

IRAN

Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War, by Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021. 480 pages. \$90 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by Fariba Parsa

When asked if I would write a review of this book, I was sure that the author would be a woman. I was positively surprised and impressed by the work of Dr. Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh. This book conveys a high level of empathy and care for women and a deep understanding of the patriarchy in Iran. In this book, Dr. Farzaneh focuses on the role of women and girls' participation in the Iran-Iraq War and how women's participation was turned into an opportunity for them. I lived in Iran when the war between Iran and Iraq began. I never considered there were positive aspects and opportunities for women during the war; like other women's rights activists, I was concerned about women who were raped and killed; lost their sons, husbands, and family members as well as their homes; and experienced extreme poverty and insecurity. These are some of the tragic images I had in mind about women and the war between Iran and Iraq. This book enlightened and expanded my insights about Iranian women and the Iran-Iraq War.

Millions of Iranian women participated in the Iran-Iraq War. According to Dr. Farzaneh's research, women carried guns and trained male and female volunteers in their use, gathered intelligence, operated on the wounded, cared for the injured, donated blood, buried the dead, guarded ammunition depots, organized kitchens and cooked food for soldiers, reported news about and photo-

graphed the war, drove trucks, flew reconnaissance mission flights, sewed uniforms and hospital bedsheets, and more.

However, as the author notes: “Yet even though women provided such varied services, men chastised in the process, belittled, beat, threatened, used and then ignored, and eventually forgot them . . . because their traditional and religious articulation of gender does not fit the secular model” (pp. 1, 6). Farzaneh goes on to state:

Both Ayatollah [Ruhollah] Khomeini and his successor, Ayatollah [‘Ali] Khamenei, focused on women’s role as mothers who raised “good” sons who welcomed martyrdom. By framing women’s involvement in only these ideological and sexualized gender roles, this focus ignores those women who highlighted their secular nationalistic reasons for defending Iran as their ancestral land (*Sarzamin*) (p. 19).

Drawing upon Farzaneh’s intensive research and interviews with several women participants in the war, he argues that women “challenged the patriarchal view of female incapacity and of intrepid prowess as strictly part of Iranian masculinity” (p. 6). For some women, the Iran-Iraq War “was an opportunity to discover their identity and capabilities in which they gained sociopolitical confidence” (p. 161). Most of the young women were from very religious conservative families that did not enjoy the Pahlavi regime’s secular reforms. Religiously devout women “took advantage of their opportunity to establish themselves as a significant part of the society and to engage in a struggle for equal treatment” (p. 161). This research illustrates that women from very religious families became aware of the mindset that had ignored their value and their capacity.

Nevertheless, as Farzaneh observes, “women’s education and participation in the war have not however, provided them with a broader say in what is decided on their behalf by the patriarchy” (p. 341). The Iranian patriarchal system continues to control “high

politics.” Views toward women have not fundamentally changed in spite of women’s achievements and contributions. The author writes that such views persist “[e]ven though some female elected officials hold high posts close to the center of power, including as deputy ministers, ambassador and vice president” (p. 342). Women holding positions of high office are there “for personal gain only, and as a such they perform just as poorly as any other person who does not have women’s interests at heart” (p. 346).

Farzaneh’s illuminating research is useful for women’s rights activists, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists who seek to acquire an in-depth understanding of the largely untold stories of and myriad roles played by Iranian women during the Iran-Iraq War and in Iran’s patriarchal system.

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