. 85-94; Frangian, pp. 127, 129, 130, 137, 141; Tadeosian, p. 88; Goroyiants, p. 126; Yeremian, pp. 60-62; Pahlevanyan, p. 139; Amurian, p. 127). They also provided support to Armenian refugees fleeing from the massacres perpetrated under the rule of Ottoman Sultan ʿAbd-al-Ḥamid II (r. 1876-1909). Starting in 1896, the women's organizations collected money, clothing, and wheat and at times personally saw to the distribution of the latter two items (Grigorian, pp. 93, 95-97).

Politics. Starting in the mid-19th century, Iranian Armenian communities throughout Azarbaijan and Isfahan went through a major transition in terms of education and politicization. A greater number of Armenians began to be educated by newly arriving teachers from the Caucasus and members of political parties, particularly the nationalist-socialist Dashnaktsutiun (see DASNAK) and internationalist-socialist Hnchakian parties, which began to operate in Iran in the 1890s and subsequently took part in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-11, q.v.). In northwestern Iran, the Dashnaktsutiun Party organized small military groups to be sent across the Iranian-Ottoman border and disseminated party ideology, with the purpose of liberating Ottoman Armenians to one degree or another. The Dashnaktsutiun boasted of having more than 2,000 members, organized into 242 groups under its auspices in all of Iran. These groups included women, who formed on average about 24 percent of the total membership of each branch, with a few exceptions (Berberian, 2001, p. 51; Report of Azarbaijan's Activities, 1904-1906; Report of Azarbaijan Regional Congress; Report of Minaret [Salmas] Region, 1904-1905; Report of Avarayr [Khoy] Region; Report of Shahsevan [Ardabil] and Andar [Astara] Region). There is no evidence that the Dashnakist women members took part in actual fighting; some were, however, involved in propaganda and the transfer of arms (Berberian, 2001, pp. 51-52; Hanguyts, pp. 86, 130-44; Tadeosian, pp. 80-103; Kitur, I, p. 209; Malkhas, pp. 340-42; Amurian, pp. 25, 30-31; Gulkhandanian, pp. 56-57; Lazian, pp. 19-20; Zeytlian, pp. 35-41).

During the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), through the formation of women's groups, Iranian Armenian women began to be involved in the women's movement in Iran, especially in the attempt to heighten attention and raise consciousness about women's issues among Iranian Armenian

women and Iranian women in general. They worked to educate women in politics, party issues, and Ottoman and Qajar constitutionalism, as well as in inheritance rights, hygiene, and other women's issues. Despite considerable hostility by conservative segments of society, they also formed the Persian Women's Benevolent Society, whose immediate goals were charitable in nature, although their future plans were much larger and encapsulated feminist ideals (Report of Vrezh [Azarbaijan] Central Committee; Minutes of Gilan Committee, Third Regional Congress). According to its own records, in April 1910 the group organized a successful gathering of 500 Iranian women (Muslim, Jewish, and Armenian, as well as European) in a Tehran park, where women gave lectures and recited poems. Janet Afary and Badr-al-Molk Bāmdād mention such a gathering sponsored by the Society of Ladies of the Homeland in the Atābak Park in Tehran in 1910 (Report of Shah City [Tehran] Committee; Report of Persian Women's Benevolent Society; Afary, pp. 186, 196; Bāmdād, p. 34). According to the report of the Persian Women's Benevolent Society, the group also received permission from the Iranian government to publish a journal on women's issues entitled *Šekufa* ('Blossom'). This may have been the same *Šekufa* whose publication began in Tehran in 1913 (Report of Shah City [Tehran] Committee; Report of Persian Women's Benevolent Society). The paucity of information on the Society leaves room for a great deal of conjecture, but at present the relationship between these two societies remains obscure. It may have been that these organizations were one and the same. Yephram (Yeprem) Khan's wife, Anahit Davitian, was also involved in women's circles and was a member of the Society of Ladies of the Homeland (Berberian, 2000, pp. 91-92; Bamdad, p. 34; Singh, pp. 173-81).

A large number of Iranian Armenian women began to be educated and politicized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, although the majority shared similar status, roles, and customs as their Muslim counterparts and remained traditional in interpersonal relations, social structure, and worldview. Socio-economic class and exposure to Westernization, especially through missionaries and Armenian immigrants from the Caucasus in the case of Iran, determined women's lives more than religion.

Iranian Armenian women's activities at the turn of the 20th century in the areas of education, charity, and, to a lesser extent, politics (as part of the Armenian nationalist movement) have been notable. In the early 20th century, they also contributed to a wider Persian nationalist movement and Persian women's movement during the Constitutional Revolution. Perhaps because of

their minority status or for the reasons yet to be explained, Iranian Armenian women did not carry out an autonomous struggle for equal rights that would focus on Iranian Armenian women; instead, they took part in a larger Iranian women's movement that began to take shape during the Constitutional Revolution.

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