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GILAN XVII. GENDER RELATIONS

GILAN

xvii. Gender Relations

The division of activities and spaces between the sexes is quite distinct in the province of Gilan. On the Iranian plateau, and in the Middle East in general, feminine is opposed to masculine as the inside is to the outside, as private is to public, as gardening is to field work, as domestic tasks are to the craft industry. Not so in the Caspian world: here roles and tasks are distributed according to a more flexible pattern: to a large extent, women take an important part in agricultural work; in their homes, the line between male and female spaces is blurred; craftwork, industrial, and commercial activities are not the exclusive prerogative of men in this region.

The principles that govern the division of labor between the sexes can be illustrated by the respective tasks carried out by men and women in the rice fields. Operations which require physical strength and the use of hand-swung chopping tools (billhooks, axes, and spades) or those which require operating complex machinery (plows and harrows drawn by animals, mechanical cultivators, and threshing machines) are left to the men. Tasks that generally do not require tools, but for which the laborer has to stoop or bend down (transplanting, weeding), or incidental and ancillary activities (for example, passing the sheaves to their husbands so they can be put into the threshing machine) are reserved for women. But there are several highly significant exceptions to this general rule, as when, for example, women flail the rice.

In the 1950s, before farming was mechanized, the number of working days per hectare of paddy field was estimated at 105 for men and 160 for women (Sahami, p. 52). According to Toshio Suzuki's (p. 296) calculations while carrying out research in the plain of Gilan in 1977-78, a time when mechanical cultivators (*tiler* "tiller") had already been introduced, males spent 70 and females 88 working days in the paddy fields, excluding threshing. Other studies (Sarhadi and Motia) estimate the female share of labor in rice farming at 76 percent, which shows how predominant female labor is in this cycle of activities.

The men cut down trees and clear the land to be farmed; they clean the irrigation canals with spades (*čelāru*), repair the small flood banks separating plots (*kalla*) in the rice plantations with special spades (*ḵālik*, *garbāz*) fitted with wooden footrests, and they are responsible for the three phases in the plowing process and for harrowing before transplanting (*nešā*). Transplanting is done by the women in the family, joined by friends and neighbors, working in groups (this form of co-operative work is called *yāvar*) or, more frequently today, by paid day-laborers, called *karāči*, local women of low income or women coming from Kurdish villages in the plain or from mountain villages. Transplanting is done in April and May and is followed in June by two periods of weeding (*vijin*, *dobara*; see Plate I); it is a particularly arduous and backbreaking work. At the time of *vijin* and *dobara*, the women work barefoot in the mud, bending down under a blazing sun. While several male tasks have become mechanized (the introduction of cultivators and, a few years ago, of tractors for grubbing and first plowing, for instance, and even, rarely, for harrowing), female work remains manual: mechanical planters, considered by the men to be expensive and inefficient, were not taken up, and chemical weeding, also expensive, is seldom used. Once again, the tasks completed by men and women together emphasize the gap between male and female techniques. Men plow the ground in the nurseries (*tumbijār*) while women use their hands to level it (Plate II). Harrowing, traditionally done by the men with curved boards drawn by oxen or horses, is followed in certain areas of the plain by the work of women using *damārda*, a harrow with an arm (Bazin and Bromberger, pp. 22-23). Harvesting (*berenjbini*) with a small-toothed sickle (*dāra*) is performed by both sexes, but mainly by men, as the women gather the cut bundles (*mošta*) in sheaves (*darz*; with twelve *mošta*s to a *darz*). For threshing (*ḵermankubi*), men in the central plain traditionally use a hand-swung tool called a "flail" (*jāku*), but the work is also carried out by females (Rabino and Lafont, pp. 19-20; Research Group, p. 113; Okazaki, p. 69). To the east and northwest of the province, men use animals to tread sheaves underfoot. Women finish the threshing process by rubbing the ears with a piece of split reed to recover the very last grains. Threshing and winnowing (*bād dādan*), now mechanized, are exclusively male tasks, while women only complete incidental chores (such as the passing of sheaves to their husbands, or [formerly] the cleaning of grains in winnowing baskets, *ṭabaq*). Finally, rice husking and bleaching, now done mechanically in mills (*kārḵāna–ye ḵermankubi*), but formerly performed with a foot-activated pestle (*pā-dang*) or a hydraulic pestle (*āb-dang*), are men's tasks. Nevertheless, Rabino and Lafont (p. 21) mention women using a *pā-dang* in central Gilan early in the twentieth century. But we can say that generally the bent-over bodies of women working with their hands contrast with the men's bodies standing erect, as they use more or less complex tools.

The same pattern (a broad participation of women in production labor, exceeding in time that of the men, with an attendant lack of technical equipment) applies to agricultural, pastoral, and craft activities, with a few significant differences. For instance, from spring to autumn the women bend over to gather the tea leaves; from the end of winter to the beginning of spring, the men plow the tea fields with spades (*bil*s) and trim the shrubs. The meticulous work of gardening is generally a female prerogative, except for the first plowing. To weed herbs (*sabzi*) and vegetables, women use short-handle grubbing-hoes (*bulu*), which they receive upon marriage from their husband or mother-in-law and which are the emblematic tools of Gilani countrywomen.

