



Woman in Culture and Arts

The Role of Rulers, Intellectuals, and Scholars in Women's Political Activism, from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution

Shahin Zarpeyma¹ 

1. Corresponding Author, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: shahin.zarpeyma@ut.ac.ir

Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received: 31 March 2026 Received in revised form: 15 May 2026 Accepted: :14 August 2026 Published online: 2 October 2026 Keywords: <i>Constitutional Revolution, Islamic Revolution, Political Activism, Women.</i>	Introduction The objective of this article is to examine the paradoxical increase in women's political agency during the Islamic Revolution in comparison to the Constitutional Revolution. It employs a historical and comparative approach to analyze pertinent documents and historical-social contexts in order to comprehend and describe the political agency of Muslim women during the Islamic Revolution, as well as to elucidate the factors and reasons that underlie this transition from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution. The study concentrates on three groups: the ruling class, intellectuals, and religious scholars—the very groups that played a critical role in confronting modernity and its intellectual and cultural currents—in order to elucidate the reasons and methods by which women's political agency increased (Sadeghi, 2011: 82–84). Therefore, the article's primary inquiry is: What has been the impact and function of the groups of rulers, intellectuals, and religious scholars on the political agency of women from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution of Iran? This article's uniqueness in comparison to previous research is evident in numerous ways. Initially, it emphasizes the historical trajectory that encompasses the two revolutions, a feature that was uncommonly observed in previous research (Mahoney, 2004: 1–2). Secondly, it emphasizes the role of the three primary groups and classes—rulers, intellectuals, and religious scholars—in the development and expansion of women's political agency, an aspect that has not been the subject of prior research (with the exception of a few works that have merely emphasized structural and political dimensions). Third, it employs a sociological-comparative approach to examine the two revolutions and the socio-political orders that resulted from them. Methodology The current research is a fundamental piece of work that employs a theoretical and analytical approach. In accordance with the research topic and problem, the historical-comparative method is implemented. In this analytical approach, research is conducted through systematic comparisons and the analysis of temporal processes in order to understand events. This approach is actually a component of historical sociology; consequently, it is crucial to consider temporality. Additionally, the data for this article were collected through library and documentary methods. Results To answer research fundamental question, the role of the rulers must first be addressed: after Mozaffar ad-Din Shah and the Constitutional Revolution, critiques of the ruling system and internal problems began to be voiced more openly, and women were able to participate more actively and with greater strength than before. These activities persisted until 1935. Reza Shah embarked on reforms in Iran in order to modernize the country following his visit to Turkey and his subsequent observations of the conditions of women during the Pahlavi era. He established the Ladies' Center upon his return, with his daughter, Shams Pahlavi, serving as honorary president. Women also began to work in government institutions, and the minimum age for marriage for girls was established at fifteen. Thus, in line with building a modern state, matching other states across the globe, and casting off the stigma of backwardness, fundamental changes in the status of women were brought about by the ruling class during the Reza Shah period. The same course of action was pursued during the second Pahlavi period. The situation is somewhat distinct with respect to intellectuals. Some of the most prominent intellectual figures of the era, in an effort to conform Iran to the standards of Europe, addressed the issue of women's status. Each individual, of course, approached the

matter from a specific perspective. It appears that intellectuals were able to further articulate their secular ideas and anti-authoritarian critiques after the Constitutional Revolution, and they progressively expanded their associations and organizations. During the second Pahlavi period, nativist ideas emerged and endured. This meant that intellectuals of the era venerated the accomplishments of the modern industrial world but believed that their uncritical acceptance was incorrect. At the same time, they considered the religious and cultural traditions of the past in need of change. In the Islamic Revolution, as in the Constitutional Revolution, intellectuals continued to raise awareness and criticize the deplorable condition of Iranian women. However, the most significant characteristic and point of difference of this period was the emphasis on a "return to the self." The religious scholars who were influential in the formation of the Islamic Revolution underwent significant changes in their thought, as a result of the events that occurred both within and outside the country. At least during the revolution, these modifications, in conjunction with the ideologies of the ruling and intellectual classes, significantly expanded the social and political spheres of women's agency.

Conclusion

The expansion of fields of political agency for women was influenced by a variety of factors, including the dismantling of the harem and the decline of polygamy among the wealthy during the reign of Mozaffar ad-Din Shah, the interactions of harem women with Europeans, and their increased contact with non-mahram men. Additionally, the transformations within the Naserid harem and the increasing role of women in political affairs were all factors that contributed to this expansion. However, the upper classes' deliberate expansion of women's political agency on the eve of the Islamic Revolution was a conscious process, driven by the governing class's will. During the Second Pahlavi era, the ruling class's objectives were in alignment with the expansion of women's political agency. Consequently, women were more prevalent in most social and political spheres during this period. In contrast to previous eras, such as the Qajar period and the Pahlavi era, during which intellectuals played a highly dependent, passive, and Westernized role, influential intellectuals, in line with the return-to-roots movement occurring elsewhere in the world, sought to equip their innovative thought with indigenous, cultural, and religious foundations on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. The allure of women was facilitated by this very fact. Therefore, the increased influence of intellectuals of the Islamic Revolution period on women and the expansion of their domains of agency were the result of the proper fulfillment of the intellectual role by intellectuals, as well as their attention to traditional and indigenous beliefs. However, the Islamic Revolution resulted in a fundamental shift in the ulama's ideas and beliefs, which shifted toward adaptation to the modern world and its elements, in addition to the repetition of their effective function on a "practical level." These changes were influenced by modern egalitarian and feminist notions, but they were also shaped by the religious rethinking of Middle Eastern thinkers, particularly Egyptian thinkers. In contrast to the Constitutional Revolution, the expansion of the field of women's political agency was facilitated by the following: the ulama's stable position among the people and the people's obedience to them; a shift in the ulama's intellectual stances regarding women's social and political presence in society; and the alignment of their ideological foundations with modern principles.

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