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Women's Employment in the Legislative Assemblies of the Reza Shah Era: Opportunities and Constraints

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ABSTRACT

This study examines women's employment during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi and its reflection in the proceedings of the National Consultative Assembly. The aim of the research is to analyze the opportunities and limitations of women's participation in occupational and educational domains, as well as the impact of state policies and social structure on their roles. The research method is based on the analysis of historical documents, the official transcripts of parliamentary debates from the First to the Twelfth National Consultative Assemblies, and authoritative scholarly sources. The findings indicate that with the expansion of girls' schools, the establishment of the university, and the modernization of the administrative system, women were able to engage in education, healthcare, medicine, social services, and certain new professions such as the police and the military; however, legal restrictions and traditional attitudes constrained their economic independence. The parliamentary proceedings show that the issue of women's employment was not addressed directly until the Twelfth Assembly, and legislators primarily focused on girls' education and cultural reforms. Reza Shah's nationalist policy was conservative in nature and largely confined to socially acceptable occupations for educated women. In contrast, social pressures and the heavy labor performed by women from lower urban and rural classes prevented them from fully benefiting from employment opportunities. Overall, the findings demonstrate that women's employment in this period was the product of simultaneous social and cultural modernization and legal and social constraints, and that women's achievements were most evident in the fields of education, medicine, and social services. This research emphasizes the necessity of an integrated examination of policy, education, and culture in understanding women's social and economic status.

Keywords: women's employment; Reza Shah; girls' education; health and healthcare; National Consultative Assembly.

Introduction

With the rise in women's awareness of and preparedness for their social rights, their participation in cultural and artistic activities gradually increased. In the late Qajar period, women emerged who, for the first time, became formally active in the artistic sphere through new professional roles. Especially during the transitional years from the Qajar to the Pahlavi dynasty, significant cultural transformations occurred, creating a limited yet meaningful space for women's presence in society and for the public presentation of their artistic works. Many of the women who gained prominence in culture and the arts during the reign of Reza Shah had been born in the late Qajar period or had begun their artistic activities during that era. Consequently, on the eve of the political transition from Qajar



to Pahlavi rule, and in light of the relatively open environment created for women's social participation, a flourishing of outstanding female artistic talent in diverse fields can be observed.

Women's employment constitutes one of the most significant social and historical issues in Iran, which from the Constitutional Revolution through the Pahlavi period consistently attracted the attention of both policymakers and society. Although women were for decades barred from direct participation in the National Consultative Assembly, discussions concerning their labor and economic activity were reflected in parliamentary debates, government reports, and the press. An examination of these discussions reveals that representatives' concerns regarding women's employment were not limited to economic and educational needs but were also shaped by cultural and moral considerations.

This study, relying on the official transcripts of the National Consultative Assembly, seeks to present a documented and analytical account of attitudes, disagreements, and parliamentary discourses concerning women's employment. Analysis of these debates enables a clearer understanding of the historical process through which women's presence in educational, health, and economic spheres was gradually accepted, and of the impact of social modernization policies on this process.

Research Background

The issue of women's employment in Iran during the Reza Shah era has been examined from various perspectives; however, most studies have focused on state policies, educational transformations, and cultural change. Some works have sporadically addressed women's employment during this period but have not examined employment-related issues within the debates of the National Consultative Assembly. Among these works, the book *Women's Employment during the Reza Shah Era* by Marzieh Hosseini is regarded as the most prominent independent study in this field. Drawing upon administrative documents, ministerial reports, and data published in the press, the author analyzes the status of female labor across different sectors and evaluates the role of state educational and health policies in expanding women's occupational participation. Although this work provides a relatively comprehensive depiction of women's employment between 1925 and 1941, it does not systematically analyze parliamentary debates or examine representatives' positions regarding women's employment. Thus, despite its scholarly value, the study does not address the legislative dimension or the reflection of parliamentary viewpoints on women's employment.

