



## Review of the book: Iranian women & gender in the Iran-Iraq war

by Farzaneh Mateo Mohammad, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2020, 457 pp., Hardcover £60.72 Paperback £18.45, ISBN 13244-5290

Zahra Tizro

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Review of the book: Iranian women & gender in the Iran-Iraq war**, by Farzaneh Mateo Mohammad, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2020, 457 pp., Hardcover £60.72 Paperback £18.45, ISBN 13244-5290

Many books have been written about the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) but Farzaneh's impeccably researched volume takes the unusual step of engaging in exploring the role of Iranian women in one of the longest wars in the world. In this book he explores how women's participation, both on the war front and the home front, had a huge impact on gender debates in Iran. This is highly important in the context of the Islamization of the country and gendering policies after the 1979 revolution when women lost many of the rights and privileges that they used to enjoy under the Shah's secular reforms. Nevertheless, as Farzaneh argues, while some women acceded to what they were asked by the new Islamic government: to submit to their husbands and perform their motherly and housewifely duties, others refused to succumb and participation in the war was one way to more actively engage in society.

More interestingly, Farzaneh demonstrates how both revolution and war provided some opportunities for young women and girls from a more conservative background to be engaged in socio-political activities, which is something they could not envisage doing before. The Islamic Revolution and Shiite ideology created a culture of acceptance for women to have a more active role in their communities through getting involved with revolutionary forces such as Basij-e Mostazafeen (Mobilization Force of the Oppressed) and Sepah-e Pasdaran (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), either through volunteering tasks behind the frontlines or more directly in the battleground. As one of the women stated, Khomeini 'gave her the spiritual reason and justification for it (p. 227)'.

Farzaneh has managed to listen sympathetically and compassionately to the most painful narratives of women and girls regarding their experiences of imprisonment, torture, hunger and sexual violence, alongside witnessing the incidents of their own families and friends being murdered by the Iraqi forces. The volume unearths rare and valuable hidden stigmatized narratives and this comprises one of the key goals of the book: to explore how the experiences and contributions of these unsung heroes of war who have largely been overlooked and have hardly been documented due to their gender, this provokes many stimulating thoughts. Despite paying a high price for defending their families, villages, and country, some of these women remained deprived of government support after the war. Sadly, women's plight and anguish did not stop with the end of the war. They were still suffering at the hands of violent spouses who themselves were plagued by PTSD and other mental and physical health problems.

The book consists of ten chapters. In the introduction, the author clearly explains the genesis of the volume and its context in the wider literature. In chapter 1, Farzaneh begins with a brief discussion of the historical and cultural background of Iran before the war and the context in which war happened. In chapter 2, an overview of the situation of Iranian women and their gender roles during the Pahlavi era of 1924–79 and after the revolution of 1979 is provided. The book continues to provide a history of the women who took part in conflicts in the cities of Abadan and Khoramshahr under the Iraqi army siege in chapter 3 and goes on to provide more details in chapter 4 about women's roles in their official capacities at different levels such as journalists, community organizers and fundraisers, propagandists and medical professionals. The role of grassroots organizations created and operated by women, receiving no support

from the state, is discussed in chapter 5 and in chapter 6 the role of urban and rural women volunteers is explored by drawing upon examples of those who were involved in the Ahvaz Laundry Facility (the Rakht-Shur-Khaneh-ye Ahvaz) under the most difficult circumstances.

One of the most important and interesting chapters in this book is chapter 7 where the author discusses female POWs by recounting the rare and untold tales of women who were kidnapped and held secretly by Iraqi forces. He explains how the idea of exporting the Islamic Revolution was highlighted during the interrogation of female POWs. After the war many women were left alone to raise their families in their spouses' absence, since they lost their lives fighting, either as military or paramilitary forces. This dimension is discussed in chapter 8. Chapter 9 addresses the struggles of women to be recognized for their wartime roles and voluntary contributions on so many levels. This includes taking care of disabled veterans as well as dealing with their own disabilities in some instances. In the final chapter, the status of women since the end of the war is discussed, although women contributed in the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war and sacrificed greatly, Farzaneh argues, they continue to experience discrimination and feel politically and socially marginalized.

All the material in this book introduces the book's multilateral framing of core focuses in terms of the relationship between the state, community, and women which is explained clearly and used consistently throughout the volume. It facilitates engagement with multiple levels of analysis and generates some fascinating insights. At times, however, this relationship does feel a little undertheorised, perhaps needing to go a bit beyond the mere description of women's experiences to more fully create a framework that can capture the complexities of relationships and interdependencies between forces shaping their narratives, experiences and conflicts. For example, Saba Mahmood does something similar in her book 'Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject' (2004), exploring a grass-roots women's movement focused on moral reform in Cairo. Mahmood derives theoretical insights from those empirical observations that then take the whole field forward. It feels like the material and analysis in this volume could also have taken further contributory step.

The volume is well-referenced, and the author uses a wide variety of interesting sources such as historical photographs, soldiers' letters, and other important documents which enrich the book's content. However, the titles of the articles in Appendix A could be translated to better contextualize the media coverage of women's participation.

In sum, this is a very good volume and a promising addition to the existing literature on women and war, especially in the context of Middle Eastern and Iranian studies and indeed brings further interest and originality. What's more it does so in a readable and engaging manner. One of the many contributions of this volume is to move away from the generally *sui generis* manner in which Iranian women are often portrayed and treated in the literature, as being some kind of passive victim in the Middle Eastern context and, more specifically, in Iran. Instead, it shows that women are much more socio-politically confident and actively engaged both in terms of challenging their gender roles and protecting their country and culture. In this way, the book offers a powerful jolt to the reader and will, one hopes, encourage further study of the ways in which Iranian society and gender roles are changing and generate additional comparative studies concerning women and their role in modern Iran.

Zahra Tizro  
University of East London, London, UK  
 [ztizro@uel.ac.uk](mailto:ztizro@uel.ac.uk)

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