

REVIEW

Iranian Women & Gender in the Iran-Iraq War, by Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2021. 457 pages.

Reviewed by Shirin Saeidi, University of Arkansas Fayetteville (saeidi@uark.edu)

(Received 17 October 2022; accepted 17 October 2022)

Iranian Women & Gender in the Iran-Iraq War by Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh breaks new ground in both Iranian feminist studies and social histories of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). The book relies on interviews, documentaries, archival research of official documents—as well as diaries, letters, memoirs, and secondary sources—to piece together the days of war for Iranians. It pays special attention to women’s participation and the war’s impact on gender. As such, readers are gifted with the first historical study that reframes the contingencies, logistics, and legacies of the Iran-Iraq War with a focus dedicated entirely to the pious women who participated in it. Ethnographic research on the Iran-Iraq war and its legacies is scarce, especially when it comes to the role of women. Showing the interplay of patriotism and Islam in pious women’s decisions to defend Iran at wartime, Farzaneh fills many gaps in Iranian Studies. One of the most important issues addressed is how pious women gained confidence in the process of their participation, emboldened to ask for roles beyond that of being the wife or mother of a martyr. In this sense, Farzaneh offers an up-close view of how the Iran-Iraq war advanced the women’s rights struggle more broadly by empowering non-elite pious women.

The book chronicles the physically and emotionally strenuous activities pious women undertook during and after the war, including: safeguarding ammunition storages, burying the dead, keeping dogs away from bodies awaiting burial, engaging in armed combat, exposure to chemical warfare agents, staffing and operating laundry facilities, volunteering as nurses, preparing food and uniforms for the front, gathering intelligence, identifying spies, waiting on the missing, and sending their sons, daughters, fathers, husbands, and other loved ones into war. While many of the women whose stories are narrated in *Iranian Women & Gender in the Iran-Iraq War* are understood by peers as the Zaynab—Imam Hussein’s outspoken sister—of their time, Farzaneh takes readers into the space traversing these women’s otherworldly aspiration to sacrifice for God and the worldly grief of living through an extraordinary human experience. In the process, readers glimpse the emotional agility, physical strength, economic resourcefulness, and intellectual stamina embodied by pious women involved in the Iran-Iraq War.

From the introduction through chapters one and two, Farzaneh provides a historical backdrop to the Iran-Iraq War. This segment attends particularly to the ways in which pious women entered public spaces at the intersections of war and revolution, thereby contradicting the Islamic Republic’s new limitations on women’s rights. An exceptional aspect of these chapters is Farzaneh’s emphasis on the ways in which both feminist scholars and men in Iran have overlooked pious women who participated in the war. For instance, he states in the introduction:

Yet even though women provided such varied services, men chastised them in the process, belittled, beat, threatened, used and then ignored, and eventually forgot them until the women volunteers began speaking out to seek recognition. They never complained about what they did because they considered their actions honorable, which God rewarded in many ways. (p.1)

Having been discounted, used, and discarded by the majority of their male counterparts in post-1979 Iran, the female volunteers of the Iran-Iraq War take solace in telling their stories publicly today and remembering God's reward and love for them.

Following on, each subsequent chapter highlights the diversity among the pious by focusing on a specific group of women involved in the war. Chapter three focuses on the women of Khorramshahr and Abadan, asserting that humanitarian concerns, patriotism, and religious values shaped women's desires to participate in the war, though they received little to no financial or moral support from their male counterparts. Farzaneh highlights both the challenges pious women encountered and the familial support they received at their insistence on volunteering at a time when women's access to public spaces and legal rights was significantly compromised. He discusses the support of some of the local Khorramshahr men, such as Abadan's Friday prayer leader Gholam Hossein Jami, to illustrate the importance of historical contingencies in studies of the war. Jami crossed the strict gender segregation boundaries imposed at the time by meeting with women and mentioning their demands in his monthly journal. As the representative of Ayatollah Khomeini in Abadan, Jami's support created space for pious women to achieve their goal of participating in the war.

Chapter four moves toward women state employees, including female war volunteers who worked for state media. This chapter, and also chapter six, reveal that female war veterans were often denied state benefits because the men working in Veterans Affairs did not believe they had actually participated in the war. Nevertheless, many women who worked for the state during the war did so out of a patriotic (and not necessarily ideological) congruency with the state in transformation. The difficult negotiations Iranian women made with others—and also with themselves—is an important finding of these chapters, and readers see the central role such negotiations played in keeping the nation united during the war.

Chapters five and six address the sacrifices women made on the home front, which, for some, was also the warfront. Chapter five discusses female relatives of war martyrs by contextualizing their emotional labor in real-time. A central argument here is that "for each male involved [in the war], there were sometimes as many as three, four, or five females affected" (p.197). This chapter also examines male martyrs, questioning whether their sacrifice outweighed those of the women who loved them and were left behind: "Who is to say whose contribution was more significant and whose participation more worthwhile? Hassan died on the night of Operation Karbala-ye 2, but Masoumeh's battle continues to this day" (p. 200). Chapter six explores the experiences of women in small towns and villages who encountered the war as an invasion of their homes.

Chapter seven focuses on female prisoners of war and highlights the resilience of Iranian women who were tortured, threatened with rape, and witnessed sexual violence while held captive in Iraqi prisons. Chapters eight and nine illustrate the emptiness of women's lives whose husbands had either disappeared, were martyred in battle, or returned as injured veterans. These women often ended up living in their memories with the dead in a constant state of war, decades after the cease-fire. Chapter ten demonstrates that in the post-war years, it has become increasingly difficult for women participants—even relatives of male fighters—to maintain the right to speak as female warriors with a commitment to women's rights.

A notable theme in the book is that although pious women in post-revolutionary Iran recognize gender inequality as an obstacle to their progress and quality of life, the pursuit of legal change does not take center stage in their political struggle. Instead, access to public

spaces and resources, and a constant remembrance of God, define their struggles. As such, *Iranian Women & Gender in the Iran-Iraq War* exposes a disconnect between feminist and non-feminist strategies for materializing gender justice in Iran today.

The book historicizes pious women's activism with an eye toward capturing the relevance of their labor to women's rights struggles in modern Iran. For example, in chapter three, readers are reminded of the historical contingencies that, similar to secular women, pious women also encountered in 1980:

Religious thoughts as expressed entirely by men prescribed what was good for women. Secularity was gone, and women had either to fight the new system or accept the "Islamic" views of women. Zahra Hosseini and other women volunteered in the war under such circumstance. The contradiction between an Islamic state that limited women's participation in the public sphere and the presence of women volunteers in the war zones couldn't have been more evident, but no one paid much heed to it at the time. (p. 72–3)

Avoiding an enchantment with the past or future, Farzaneh centers his narrative on the *now*, making the book, its many questions, and the post-revolutionary gendered social patterns it reveals politically relevant.

Each chapter, by drawing attention to the emotional labor pious women in Iran bore during the eight-year war, reminds readers of the inner strength these women developed by sitting still with grief, mourning, and hope—all at once. As chapters historicize this experience in the contingencies of both the war and post-war years, this book also demonstrates that embodying spiritual agility and force are indeed a legacy of the war for all Iranian women.

With a commitment to speak across borders and boundaries, one of the book's subtle contributions is its capacity to reach a broad audience, in Iran and abroad. The book is written for an international audience by an author who both witnessed the war first-hand as a young volunteer and witnessed its aftermath as a historian in the diaspora. Farzaneh writes as an eyewitness who remembers the past and an observer who sees the present to offer us a detailed historical account of pious women's role in post-1979 gender struggles.