Among academic theses, the dissertation entitled *An Examination and Evaluation of the Role of Culture in Women's Employment during the Pahlavi Period* by Ensieh Karimi holds particular significance. Focusing on the press of the First Pahlavi era, this research analyzes the role of cultural and social discourse in shaping attitudes toward women's employment. Despite its importance, the study centers on media representations and does not examine parliamentary discussions or the perspectives of representatives as an official decision-making and legislative institution.

Research Method

This study employs a historical-analytical approach. Data were collected through library research, with the principal sources being the official transcripts of the National Consultative Assembly during the Reza Shah period. In the historical component, debates and developments related to women's employment are reconstructed within

their temporal context. In the analytical component, parliamentary discussions are categorized according to themes such as employment opportunities, legal constraints, and representatives' attitudes toward women's work.

Women's Employment in Iran's Social System

A review of Iran's social history demonstrates that women's economic participation predates the formation of the modern nation-state and is rooted in agricultural, pastoral, and handicraft subsistence systems. In nomadic and rural communities, especially during the Qajar era, women played a decisive role in production, maintenance, and reproduction of labor power—a role deeply intertwined with the gendered division of labor within tribal and rural structures. Ethnographic sources and travel accounts indicate that activities such as spinning, weaving, food processing, livestock care, and participation in agricultural production were integral components of both household and community economies (1). This participation was often unpaid and framed as extended domestic labor, yet it held fundamental economic value in sustaining Iran's traditional livelihood systems.

In urban settings, women's economic activities evolved differently as a result of structural change, market expansion, and the differentiation of public and private spaces. Although social and cultural restrictions limited women's presence in public life, they nonetheless played an important role in urban economies through home-based handicrafts, sewing, service activities such as midwifery and wet-nursing, and certain commercial occupations. Qajar-era sources and European travelogues document that women tailors, embroiderers, and producers of household goods constituted a significant segment of the consumer market (1). In addition, property ownership and shop management by some middle- and upper-class women, along with their participation in emerging investments such as banking, reflected a gradual increase in economic awareness and entry into more formal economic spheres during the Qajar period.

Collectively, this evidence demonstrates that although women's occupational structures in Qajar Iran were constrained by patriarchal frameworks, they functioned as a concealed yet powerful foundation for the continuity of the traditional economy and the expansion of new economic relations. In the early years of the Constitutional period, women's social participation gradually increased. During the Fifth Assembly, as in previous periods, education—especially girls' education—continued to expand despite political turbulence, as reflected in the growth of schools, the enactment of educational laws, and sustained state support for public instruction (2). The expansion of girls' schools from the 1910s and the growing needs in education and healthcare provided the groundwork for the emergence of parliamentary debates on women's employment.

Women's Employment during the Reza Shah Era

With the spread of modernist thought, women were not excluded from these transformations. Girls' schools expanded and increasing numbers of girls pursued formal education (2). With the establishment of the university, women were able to continue their studies at higher levels and become better prepared for labor market participation. Accordingly, in 1936, the law establishing preparatory teacher-training colleges for girls was enacted (2).

Technological expansion, state growth, and administrative modernization opened new occupational arenas for women beyond the household, including employment in factories and government offices. Consequently, women became active in education, healthcare, medicine, and agricultural assistance to rural populations. A particularly noteworthy development was the role of the Rural Development and Promotion Corps, which was tasked with

teaching modern household management to rural women and providing social welfare and community support services (3).

Although the state confronted growing women's demands before and after 1931, and literacy among women expanded alongside new identity-forming resources, no decisive political commitment to women's suffrage or full equality in employment opportunities emerged. Nevertheless, modernization in health, education, and bureaucratic institutions enabled women to enter new social and political arenas. These transformations generated novel employment opportunities, allowing women to choose professions such as nursing, teaching, hairdressing, acting, and singing, while also challenging the entrenched gender binary of housewife versus male breadwinner and reshaping perceptions of gender roles. As a result, women increasingly participated as social and professional actors beyond traditional domestic roles (4).

