

Grey literature and the role of women pioneers in Qajar era (1910-1920)

Somayeh Sadat Hashemi, Roya Aminalroaya, and Nooshin Hakhamaneshi,
National Library and Archives of Iran

Abstract

Iranian society in the Qajar era, despite having an ancient civilization and culture, had a medieval society with national and religious prejudices. During this era, due to the society's view of women and the lack of importance to their prosperity, their education was not considered. After constitutional revolution, newspapers and magazines became more active and their number increased day by day. In this time, newspapers became very popular among the people, and their news covered not only political and social subjects, but also the news of women of other nations in the form of apparent values, duties and status in the family. This news and information and intellectual progress led women to cooperate with the press of that time; because they considered it is the perfect tool to express their thoughts with others and connecting abroad. In this regard, women started publishing magazines in order to awaken and increase the awareness of women in the society in which the first magazine was published by women was "Danesh".

In this research, the articles of women's journals, that were published during 1910-1920, studied in order to obtain an understanding of the information needs of women in that period. This study surveys the topics and the number of articles written or translated by women. The research population consisted of 116 issues from six titles of the women journals and a total of 569 articles were reviewed.

A review of these journals shows that women initially tried to cover subjects such as childbearing, marriage, health, etc. in their own media. The purpose of these journals was to take women out of the space created by their dominant culture or society, to bring them into the community, and to make them aware of the right to equality with men, while preserving their dignity as mothers and females. These media were a window to address the most basic information needs of women, such as health and psychological topics. It was especially important to inform women about the health and protection of children at a time when infectious diseases such as smallpox were pandemic.

Keywords: Iranian women, Qajar era, Grey literature, Women Journals

Qajar dynasty

The reign of the Qajar dynasty in Iran (1796 – 1925) is recognized as a period of dynamic political, economic, and cultural transformations. Founded in the late 1700s, the Qajars ruled for the next century and a half. The last decades of the dynasty's rule were also marked by Iran's first twentieth-century revolution, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which resulted in the formation of an elected parliament and the drafting of a national constitution, both of which still comprise the backbone of Iran's government¹.

Social status of women during the Qajar

"Behind the closed doors at home, prohibited from everything in life, education, training and social life, women are regarded as mindless, like infants; they are confined to the burdens of household work and childbearing and are considered the slaves and servants of their husbands," wrote Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (1852–1920), an outspoken and prominent Qajar woman. Similarly, in describing women's absence in public, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, a noted novelist commented: "No women can be seen in this country of men, but strangely, half of the walking population in the streets is wrapped in black bags from head to the toe without even an opening to breathe."

Yet, these invisible women were capable of action, as in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911 when many women gathered in the streets of Tehran took off their veils and shouted: “Long live freedom. . . . We must . . . live the way we want!”

Women were primarily confined to the household and reproduction. Their three-piece dress consisting of the chador (a long veil that covered them from head to toe), the rubandeh (a short veil that masked the face), and the chaqchur (very loose trousers) that signified their separate world; it assured them space and identity as *zai’feh*, or the weak sex and status as *moti’eh*, or those obedient to men’s will.

Women spent most of their lives in the private world of the family. Indeed, a common name for a wife was *manzel* (the home). Rich or poor, women were confined to, and devoted their entire lives to the family.

Focusing on women’s journals, this historical research discusses women’s experiences in the family and their work, religion, and politics at the turn of the twentieth-century².

In sum, despite variations in different classes, women were primarily confined to the private and secluded world of the family. Patriarchal power also varied by class. The higher women were on the social scale, the more secluded and less mobile they were. By contrast, less-privileged women were more mobile and less secluded. Class and patriarchy acted together to shape women’s lives; together, they affected women’s work both within and outside the family.

Depending on the kinds of work they performed, working Iranian women often combined child rearing with their tasks in the larger economy. Not all women worked outside the family. Those who did, they struggled against poverty, whether single or married, or as child laborers. While these women encountered male domination both in the household and in the marketplace, the economically secure women stayed home and experienced patriarchy more directly there. Gender subordination varied by class insofar as women’s work was concerned. Women’s work was diverse. Many poor women worked as carpet weavers, vendors, domestic laborers, and seamstresses³.

The beginning of women's activity as a journalist and the process of content production for women in different classes of society

With the Constitutional Revolution and the beginning of the Enlightenment, we see that the publication of journals by women for women is not far from the beginning of the publication of newspapers (in general) in Iran.

The director and editor in chief of women's periodicals were mostly women, and each of them had significant social activities (women's movement activist, writer, doctor, etc.) and was fluent in one of the foreign languages.

The women’s journal of this era was: “*Danesh*”, “*Shokoufeh*”, “*Zaban-e Zanan*”, “*Name-ye Banovan*”, “*Jahan-e Zanan*” and “*A’alam-e Nesvan*”⁴.

Danesh Journal

Danesh was the first women's magazine; the first issue was published in 1910, four years after the Constitutional Revolution. The director was *Dr. Kahal*. The contents of this magazine were in moral subjects, housekeeping, childbearing, and marriage didn’t talk about the politics. Its goal was to educate women and girls and to teach morals to women. Although it was the first experience of women in journalism, it succeeded to a large extent in meeting the goals set out at the outset and took effective steps to introduce women to society⁵.

