Women of the White Revolution:

The White Revolution's impact on women's political mobilization

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Abstract:

This article discusses Iranian women's political mobilization during the reforms of the White Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. The focus on how socioeconomic status affected women's mobilization aims to address how women from different backgrounds collectively organized to combat policies that were not indicative of the needs of the people. Imbalance in the accessibility of women's activism varied based on women's proximity to urban areas and socioeconomic status. Women of different backgrounds were not completely barred from activism but instead mobilized through different avenues. This paper positions the White Revolution as an event that exacerbated class disparities and distanced the needs of Iranian women from the government, which catalyzed women's mobilization. Addressing socioeconomic status was meant to overtly show that the organization of Iranian women was dynamic.

Through a series of reforms, disparities between rural and urban populations were examined during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign in Iran. In an effort to modernize Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, general reforms were imposed on the rural population and women, facilitated through the White Revolution. Through the efforts of modernization, women's rights were toyed with by the Iranian government, with contributions that failed to address the needs of the different demographics of women throughout Iran. While reforms uplifted urban upper-class women, rural women remained underserved and exploited by the imposition of new labor incentives. Upper-class educated women ran the mainstream women's rights movement throughout the White Revolution. Although the reforms of the White Revolution began to decline, women outside of the mainstream women's movement took on active roles in political activism. Motivated by distrust in the Iranian government and injustices in Iran, the White Revolution created a women's movement that ebbed and flowed, mobilizing urban upper-class women and then mobilizing rural, middle-class, and leftist women. Although women across Iran were not served equitably by the Shah's reforms on women's rights, the reforms enticed women of differing socioeconomic status to take political action. The Iranian White Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s exacerbated disparities between rural and affluent women in the pursuit of women's rights, and catalyzed women's political mobilization.

The White Revolution

Issued through a series of reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, the White Revolution consisted of points that addressed land reform, the condition of the lower class, and women's rights. Mohammad Reza Shah, the leader of Iran, was inspired by Western democratic ideals and applied his vision to create a movement towards Western modernity in Iran, translated into the White Revolution. Announced on January 9, 1963, in a national referendum, the White Revolution originally consisted of six points, from land reforms to the political rights of

women.[92] The Shah envisioned a changed government in which Iranians were politically active. The Shah believed political participation was not feasible without reforming literacy programs to alleviate the large illiterate population.[93] Economic strength in Iran, both internally and economic independence from outside countries, was a prominent goal of the reforms.[94] A reformed internal economy was pursued through land reforms, which were intended to provide the rural lower class with the resources to gain financial status, increase agricultural production, and further develop rural land.[95] Reforms targeted the lower classes through literacy programs and land reforms, which were collectively pursued under the White Revolution to create the Shah's vision of a modernized Iran.

The White Revolution was used as a tactic to maintain and support the centralized power of the Shah. The rhetoric perpetuated by the Shah emphasized the unprecedented nature, the lasting implications, and the effortless tactics of the reforms.[96] In the Shah's book *Mission For My Country,* published in 1961, the Shah rationalized the need for his powerful position in the implementation of reform in Iran. The Shah addressed the preliminary stage that the government was in to align himself as an integral part of the Iranian government. The Shah stated that "In a country where tradition still weighs heavily, nothing could be more unrealistic than to suppose that locally-based parties will spontaneously appear and flourish. So I consider my role as King requires that I encourage parties."[97] The Shah positioned himself as a propagator of the newly implemented parliamentary democracy. The acknowledgment of the political parties and their role in the government was vital to connect the Shah as the mediator of the success of the parties.

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[92] Gholam Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (University of California Press, 2009), 691.
[93] Gholam Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (University of California Press, 2009), 221.
[94] Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Iran's 'White Revolution': A Study in Political Development," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (1974): 130.
[95] Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Iran's 'White Revolution': A Study in Political Development," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (1974): 131.
[96] Ali M Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammed Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 15.
[97] Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Mission for my Country* (McGraw Hill, 1961), 173.

The obfuscation that the Shah perpetuated to compensate for his reign was not widely accepted by the Iranian people. Doubt in the Iranian government permeated into outside sources as civil unrest arose, which connected Western countries like the U.S. closer to Iran.