During Reza Shah's reign, the state and certain progressive forces sought to familiarize women with education and their social rights, yet prevailing social structures were not fully aligned with these objectives. While the regime's cultural policies promoted modernization, Iran's socio-economic conditions differed markedly from those that had enabled European women's emancipation. The newspaper *Ettela'at* cautioned Iranian women against imitating European women's behaviors and against uncritically accepting domestic media portrayals of Western women's progress and freedom. According to its writers, Western societies had first secured material well-being for men before advancing women's education and emancipation, whereas Iranian men were still compelled to labor long hours. If women also worked outside the home and neglected domestic responsibilities, family life would be disrupted. Women's freedom, the newspaper argued, did not mean spending long hours in cinemas; preventing a woman from working did not negate her freedom, but denying her education did (5).

At the same time, regardless of elite debates over whether women should work, rural, tribal, and working-class urban women were compelled to labor to sustain their households. The reform-minded merchant Sadeq Borujerdi criticized men who labeled women as weak while burdening them with oppressive labor conditions, emphasizing that working women—tribal, rural, and urban—bore disproportionate hardship (6). Thus, women's freedom in Iran during the 1930s was more closely associated with access to education and economic participation, while social pressures and heavy labor on working-class and rural women continued to impede its full realization.

Women's Employment in the Debates of the National Consultative Assembly during the Reza Shah Era

From the First through the Twelfth National Consultative Assemblies, the issue of women's employment was in practice excluded from the legislative agenda, and no formal or direct discussion of women's labor rights or economic participation appears in the official parliamentary transcripts of these periods. In the First through Fifth Assemblies, women neither possessed the right to vote nor the ability to be present in parliament; consequently, issues such as employment, the right to work, job security, or equal opportunity were fundamentally absent from debate. The primary priorities of legislators during these sessions were the consolidation of constitutionalism, the drafting of fundamental laws, the organization of administrative and financial affairs, and the management of political and security crises. Within this context, matters relating to women appeared only sporadically and indirectly, mainly in discussions of girls' education, women's familial roles, or socio-cultural concerns, all framed within a traditional outlook that confined women's responsibilities to the household and family.

It should be noted that in both the Fourth and Fifth Assemblies the subject of employment was discussed, but not as women's employment; rather, it emerged in connection with the establishment of industrial centers,

vocational schools, the organization of male employment, and administrative or legal issues related to guardianship and civil registration.

For example, in the Fourth Assembly, the Minister of Education proposed the establishment of technical schools for girls and boys with the aim of expanding domestic industries and creating employment for youth; however, this initiative was grounded in general employment policy and did not address the formulation of specific regulations for women's employment (5). In the Fifth Assembly, employment appeared in other forms, such as the emphasis by Agha Sheikh Mohammad Tehrani on the non-employment of women under guardianship. Although these discussions related to women's affairs, they did not concern women's employment as such and were largely administrative and legal in nature (6). Thus, in both the Fourth and Fifth Assemblies, despite the presence of employment on the agenda, no direct discussion of women's employment occurred.

In the Sixth through Twelfth Assemblies, despite the expansion of social and cultural reforms under Reza Shah—including the development of girls' education, changes in dress, and ultimately the unveiling decree of 1936—women's employment still did not enter the sphere of formal parliamentary debate. The dominant perspective among representatives during this period emphasized the necessity of women's moral and cultural education and viewed women primarily as citizens in need of social and cultural guidance. Although, at the level of state executive policy, limited measures such as the employment of women in education, midwifery, and nursing were undertaken, these developments proceeded without explicit parliamentary debate or legislative support. Consequently, in none of the First through Twelfth Assemblies was women's employment articulated as a legal, economic, or social issue; discussions related to women remained largely confined to educational and cultural domains.