Contrary to the majority of sericultural areas throughout the world, men in Gilan are in charge of feeding silkworms in nurseries (*telembār*) with mulberry leaves (see Plate III). To do so, they must crawl on an openwork floor (a "bridge," *pord*) located above the "bed" (*ket*) where the worms are located. But the tasks preceding and following silkworm breeding are mostly handled by women: the hatching of seeds and the first feeding of caterpillars in a heated room in their homes; the unreeling of the filaments from the cocoons (*pilečini*); the reeling of silk and the spinning of filoselle silk; and the home weaving on a two-heddle loom (*páčāl*) of *čādor-šab*, a fabric with geometrical designs which women tie around their belts when transplanting or weeding, and below their shoulders when carrying a child.

How can one explain the important participation of men in sericulture, an activity based on a feeding and breeding pattern, and generally restricted to women? Several reasons—technical, economic, and symbolic—can account for this peculiar configuration. Breeding in the silkworm nurseries coincides with the period of transplanting and weeding of rice, tasks which keep the women occupied between April and June. Furthermore, one should bear in mind that silk was for a long time the main commercial export product of Gilan (Bromberger, 1989a) and, as such, a particularly well-developed sector in the agricultural economy. Finally, it is hard to imagine, in Gilani society, women crawling on the upper part of the nursery, whereas men would have been climbing trees or to the elevated parts of houses from a young age (Bromberger, 1989b, p. 14).

While women are busy with the poultry and domesticated fowls (particularly diversified in Gilan) and the cows are kept close by, the oxen, the men's "fellow workers and friends" (Bromberger, 1997, pp. 123-24) and horses, "animals too valuable to be entrusted to women" (de Morgan, p. 251), are under male dominion. In pastoral zones (Gāleš and Ṭāleš) men are in charge of leading, guarding, and tending the herds. The division of labor is also unusual among stockbreeders in Persia when it comes to milk production, which again exhibits the idiosyncrasies of the Caspian region, where men milk the goats and the ewes (Plate IV), an activity elsewhere reserved for women.

The division of labor in the manufacturing sphere is generally in keeping with the pattern of traditional societies (Tabet, Testart); men work with hard materials and complex tools (joinery and carpentry), and they handle the 'arts of fire' (ironwork, firing pottery), whereas women work at home with more flexible material (wool-spinning with wheels, rush mat and fabric weaving, crocheting). Men work with textiles only professionally—in a workshop or as itinerant craftsmen, producing, for example, felt (*namad*; Bazin and Bromberger, p. 64). But in the craft industry, the originality of the Gilani society is evident as well. In Ṭāleš and to the east of Safidrud in general, women use foot-powered, two-heddle looms that are often exclusively used by men in the Middle East (idem, pp. 71-72). Here and elsewhere, pottery made with a wheel is a male activity, while women only handle the fashioning of the products, including bowls (*gamaj*) and churns (*nerḵa*), using a simple wooden rotating support. However (and this is a rare occurrence anywhere in the world), women, in some pottery centers, use the wheel to fashion mortars (*nimkār*; Achouri, 1977).

The unique status of Gilani women also appears in their early participation in industrial work. In the late 19th century, one hundred industrial cocoon-processing plants and, later, silk mills, which employed mainly women, operated in the area (Lafont and Rabino, p. 96, n. 1, p. 47; Bromberger, 1989a, pp. 83-85). The tea factories which were built in the area in the reign of Reza Shah also resort, to a lesser extent, to seasonal female labor; on the other hand, women are the main labor force in the clothing industry and food-conditioning plants. Trading is not totally foreign to women, as it is in other areas of Persia: they sell their herb crop directly in the country bazaars. Those extra-domestic activities, often done during seasonal migrations, have contributed to shape a consciousness and behavior that stand apart from the dominant pattern of women confined to a private sphere.

There is no room, like the *andarun* (q.v.), as is the case in some Persian houses, specifically reserved for women, and this is highly significant. Women and men share the same space, and women unreservedly talk to guests, even if they are not close relatives. Only invisible limits—that is, not actual walls or doors—separate the male from the female space: men sit in the back (*bālā*) of the room, while women stay close to the door and the stove where the food is heated. When guests come in the spring, the men gather in the back of the portico (see ayvān) and the women near the entrance, thus forming two close but separate micro-societies (Bromberger, 1989b, pp. 81-82).

