

**Gender Equality in Iranian History:  
From Pre-Islamic Times to the Present**

*Minoo Derayeh*

*Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2006. 242 pages.*

This ambitious undertaking, comprising 6 chapters, 16 tables, 4 appendixes, and a glossary, is the culmination of a doctoral program at McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies. A specialist in Islam, world religions, and gender studies, Minoo Derayeh is now an assistant professor at York University in Toronto.

*Gender Equality in Iranian History* seeks to uncover the social, political, and economic status of women across the vast expanse of Iranian history. In her "Foreword," Ratna Gosh (McGill University) applauds the author's contribution for showing that the "concept of Islamic feminism is founded on the idea of complementary rather than equal rights" and, equally importantly, for laying bare "the root of cultural patriarchy" (p. ii). The very idea of complementarity, as the book's chapters reveal, has not always been unproblematically present in Iran's encounter with Islam.

The "Introduction" outlines the questions motivating the study and presents an overview of existing studies pertaining to women and gender in Islam. In it, Derayeh also describes her methodological orientation: "I have incorporated a multitude of diverse tools of inquiry such as qualitative research, critical textual analysis, biographies, autobiographies, and interviews" (p. 17). After reviewing the current scholarship on the concept of feminism in the Islamic world and finding it wanting, either due to its reliance on Eurocentric concepts or over-generalizations, she defines her approach to feminism as "any quest aimed at achieving gender equality, whatever its form of expression, i.e., poetry, novels, scholarly works, demonstrations, party and group associations, militant participation, etc." (p. 20). This all-encompassing definition tempers the title's seeming anachronistic nature, but does not address some contemporary Iranian women's own objection to the use of the term *feminism*.

In chapter 1, "Women before Islam," Derayeh explores the status, education, and rights of women in pre-Islamic Iran. She sets this history against an overview of their social standing in pre-Islamic Arabia. Given the paucity of reliable documentary sources for ancient Iranian historiography and the need to be familiar with Middle Persian, Derayeh draws on a variety of material ranging from national epics to translations of Zoroastrian sacred texts, as well as Persian-language secondary sources about Iranian customs and traditions before the arrival of Islam.

In the following chapter, "Islam: Emancipation or Shallow Hope," she zeroes in on inheritance, family law, and slavery, concluding that in the early days of Islam there was an immediate improvement in the lot of women, but that the changes were primarily due to the early Muslim community's needs. At its inception, she argues, Islam could not afford to lose women as a contributing socioeconomic force.

The ensuing three chapters, "Iranian Women under Islam," "Modernity and Tradition," and "Voices Unveiled," are organized along historical periods and trace the changes affecting women's lives in Iran. Pointing to figures like the Babi poet Qurat Al-Ayn, who is reputed to have publicly unveiled in the nineteenth century, women's participation in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11, interviews conducted by Derayeh, and contemporary women's literary production, she demonstrates that women's own views on their rights frequently fell on deaf ears: "The different governments in power, whether liberal, authoritarian, or Islamic, passed and issued several important laws and regulations concerning 'women's issues.' Very often, however, they failed to consider women's own positions and demands concerning 'women's issues'" (p. 160).

The final chapter, “Iranian Women: Then and Now,” is an informative review of prominent women in post-revolutionary Iran who have mobilized against the Islamic government’s discriminatory practices. Mehrangiz Kar, a lawyer, human rights activist, and journalist, as well as Shirin Ebadi, the recipient of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, are two such figures. Despite setbacks suffered by women in certain sectors and professions, Derayeh finds that Iranian women have kept the patriarchal forces at bay. She ends her analysis by stating that “the continuing struggle of Iranian women to protect their rights and their social, legal, and political status, and their success in achieving access to various fields of education and employment, have made it almost impossible for the present government of Iran to impose upon women a more restrictive fundamentalist Islamic system” (p. 217). This conclusion points the way to more extensive explorations of the problematic concept of women’s agency in contemporary Iran and, more broadly, the Islamic world. Such unanswered questions are inherent to a study of this disciplinary and historical scope. It is very difficult to satisfy the requirements of the many scholarly disciplines invoked in this study, and no one author can be asked to tackle them all.

Derayeh’s work provides the groundwork for future studies and presents such useful research tools as the four appendixes: “Grounds for Divorce in the Family Protection Law of 1967 and 1975,” “Stipulated Conditions in the Marriage Certificate,” “The Islamic Republic’s Gender Based Discriminatory Laws,” and “Article 20 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic.”

By introducing readers unfamiliar with available Persian-language sources, the author paves the way for others to delve deeper into how women have been configured in Iranian cultural history.

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