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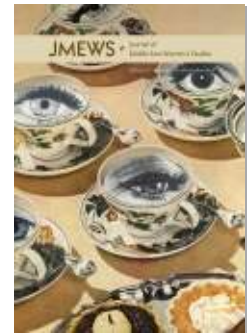
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*Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War* by Mateo  
Mohammad Farzaneh (review)

Maryam Zehtabi

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## REVIEW

### *Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War*

Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh

Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021

457 pages. ISBN 9780815637103

Reviewed by MARYAM ZEHTABI

Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh's book is a meticulous chronicle of the lives of Iranian women who contributed to the eight-year war between their country and Iraq. Overcoming prescribed gender roles and cultural taboos, many women flocked to the war zone to be part of what they believed a "holy defense." They volunteered, with mostly no financial compensation, to take up arms, nurse the wounded, gather intelligence, and work at mortuaries, laundry facilities, kitchens, and so on, yet their work and sacrifices have been either not recognized by the general public or trivialized by the very men they worked with. Considering the paucity of material regarding women's contributions in the war either by or about them, Farzaneh's book is a welcome intervention in a field that takes men's stories of heroism for granted and looks at women's with skepticism.

The first two chapters provide the much-needed background for the war and establish why women's participation in it in different capacities defied the patriarchal configurations of femininity that prevailed in the conservative sections of society both before and after the Revolution of 1979. As most of the women who gave their unwavering support to the war effort belonged to the religious lower classes and did not benefit from the Pahlavi dynasty's secular reforms, it is intriguing to learn how many of them felt empowered in a religious, patriarchal state that stripped them of their most basic rights within family and civil society by stressing that domestic and reproductive labor was their first and foremost function.

The chapters that follow abound with stories of women who participated in the war, either in the combat zone or on the home front. Farzaneh painstakingly records their names, draws the reader a picture of their upbringing and the values instilled in them, and explains the reasons for their actions. Telling the story of the Iran-Iraq War through the narratives of its women participants, Farzaneh does a great job of showing that for many

of them, defending Iran and Islam were two sides of the same coin and that determining whether religion or patriotism drove them to the extremes of behavior imaginable for women at the time is difficult. What stands out, however, is the Shiite ideology and the story of Hussein and Zaynab, the grandchildren of the Prophet, which is cited by many women as the incentive for their extraordinary sacrifices in the war and their exceptional fortitude and stoicism in the face of bereavement.

One of the book's most notable aspects is its expansive definition of what participation in war entails. It begins with the stories of women who never left the front line as their cities were invaded by Iraq (chap. 3); turns to the women of the state who were part of the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic during the war (chap. 4); sheds light on the sacrifices women made on the home front providing food, clothes, and other necessities for the soldiers (chap. 5); uncovers heroism in unlikely places, such as mortuaries and laundry facilities in the war zone (chap. 6); draws our attention to female prisoners of war of whose existence very few Iranians are actually aware (chap. 7); describes the emotional toll of losing one's husband, son, father, and brother to martyrdom in the war (chap. 8); and ultimately explains why for many women the war has never ended, as they themselves and many of their family members suffer from its consequences forty years after it began (chap. 9). What I found missing, however, from this substantial and very impressive list, is the story of secular women. Almost all the women whose stories we hear in this book come from a conservative background, were ideologically in line with the regime, and were affiliated with Basij or Sepah. While the majority of women war participants fell into these categories, as Farzaneh underlines (43), a comprehensive study of women's role in the Iran-Iraq War needs to address secular women as well, despite their minority status. A few times in the book (110–11, 175), we hear that the professional staff of various hospitals were uncooperative and averse to untrained volunteers on the premises, and were justifiably afraid of replacement by the latter, who supported the ideology of the theocratic regime (110), but we do not get to hear their side of the story.

Nonetheless, the plenitude of stories about women war participants is one of the book's most remarkable aspects. Having done extensive archival research and conducted interviews with the women in question, Farzaneh captures the essence of life for Iranian women in the eight long years they fought in it in different capacities. This is indeed a feat, considering that these stories were not previously published in English or, some of them, even in Persian. Still, it would have been better to allow these women to speak for themselves than to tell their stories for them. In the last few chapters a number of long quotations from these women offer a more intimate glimpse into their lives. Allocating enough space for women's individual voices to come through the narrative is of the utmost importance in a book premised on the fact that Iranian women have been kept from recounting their firsthand experience of the Iran-Iraq War by men who have usurped the defense of the homeland as a man's domain.

Despite its shortcomings, this book is rich in detail and accessible. It sets out to fill an important "historical gap by providing an academic study of women's participation in the

war—examining and analyzing what female volunteers have written, remembered, and propagated over the years” (15), and it delivers on that promise triumphantly.

MARYAM ZEHTABI is a lecturer of Middle Eastern and South Asian languages and cultures at the University of Virginia. Her recent research has focused on the ramifications of sex work in Iran from the Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century to the present through the lens of Persian literature and film. Her works have appeared in the *International Journal of Persian Literature*, the *Guardian*, and this journal. Contact: [mzehtabi@umass.edu](mailto:mzehtabi@umass.edu).

