

BOOK REVIEW

**Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran–Iraq War. Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021). Pp. 477. \$90.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780815637103**

Reviewed by Maryam Alemzadeh, Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA ([ma40@princeton.edu](mailto:ma40@princeton.edu))

Recent scholarship has shed light on many aspects of women's status and gender relations in contemporary Iran for the English-speaking world. The formative experience of the Iran–Iraq war and its long-lasting effects on women's lives under the Islamic Republic, however, has not received the attention it deserves. Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh's book serves as a great first step to amend this shortcoming and to generate new discussions on gender power relations in Iran today.

*Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran–Iraq War* relies on the rich and expansive collection of personal narratives (memoirs and press interviews) published in Iran. Published material is complemented with interviews the author has conducted with Iranian women involved in the war, and with illustrative photographs retrieved from archives in Iran. Based on these narratives, Farzaneh sets himself the task of highlighting the understudied role of female participants in the war and how the war shaped their womanhood for themselves and for society at large. He illustrates how the eight-year war served as both an opportunity for them to challenge their patriarch-defined gender roles and a cruel burden that exacerbated their already difficult lives as women. The variety of experiences and viewpoints presented in the book also illustrates the dilemma that the Islamist government faced during the war. On the one hand, it needed women's labor and moral participation both on the home front and on the battlefield to survive the war. On the other, both the official ideology and the social norms imposed limitations on women's participation in public life. The book provides a vast array of biographies and experiences attesting to these dilemmas for both the women and the authorities.

Farzaneh starts with a general landscape of Iranian women's war experience (Introduction), the historical background of the war (Chapter 1), and a review of women's social status in twentieth-century Iran (Chapter 2). Then he delves deeply into various types of participation that women had in the war, whether voluntarily or imposed by the circumstances. In Chapters 3 to 8, we read stories of the women of Khorramshahr and Abadan (the two largest cities heavily struck by the war), who lived in the eye of the storm, fought alongside men, and provided support for frontline fighters; women who officially worked with the state as militant trainers, war photographers, and enlisted first-aid providers; those who endured the war on the home front while their husbands, sons, and relatives went to war; and a few who were captured by Iraqis and spent months and years of their lives under the inhumane conditions of Iraqi prisons. Farzaneh then discusses the continuation of war experience in women's lives (Chapters 8 and 9)—those living with physical and mental trauma, taking care of disabled loved ones, awaiting those who went missing in action, or grieving lost husbands and sons and filling in the masculine roles in the family structure in their absence. Chapter 10 addresses Iranian women's unequal social and political statuses in the postwar era compared with men.

Farzaneh's attempt at putting to use a controversial and often prematurely dismissed source of data, i.e. government-sanctioned memoirs and autobiographies, is laudable. The colorful

narratives and stories that enrich this work would not have been so abundantly available elsewhere. For readers unfamiliar with discursive complexities that taint publications in Iran, however, it would have been great to have more critical reminders of the potential biases in these texts. We do get such reminders, but they are few and far between, sometimes creating the illusion that the stories are fully accurate representations of the events, experiences, motivations, and emotions of the women involved. Although most stories conform to the official war narrative—that of women selflessly dedicated to Shi'i Islam, Iran, and Ayatollah Khomeini—it helps that we occasionally hear about women who were reluctant to engage in the war in any capacity and about those whose motivation for participation was not religious, and only nationalistic. With a stronger presence of a critical, theoretical stance, the two types of stories would present a more holistic and accurate picture.

Farzaneh reminds us elegantly that ample biographical and historical details are necessary as they “put the subject in the limelight of historical exploration...” (14). Descriptive details enable a tangible grasp of the ordeals the heroines went through, their thoughts and emotions as they stepped up to the challenge, and their—and the surrounding society's—perception of what they achieved. The book does a great job at enabling this tangible grasp. Presenting the data in the form of long, consecutive individual stories with scarce analytical intervention from the author comes with a downfall, however. Without the author's guidance, one is left wondering what each story contributes to the book's agenda. In the lack of subheadings in chapters as long as 80 pages, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of chapters' themes and to find the connection when one story ends and another starts.

As mentioned above, the multitude and the variety of women's narratives presented in the book offer the reader a plethora of war stories and life trajectories. The fact that Farzaneh lets us “[hear] directly from the women themselves” (362) adds to the richness of the reading experience. I still think, however, that a more consistent theoretical treatment of the narratives, complemented with feminist studies of women's political engagement and war participation, would have added to this richness. The brief episodes of analysis that we find in the introduction and scattered among the stories could be a great starting point to engage with existing scholarship (Viterna's *Women in War* and Berry's *War, Women, and Power* are just a few among many great analyses; Naber's “Radical Potential of Mothering,” although published after this book, is a good example of how a nuanced interpretation of women's participation is crucial).

Furthermore, we learn of a few extreme cases, such as the only Iranian female jet pilot and a handful of militant women who insisted on taking up arms on the front line, where societal and political norms were actively challenged. Engaging with theories of female identity and activism, especially in non-Western contexts, could have led to a more nuanced discussion of such experiences, as opposed to leaving them as awe-inspiring individual stories. In other cases, it is not clear how Iranian women acted differently from men, from women in other contexts, and from what the government and the patriarchal society expected from them (even if we accept the controversial assumption that these imposed a clear and uniform set of expectations on women). Contrasts in the analysis also appear when in a great many of the narrated stories, women participate in the war in their traditional roles as suffering or supportive mothers and wives. Such stories—and the author's interpretation thereof (see p. 6, for an example)—do not represent any challenges to cliché female roles and women's victimization narrative; rather, they reinforce them.

The caveats that come with the abundant and colorful narratives, as discussed above, can be seen not as shortcomings, but as potentials for exploration. They leave the reader with the possibility to decide what to take away from the narratives, empirically and theoretically. Significantly, for the first time, non-Persian speakers can dive deeply into the rich world of Persian-language memoirs written by women. Farzaneh's *Iranian Women* is the first book-length source in English that engages readers with these women's stories as deeply as the memoirs would. Articles published on this topic have not had the space

to serve this purpose, and the very few translated memoirs constitute too small of a sample to do so. Although the book does not contain many direct quotes from the texts, it can be used as a great initiation to the world of memoirs and autobiographies published in Iran. In addition, the book stands out in other seemingly marginal but very important ways. First, Farzaneh decentralizes the war narrative by covering stories from across the country, as opposed to focusing on either Tehran or the major war-torn cities on the western border. That allows us to get a snapshot of how women in different locations and from various social backgrounds experienced the war in different ways. Second, the book comes with useful appendices such as a list of articles about women's participation in the war in Persian, published during the war itself, as well as a name index of female war participants. These additions will be useful for other researchers trying to tackle this important subject. Last, but not least, Farzaneh's citation of junior scholars, female scholars, and scholars residing in Iran is a much needed celebration of their work. I hope that we see more of this thoughtful manner of citations in future studies of Iran and the Middle East.