Reza Shah's nationalist program concerning women's rights was markedly conservative. In the Civil Code of 1934—strongly influenced by Islamic law—Article 1117 granted husbands the authority to prevent their wives from engaging in any profession or occupation deemed contrary to family interests or personal dignity. Following the reading of this article in parliament by Abdolhossein Orangi (Sheikh-ol-Molk), the representative of Fuman, who had also participated in the Eastern Women's Congress, he remarked: "This Article 1117 remains a matter of concern." He elaborated: "The husband may prevent his wife from any profession or occupation that is contrary to the interests of the family or the dignity of himself or the wife. Now, who determines whether this profession is contrary to your interest or mine—does the husband alone determine this? Consider this: a husband tells his wife not to teach at school, claiming it violates his dignity. Does he have the right? I do not oppose this, but I wish for clarification: if the husband himself is the sole determinant, so that whatever he considers contrary to his interest or that of his household he may prohibit, then indeed this article is correct" (7).

The Minister of Justice, Ahmad Matin-Daftari, provided an equivocal response: "The law exists so that, in cases of dispute, judgments may be issued on the basis of its provisions, and the authorities responsible for resolving personal disputes may rely upon it. Certain matters are not subject to dispute, for the leadership of the family rests with the man, and the determination of interests ultimately lies with the state. If a man seeks to prevent his wife from any activity—even one of great personal satisfaction—by ordering her to refrain from all work, the wife is not obliged to submit; she may demonstrate that the activity is neither contrary to her interests nor to the dignity and welfare of the family" (7).

It should be noted that Reza Shah, particularly after his visit to Turkey and his meeting with Atatürk, adopted a more favorable stance toward women's employment and encouraged their participation in economic activities alongside men. However, the occupations envisioned for women were largely limited to teaching, nursing, typing,

and similar fields, and women, like men, were unable to attain senior professional positions. With the exception of a small number of women such as Fatemeh Sayyah—who demonstrated exceptional competence and, under state supervision, attained positions such as university professorship—most women remained confined to ordinary occupations. Overall, women's employment and participation in the economy remained under state control, and women were unable to achieve independence from male authority. During the Reza Shah era, women's employment, although encouraged by the state, remained constrained by legal limitations and male dominance, leaving women's economic independence severely restricted (4).

Women's Employment in Education

The strongest parliamentary support concerned girls' teaching as a profession. In several sessions, it was explicitly stated that educating girls "is not possible without female teachers," and that the shortage of women personnel hindered the expansion of schools. In one session of the Eighth Assembly, a representative explicitly declared that the absence of female teachers "deprives girls of education" (8) and emphasized the necessity of state support for training female teachers. In subsequent terms as well, reports from the Ministry of Education indicated that as girls' schools increased, the need for female teachers rose rapidly.

The Hiring of Madame André Hess to Teach at the Dār al-Mo'allemāt

In the session reviewing various commission approvals regarding the employment of André Hess for the teachers and administrators of the Dār al-Mo'allemāt, commission members examined the government bills numbered 4139 and 4239 on this matter. Members of the Foreign Affairs and Education commissions announced their support for renewing André Hess's contract for the Dār al-Mo'allemāt. In addition, a member of the Education Commission emphasized the importance of education and upbringing in schools and the need for appropriate supervision of students, proposing measures to improve these areas. Finally, the Minister of Education underscored that such measures were highly significant for the development and reform of the Persian language and local vocabularies. Ultimately, the single-article bill on renewing the employment of French teachers and administrators for the Dār al-Mo'allemāt for two years was approved by the representatives. This decision, backed by the majority, was expected to facilitate the necessary changes in this domain. The law enabled the government to extend the employment contracts of the teachers and administrators of the Dār al-Mo'allemāt for up to two years, provided the required conditions were met (8).

An examination of these debates shows that the expansion of girls' education in Iran faced a severe shortage of female human resources, and that legislative support for hiring and training female teachers was not only a response to the urgent needs of girls' schools, but also reflected attention to the importance of women's education and its perceived role in linguistic reform, cultural change, and the social development of society.