The U.S. closely monitored Iran and was aware of the distrust that the Iranian people had in the government. In 1961, the U.S. president at the time, JFK, understood the value that Iran had and formed a special task force focused on Iran within the National Security Council.[98] In 1961, McGeorge Bundy, a member of the Iranian task force, asserted that there was a growth of civil unrest within Iran. Bundy acknowledged the damage that the Iranian elections had on trust between the people and the government. Bundy stated, "They may well give rise to violent expressions of dissatisfaction over the rigging of the results."[99] The American task force was aware of the civil unrest in Iran and the part that the Shah played in Iranian's distrust in the government. The Shah set up an ostensible election, in which the Iranian people did not have actual representation. The U.S. was alert to the political repression that the Shah had cultivated and understood that Iranians could counter repression through violence. Throughout the political repression, the Shah strategically placed himself in a position to be an advocate for the success of Iran, with Iran's success directly proportional to the Shah's power.

The White Revolution emphasized the modernization of Iran through reforms and Iran's partnership with the West. The initiation of the White Revolution coincided with compliance with the West, particularly the United States. In 1964, the Shah announced that a legal exemption would be placed for U.S. personnel working in Iran.[100] Controversy and unrest, due to the Shah's conduct in power and the reforms implemented, controlled the Shah's western alliance. Internal

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[98] April R. Summitt, "For a White Revolution: John F. Kennedy and the Shah of Iran," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (2004): 563.
[99] Philip J. Halla, *Iran: General, 1961: January-February,* PDF, 1961. https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfknsf-115-006#?image_identifier=JFKNSF-115-006-p0007
[100] Ansari, Ali M. "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power." *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 20.

strife, the loss of power, and the threat of a Soviet invasion impacted how the Shah chose to evolve Iranian society.[101] While the Shah aligned himself with the U.S., this alliance distanced him from the Iranian people and led to further dissatisfaction with the Shah's performance in power. The reforms clashed with traditional structures in Iran as they were applied with a Western approach.

The Land Reform of the White Revolution was not indicative of the needs of the rural population, and perpetuated a disconnected model of modernity. The land reforms were imperative for cooperation between the rural peasantry and the government.[102] The land reforms of the White Revolution were targeted to bolster the rural community and aligned the Shah as a champion of a new era in Iran. The Shah embraced the opportunity to endorse the land reforms, which added to the altruistic framework of the White Revolution. According to Ali Ansari, the Shah relied on the unprecedented nature of the reforms in Iranian history and reaffirmed the lack of bloodshed in the land reforms to appeal to the farmers affected by the reforms.[103] Land reforms upset the traditional structure of the agricultural sector. Ansari included the negative reception of the land reforms from the landowners, with reforms viewed as a project that excluded people impacted directly by the reforms.[104] The reforms provided agency to individual farmers but disrupted traditional systems and upset the landlords. Land reform was an instrumental component in the White Revolution, but with the rise of the Shah's plan to pull Iran towards modernity, and altered the traditional system in rural areas. The status of rural women was altered with the execution of land reforms.

The restructuring of the farm system in rural Iran changed the social dynamics of rural women. The land reforms enabled farmers to act autonomously from landlords. Changes in the

[101] April R. Summitt, "For a White Revolution: John F. Kennedy and the Shah of Iran," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (2004): 562.
[102] Kurush Shahbaz, "Iran's White Revolution," *World Af airs* 126, no.6 (1963): 17.
[103] Ali M Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 15.
[104] Ali M.Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 10.

dynamics of the agricultural system altered the role that women traditionally held as proponents of agricultural work. The reforms enabled farmers to hire workers to complete farm work previously conducted by women.[105] Women were invited to contribute to the income of their household. Paidar Parvin in *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* asserted that while rural women had employment opportunities in the textile sector, as well as a minority employed as teachers, women were subjugated further as consumers.[106] Employment opportunities for women did not lead to an exuberant increase in the agency of rural women, but tied women to exploitative working conditions. Women comprised the majority of the labor force in the textile sector, with an increase in women's employment as the White Revolution continued.[107] Land reform failed to revolutionize the status of rural women and siloed women into working conditions that further subjugated them.