On the whole, an asymmetrical complementarity emerges in the division of labor and space between men and women. Gilaks often say that husband and wife are essential to one another “like two fingers of one hand.” Men are well aware of it and, at the end of the labor season in the rice fields, they give their wives a small gift as a token of their gratitude, generically called *tamānākun(a)* (“it is complete!” or “the job is done!”). Considering the important female participation in the tasks of production outside the house and the parity of wages between men and women in the agricultural sector, the egalitarian trends in Gilaki society must be underscored. At the same time, however, considering the difficulty and the time devoted to their activities, the overexploitation of female labor is a constant threat. This paradoxical situation is reflected in everyday behavior. Gilaki men are less inclined to show their manliness (*mardānagi*) than men of the Iranian plateau. Women can be forthright and participate in men’s conversations. Men, however, are the ones who give orders. Finally, the inequality of posture, stooped versus erect, and upper versus lower in the execution of technical activities is also found in death: the burial pits for women are dug slightly deeper (by approximately 15 cm) than those for men.

Children's games contribute to the distinction between male and female roles. Boys' games develop dexterity and, incidentally, strength: the *āḡuz-bāzi*, a game of marbles played with walnuts, the *albili-bāzi*, throwing a wood stick as far as possible by striking it with a larger stick, the *gandom-kuna*, throwing a stone onto a piece of wood buried in the ground, the *varvare-bāzi* (top spinning) and the many versions of leapfrog (*ḵar-e pošt avāz*). Teenagers are initiated in hunting and gathering activities that are exclusively male domains: hunting with slings (*sang andāz pust*), snares (*varzul*), or folding nets to catch sparrows (*gonješk*) or wildfowl; catching fish with sparrowhawks (*māšk*) or practicing angling. With adolescence comes the time of adult games that call for cunning, skill, strength, and good luck to win the bets. The men of Gilan particularly like fights (*košti gila-mardi*), bullfights (*varzā jang*; see Gāvbāzi), and tight-rope walking (*lāfan-bāzi*), yet another expression of the male esteem for high spaces; the "egg war" (*morḡāne jang*; French *toquette*), where two players try to shatter each other's egg, the winner being the one whose egg remains unbroken; and the *haštak*, a game played by throwing nuts into holes dug in the ground, an activity that gives rise to a considerable amount of betting (Plate V).

With the end of childhood comes the age of religious duties and another cycle in the male life begins, one of pain-inflicting piety, expressed in the ritual of *moḥarram* when young people strike their chests with the palms of their hands (*sinazani*) and their elders whip themselves with chains (*zanjirzani*; see DASTA), a sign of devotion and virility (sometimes children anticipate those rituals by practicing with small chains given to them by their fathers).

The girls' path is traditionally confined to the space in the house and the garden. Their games, hopscotch (*ḵaṭbāzi*), and jacks (*ye-qol*), etc., exclude the use of strength, violent moves, or the killing of animals—only men may kill and butcher. They learn domestic tasks, housekeeping, cooking (except for roasting meat, reserved for the men of the household) and are gradually associated with the garden and fieldwork. Unlike the publicly displayed piety of men, women's devotions are discreet, as they meet in small sanctuaries to partake in propitiatory meals (*sofra*) to make their wishes (*naḏr*) come true. Nevertheless, since the 1990s feminine habits in mourning ceremonies have changed: women have gotten used to striking their chests with the palms of their hands as the men do.

If, in social life, responsibilities and authority are men's prerogatives, women's participation is not negligible and emphasizes, once again, the uniqueness of the situation in Gilan. During the Constitutional Revolution (q.v.), women's societies (*anjoman*s) were formed in the province (Afary). After World War I, *Peyk-e saʿādat-e neswān* ("The harbinger of women's happiness"), an association of educated women, worked at improving women's conditions through various projects, as well as publishing a review once every two months (Faḵrāʾi, pp. 359-60; see PEYK-E SAʿĀDAT-E NESWĀN). More recently, the percentage, though still very small, of women candidates (2.69 percent) and elected women (1.22 percent) in the local elections of 1999 was higher than in other rural zones and higher than the country's average (2.1 percent candidates, 0.72 percent elected). In villages, co-operatives run by women (*šerkat-e taʿāwoni-ye zanān*), created in 1994, have been very active and prosperous. When the village population disagrees with State representatives, groups of fervent women march to support their claims. This strong social consciousness goes hand in hand with the high rate of female education (Hourcade et al., p. 74) and patterns of behavior not common elsewhere at the time but which later become the norm in the country as a whole at the demographic level: according to 1991 and 1996 data, the average age (23) of women getting married is higher than anywhere else in Persia (idem, p. 43; Ladier-Fouladi, p. 52), the age difference between newlyweds is minimal (less than 2.5 years; Ladier-Fouladi, p. 59), and fertility is particularly low compared to the rest of the country (a little more than two children per woman in 2003).

The unusual status of women in the district comes at the cost of a reputation for frivolousness (Rabino, p. 78). This reputation of frivolousness is fueled by a great number of jokes on Raštis (see GILAN xv. Popular and literary perceptions of Identity) that are widespread in Persian society. Such mischievous stories stigmatize, in a disproportionate and fantastical manner, the unique dynamics of male-female relations in the Caspian region of Iran (Bromberger, 1986).

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