Women's Employment in the Health Sector

Representatives repeatedly emphasized that women's presence was necessary in medical affairs, especially in midwifery and nursing. In one session of the Ninth Assembly, it was stated that "many women, due to family sensitivities, are unwilling to consult a male physician", and that this issue threatened public health. In some cases, representatives not only insisted on employing women but also considered an increase in the budget for training midwives and nurses essential.

Employing a Female Physician Specialized in Gynecology

With the advancement and implementation of state reform policies in social sectors and public services, families from educated and affluent strata showed greater interest in receiving treatment and childbirth services in hospitals. With the presence of figures such as Dr. Amir A'lam, the Dār al-Mo'allemāt was established with emphasis on specialized instruction for girls, and the expertise of medical professionals was utilized in hospitals in order to improve the mortality situation among children and women in childbirth to an acceptable level. Initially, Madame Faraskina was employed as an instructor for the school's trainees; however, the number of sick and pregnant women who visited the hospital remained very low, to the extent that sometimes over a period of 15 to 20 days not a single delivery occurred at this center, except under abnormal or exceptional circumstances. Subsequently, Dr. Dermsen, Dr. Penn, and Dr. Sarkisian were employed in hospitals, and through teaching medical skills to the trainees of the Dār al-Mo'allemāt, they contributed to improved and more orderly childbirth conditions (9).

Until 1928, the midwifery school lacked a dedicated, codified set of bylaws. Its program was three years in length, and admission required completion of six years of primary education and knowledge of French. This meant that most applicants for midwifery classes were trainees or graduates of the Dār al-Mo'allemāt. In 1928, during Reza Shah's rule, regulations for medicine, pharmacy, and midwifery were established. Admission to the midwifery school then required completion of the first three years of secondary education. In 1931, the school's specific charter and bylaws were approved by parliament, and the entry requirement became possession of a girls' secondary school certificate. A defined five-year curriculum was also set for midwifery training, and Dr. 'Alam al-Molk Farahmandi was appointed as the head of the midwifery school.

These developments in employing and training women in the health sector—particularly in midwifery and nursing—not only improved the quality of medical services and reduced maternal and neonatal mortality, but also highlighted women's role in rebuilding and developing the public health system and consolidated their presence as a necessary condition for women's equal access to medical care.

Women's Employment in Factories and Industry

In general, although state attention to the education of women and girls represented progress, women who sought higher education did not enjoy opportunities equal to men for entry into important government positions. As a result, many women entered intermediate occupations such as nursing, teaching, and factory labor. Nevertheless, women working in factories, despite performing work comparable to that of men, received lower wages.

The newspaper *Ettela'at* referred to women's participation in economic affairs and factory work as a development with multiple social consequences. Among these, it cited an increase in male unemployment. Such participation, it argued, might also lead women to fall behind in their social responsibilities, such as childrearing and managing household affairs (9). It further suggested that entrusting children to nurses could affect family life (10). In addition, it stressed the need for heightened sensitivity regarding women's work environments: husbands should be informed of their wives' working conditions and know their associates; therefore, appropriate measures were required to guarantee women's rights in the workplace and maintain balance between personal and professional life (7).

Seyyed Ebrahim Zia Qashqai (Zia al-Va'ezin), the representative of Abadeh, stated regarding women's work in factories that, for ensuring the fundamental prosperity and progress of the Iranian nation, concerned individuals should introduce serious ideas and concerns into public debate. He argued that two main pillars were necessary to

achieve this objective: one emphasizing compulsory education and another emphasizing economic development. Studies and investigations, he noted, show that many people regard these two pillars as their principal priorities, although opinions differ as to which is more important. He invited newspapers and media outlets to mobilize public attention toward compulsory education and toward securing bread and employment for the people. He emphasized the establishment of factories and the advancement of industry, and, referring to a successful example of a factory in Isfahan, encouraged the use of wealth and assets to launch domestic economic enterprises and provide jobs for the population (10).