Shokoufeh Journal

The first issue of the *Shokoufeh* was published in 1913 under the management of *Maryam Amid*. Beautiful and instructive cartoons were printed in each issue of *Shokoofeh* and critically reviewed the superstitions and old customs of the society. Most of *Shokoofeh*'s articles were related to women's schools, their exams, and other matters related to women and girls. It also covered news and articles about women around the world⁶.

Zaban-e Zanan Newspaper

In 1919, *Sedigheh Dolatabadi* (director) published the *Zaban-e Zanan* newspaper in Isfahan. This is the first women's newspaper to have the word 'woman' (*Zanan*) in its title. During its publication, the newspaper advocated for freedom and the development of culture among women in the country⁷.

Jahan-e Zanan Journal

It was a special magazine on women's rights and education that *Fakhr Aafagh Parsa* started publishing as a director in Mashhad in 1920 and later continued to publish in Tehran. The content of this Magazine was more about European-style women's liberation and unveiling and equal rights⁸.

Name- ye Banovan Newspaper

Its editor in chief was *Shahnaz Azad*, whose first issue was published in 1920 in Tehran. The pro-unveiling newspaper also published articles written exclusively by women, as well as national and international news⁹.

A'alam-e Nesvan Journal

Its editor in chief was *Nawabeh Safavid*, and established in 1920 in Tehran. The articles were written by the American School graduates for Girls in the Presbyterian missionary compound in Tehran. The subject of the articles was extensive and included medical reports, housekeeping tricks, fashion in the West, literary works, and news from feminist movements around the world. The magazine also published articles denouncing the early marriage of girls, the lack of women's political rights in Iran, and the *hijab* (=veil)¹⁰.

Findings

A review of these journals shows that women initially tried to cover subjects such as childbearing, marriage, health, etc. in their own media. These media were a window to address the most basic information needs of women, such as health and psychological topics. It was especially important to inform women about the health and protection of children at a time when infectious diseases such as smallpox were pandemic. Later, the purpose of these journals changed to take women out of the space created by their dominant culture or society, to bring them into the community, and to make them aware of the right to equality with men, while preserving their dignity as mothers and females.

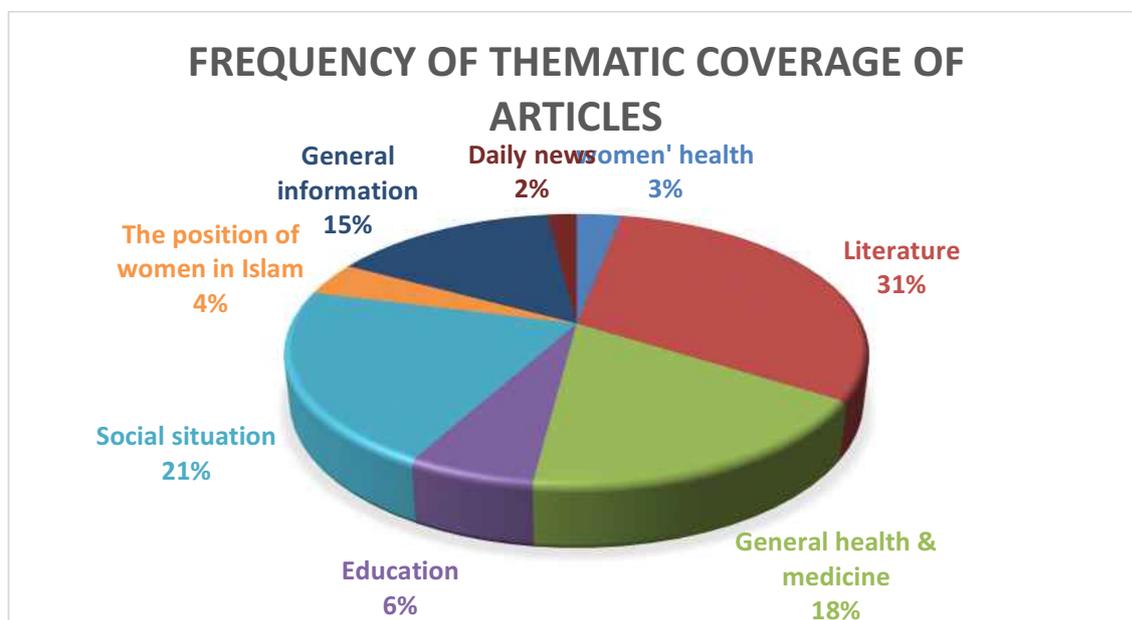


Chart1. Frequency of thematic coverage of articles

Out of 569 articles, the most thematic coverage is in the fields of literature with 31% and women’s life style and social situation with 21%. Also, the least covered topic is the daily news about political issues (2%). The publication of poems on the subject of women's status and dignity, as well as stories and myths in which women have played a role, are other points to consider in these articles.

Due to the awareness of women in the years since the publication of newspapers, these publications also gradually addressed issues such as women's rights and their role in society, which, of course, was not very pleasant to the society of that day and led to their closure. This is a reason for the small number of articles in the field of current issues and political news.

