

## **Voices from Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women**

*Mahnaz Kousha*

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*Voices from Iran* is authored by Mahnaz Kousha, an Iranian college professor who lectures on issues relating to women in the Middle East at Macalester College in Minnesota. The 10-chapter work provides a qualitative study, featuring 15 Iranian women, that addresses the position of women in Iran. Participants ranged in age from 38 to 55 and lived in the capital city of Tehran from 1995 to 1997. These women came from low- to high-income families, had educational backgrounds that range from high school diplomas to college/university degrees, and possessed employment experience in Iran.

Even though the work can be considered a valuable piece in that it serves as a medium through which the voices of Iranian women can be heard, it does not necessarily reflect the experiences of all women due to the limitation of the research itself (region, language, religion). In addition, some of Kousha's conclusions are far reaching and can be rendered debatable. For instance, the issue of why educated mothers still do not treat their daughters fairly and seem unable to help them *question* and *resist* their social status is not addressed. The author also fails to provide an in-depth analysis regarding the impact of family class and culture in shaping the subjectivities of their daughters. As well, the social and cultural impact of the Islamic revolution on women's rights in Iran is not discussed. Moreover, a closing summary or assessment is not made at the end of the work.

The book's first three chapters include an introduction, a methodology chapter, and an introduction to the research participants. The analysis of the data begins from chapters 4 and 5, where the different relationships between mothers and daughters are discussed. Some of the participants' experiences involve mothers who openly shared their problems and concerns with them such as the isolation and powerlessness that they have with their husbands or mothers-in-law. Others complained that their mothers discriminated against them while giving their brothers preferential treatment. Of interest is the fact that the author does not explore the underlying factors that may have contributed to this problematic behavior such as parental education, socioeconomic status, local culture, and religious issues.

In chapter 6, Kousha analyzes the relationship between fathers and daughters. The father is seen as the first man in his daughter's life, provid-

ing both economic and emotional support (p. 91). According to the author, fathers have a strong role in disciplining and regulating their daughter's activities. However, she argues that this patriarchal control became more flexible during Iran's social revolution. She contends that the father-daughter relationship is a model for the relationship between these women and their future husbands.

While some women reported that their fathers were overall caring and understanding toward them, others were rigid and restrictive, especially in relation to their career, education or choice of husband (p. 111). At the same time, however, most of the participants noted that their fathers were ignorant of their needs and interests and could not guide them when it came to choosing compatible life partners.

The plight of Iranian girls is greatly hindered not only by their parents' inability to communicate effectively, but also due to the fact that they are part of a society that does not allow young women to interact freely with young men. It is, therefore, understandable that in chapter 7, where the reasons for marriage are addressed, none of the participants claim to have been emotionally motivated. Instead, these women cite family pressure, the desire to have an independent life or to escape family oppression, and curiosity as the main reasons for choosing to get married.

In the following chapters, the author describes some of the primary reasons women gave for seeking employment, such as the desire for financial independence, the need to escape domestic responsibilities, and simply to have fun. However, some women reported having to resign from their jobs to take care of children and their elderly parents or in-laws. As a result, Kousha concludes that Iranian women tend to sacrifice themselves to ensure the comfort of others.

In addition, the participants were asked whether or not they were happy being women and, if given the opportunity, they would choose to be men. Some stated that they would be happy being women and living in Iran if human rights and gender equality were in place. In chapter 10, the participants compared their situations before and after the 1979 Iranian revolution. A few of them claimed that they had had the chance to participate in socio-cultural activities both before and after the revolution. However, after the revolution they had more of an opportunity to consider their own personal needs, desires, and values. Also, the opportunity to pursue a higher education and job opportunities were made more readily available to them.

After the revolution and the establishment of Islamic law as the law of the land, certain changes, such as wearing the hijab, were enforced in Iran.

Although, Qur'an 2:256 states that everyone is free to choose his/her own religion, women have had no choice but to adhere to the new theocratic government's rules. Beyond the superficial changes, inequality between men and women persist in every regard. No fundamental changes have been made regarding furthering the rights of women in divorce and child custody. Moreover, different rules for men and women regarding adultery and polygamy still exist.

Based upon Kousha's study, one can conclude that the issues relating to women in Iran over the past few decades are very inter-related and rather complex. Also, the fact that the sociopolitical issues in Iran have been in a constant state of change suggest that the author's work is a work-in-progress. The opinions and attitudes of the women interviewed may have also changed since then. Given this, it would be most interesting to conduct a similar interview with them to see where they are now and where they would like to be in the future.

The book's contribution is that it represents the voices of Iranian women speaking to their own experiences. However, the analysis could have been furthered by a deeper sociocultural and psychological examination of the multiple social, religious, and political factors shaping their lives. Still, this book can be recommended for students in sociology and women's studies who are interested in empirical research highlighting the lived experiences of Iranian women in contemporary Iran.

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