At the end of the session, the Speaker of Parliament referred to the correction of bills from the previous term and the importance of these corrections for encouraging people to establish factories and create economic opportunities. He also noted that, for success in these matters, the state needed to create facilities and support factories. Nevertheless, the necessary measures for approving required bills had not yet been taken, indicating delays and difficulties in the parliamentary process of passing laws and bills (10).

Women's participation in industry and factories not only reflects a dimension of the country's economic and industrial development, but also reveals the necessity of creating supportive conditions and ensuring balance between women's family life and professional roles.

Although multiple measures were undertaken during the Reza Shah era to create employment opportunities for women, no codified and explicit laws were enacted in this regard, and the parliament largely addressed the recruitment and employment of men. In practice, Reza Shah did not intend to regulate women's employment through legislative initiatives, and even Article 1117 of the Civil Code introduced constraints on women's employment. Nevertheless, women's social circumstances gradually led them into the labor market, and the use of low-cost labor—especially in spinning and weaving—was among the reasons for employing women. Social transformations brought women into the sphere of economic labor, yet no codified protective laws were adopted to guarantee their rights.

For this reason, women largely turned to occupations that society deemed acceptable, which did not encompass all Iranian women. Occupations such as teaching, nursing, and typing were limited to a relatively small group of women who possessed education, skills, and appropriate social standing, and whose public presence was culturally and socially acceptable. The absence of clear protective legislation, along with the state's inattention to women's employment, meant that many intellectuals were unable to encourage women's economic participation through legal channels. Society, moreover, was still unprepared to accept women's work outside the home, and in the view of many men, women's employment was not considered appropriate.

The experience of the unveiling policy further demonstrated that without social preparation, legal changes in women's rights are likely to fail, as this policy was rapidly revoked after Reza Shah's fall. Thus, during this period, women's work faced numerous legal and social barriers. Women from lower urban and rural classes mainly turned to traditional occupations such as carpet weaving, midwifery, and brokerage, which lacked strong social prestige. By contrast, newer occupations such as teaching and nursing—associated with educated women from higher urban strata—also encountered resistance and negative attitudes. The result was the marginalization of many educated and intellectual women and their limited integration into social and economic spheres (4).

Conclusion

An examination of women's employment during the Reza Shah era indicates that the social and political transformations of this period, despite the state's efforts toward modernization and reform, simultaneously created both opportunities and constraints for women. The expansion of girls' schools and the establishment of the university laid the groundwork for women's education and their entry into the labor market. Alongside education, the growth of state institutions and the adoption of new technologies enabled women to participate in fields such as education, healthcare, social services, and agriculture. Moreover, women's presence in emerging occupations such as teaching, nursing, and factory work reflected gradual changes in gender roles and a limited acceptance of women's participation in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, a review of the official transcripts of the National Consultative Assembly from the First through the Twelfth terms reveals that women's employment was rarely and only indirectly addressed, and that formal legislation in this area remained extremely limited. Civil laws, including Articles 1117 and 1177, placed authority over women's economic and occupational activities in the hands of men, thereby restricting women's economic independence. Even positive government measures—such as employing women in education and healthcare or creating new employment opportunities—were implemented under strict state supervision and were confined to specific occupations and social groups. In addition to legal restrictions, cultural and social barriers—particularly conservative attitudes toward women's roles, the heavy labor burdens borne by urban and rural women, and the distinct socio-historical conditions of Iran compared with Western societies—prevented the full realization of women's freedom and economic participation. As a result, women's freedom in the 1930s was largely limited to access to education and restricted entry into certain professions, rather than the achievement of genuine economic independence and equal participation across all social domains.

Overall, the Reza Shah period represents a transitional stage in the trajectory of women's participation: a phase that, while creating limited and controlled opportunities for education and employment, also demonstrated that without extensive legal, cultural, and social change, the realization of gender equality and women's full and active participation in society would continue to face serious constraints. This analysis underscores the importance of examining the historical context of women's employment and highlights the necessity of coordination among executive policies, supportive legislation, and cultural transformation in enhancing women's social and economic roles.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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