As Figure 2 shows, most articles are written by women (55.54%). The lowest number of articles was written by men (12.3%); Also, the highest number of translations with 8.26% was done by women and the lowest by 1.05% by men.

One of the reasons is the prejudice of some publications in publishing articles written by women. As some of them like *Zaban-e Zanan* stated in their editorial, they would not publish at all if they received an article from the gentlemen: “Only the letters and articles of women and girls are accepted. Men should not bother to write something that will not be accepted”.

The unfamiliarity of many women writers with a second language caused the number of translated articles to differ significantly from other articles. It should be noted that this is a positive point and encouraged women to write.

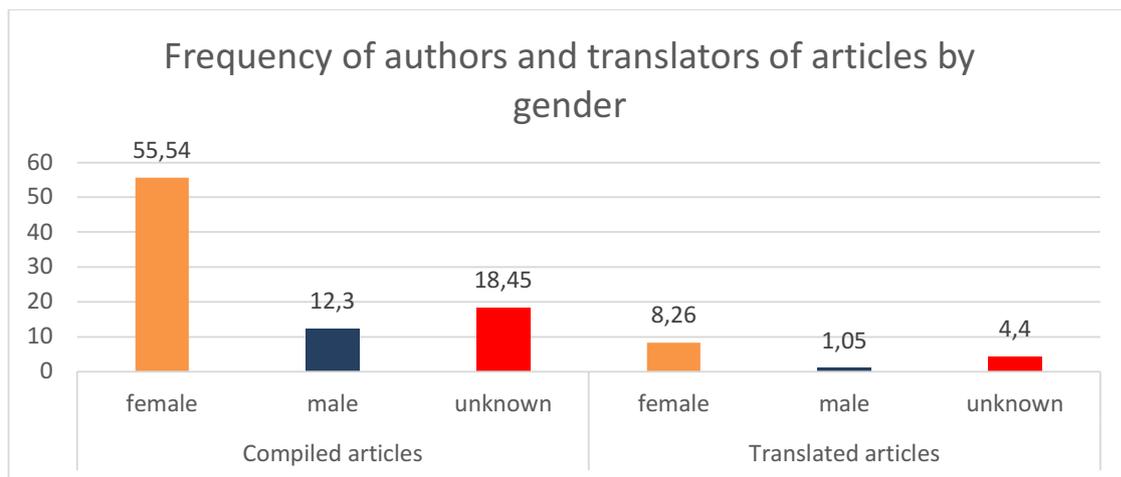


Chart2. Frequency of authors and translators of articles by gender

Although the publication of journals for women caused significant changes, public opinion still did not accept the presence of women in society. Therefore, many women published their articles and translations in journals under abbreviated or anonymous names, and the author of 162 articles (28.47%) is not known to have been a woman or a man.

Conclusion

The articles written in the specialized journals of women in the Qajar period were mostly about topics related to home, family and children, and the daily news (included the social and economic news). There are no political subjects in the initial issues of these articles. Perhaps the reason for this is the lack of connection with other countries and societies, which caused them to stay away from new information and news and promote superstition.

Gradually, as these publications found their place in the society, a number of them, such as *Zaban-e Zanan* and *A’alam –e Nesvan*, addressed topics related to women's political rights and current political issues.

In this regard, in order to achieve individuality, women had to achieve the following components: the right to choose and freedom to decide, accept responsibility for choice, rely on rationality with the tools of knowledge and science, desire for dynamism and

progress in life, attention to individual rights and social. Permission to publish articles for women shows the awakening of society and the need for change in life. The gradual launch of journals founded and run by knowledgeable and educated women is a revolution in social life and a change in women's attitudes.

As these journals show in subsequent years and the content of their articles, women were no longer indifferent to internal and external events at this stage as in the past. By studying newspapers, participating in association meetings, literacy, etc., they realized the difference between the conditions of their country and other societies and called for the improvement of their situation. Women also realized the differences between societies and called for an end to this discrimination.

References

- ¹ . Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran: A Digital Archive and Website. Retrieved in 2021, Sep. from https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/harvard_univerty_womens_worlds_in_qujar_iran_a_digital_archive_and_website.pdf
- ² . https://doi.org/10.1017/CCBOa9m78b0r5id11g5e1_0B3o80o.k00s3
- ³ . McElrone, Susynne M. (2005). Nineteenth-Century Qajar Women in the Public Sphere: An Alternative Historical and Historiographical Reading of the Roots of Iranian Women's Activism. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. V. 25, No. 2. pp. 297-317
- ⁴ . Babran, Sedigheh (2002). Women's special publications (in Persian: Nashriyat -e vije Zanan). Tehran: Roshangaran
- ⁵ . Danesh Journal (1910)
- ⁶ . Shokoufeh Journal (1913)
- ⁷ . Zaban-e Zanan Newspaper (1919)
- ⁸ . Jahan-e Zanan Journal (1920)
- ⁹ . Name- ye Banovan Newspaper (1920)
- ¹⁰ . A'alam-e Nesvan Journal (1920)