Women's Legal Status

The White Revolution addressed the modernization of the status of Iranian women. Reza Shah Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's father, initiated the push to modernize women's image in Iran. Andre Vogel defined Reza Shah's model of modernity as a Western model that pushed women into the public view and relied on clothing to succeed this model.[108] Reza Shah enacted the de-veiling of women, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi continued with the uplift of de-veiled women in the public sector.[109] A motivator for further reform aimed at the status of women was women's central role in Iranian society and as a representative of Iranian values. Restrictions on women were lifted to represent the alignment of the White Revolution with the West and

[105] Fred Halliday, *Iran Dictatorship and Development* (Penguin Books, 1979), 191.
[106] Parvin Paidar, *Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran,* (Cambridge University, 1995), 161.
[107] Parvin Paidar, *Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran,* (Cambridge University, 1995), 161
[108] Andre Vogel, "The Source of Change Within Society: A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women's Movement," *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship* 2, no.4 (2018): 6.
[109] Roksana Bahramitash, "Revolution, Islamization, and Women's Employment in Iran," *The Brown Journal of World Af airs* 9, no. 2 (2003): 231.

permeate the new cultural values.[110] In addition to regulations on women's clothing, Iranian women were granted suffrage and legal rights by the Family Protection Act (1967). Women's suffrage was a prominent part of the legislation passed that addressed the legal status of women in Iran.

The enfranchisement of women in the 1960s was a controversial act that upset the religious leaders in Iran. Iranian religious leaders were in disagreement with the alliance that Iran established with the U.S., and used that rationale to disagree with the mission of the White Revolution.[111] The dissatisfaction with the White Revolution was not confined to the alignment with the West, but also to the reforms that addressed the status of women. Prominent religious leader Ruhollah Khomeini, and leader in the Iranian Revolution, confided privately to the Prime Minister of Iran a year before the White Revolution and expressed his view that enfranchisement of women was contrary to Islam.[112] Opposition from religious leaders did not end the White Revolution, and the Shah continued to implement reforms on Iranian women's status, which included women's suffrage.

Legislation that worked to elevate women's position in society continued beyond suffrage. Arzoo Osanloo connected Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to his father, Reza Pahlavi, as their motives aligned with the perspective of a public perception of altruistic leaders.[113] Additionally, Osanloo noted that the Shah's grant of suffrage was rooted in a patriarchal role that the Shah saw himself in, in which he granted women the vote if they were deserving and obedient.[114] In March of 1963, the government officially codified women's suffrage and catalyzed legal reform aimed at women's rights. Shortly after the passage of women's suffrage in 1963, the Family Protection

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[110] Roksana Bahramitash, "Revolution, Islamization, and Women's Employment in Iran," *The Brown Journal of World Af airs* 9, no. 2 (2003): 231.
[111] Andre Vogel, "The Source of Change Within Society: A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women's Movement," *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship* 2, no.4 (2018): 8.
[112] Andre Vogel, "The Source of Change Within Society: A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women's Movement," *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship* 2, no.4 (2018): 9.
[113] Arzoo Osanloo, "Lessons from the Suffrage Movement in Iran", *The Yale Journal Forum* 129, (2020)501
[114] Arzoo Osanloo, "Lessons from the Suffrage Movement in Iran", *The Yale Journal Forum* 129, (2020)501

Law (FPL) of 1967 and the subsequent revision of the FPL in 1975 were implemented.[115] Women's suffrage was used as a point of mobility towards modernity, rejecting antiquated law as the Shah reformed Iran to meet a new standard. Although women gained suffrage, this act was counterintuitive, as the Iranian government monitored the elections and politics. The Family Protection Law of 1967, along with women's suffrage, added to the legal reform for Iranian women. Both the Family Protection Law and women's suffrage enabled the mobilization of middle- and upper-class women.

The Family Protection Law of 1967 addressed two very important components the status of women in marriage and divorce. Divorce, outlined in the FPL, placed restrictions on the impact that divorce had on women and restricted the rights that men had in divorce proceedings. If the divorce between the husband and wife was amicable, then the court would issue a non-reconciliation certificate.[116] The purpose of the FPL's regulation of divorce was to create a basis for the rights that a spouse had in court. The issue of the non-reconciliation certificate by the court was important to the agency women had in the cessation of a marriage. The certificate of non-reconciliation played a crucial role in determining the custody of children. If the certificate was issued, the court would determine the adequate arrangements for the safety of the children, including the custody arrangement.[117] Additionally, the FPL asserted the restriction of polygamy without the consent of the first wife, which was an offense that could have been brought to court.[118] The FPL was a form of general legislation aimed at redefining the influence that women had in both divorce and custody proceedings. The FPL did not eradicate the patriarchal social structure that limited women's social mobility, but enabled women's transition into the workforce. Although the reforms did not explicitly exclude a specific demographic of women, urban upper-class women were the main beneficiaries of the reforms. In addition to the

[115] Arzoo Osanloo, "Lessons from the Suffrage Movement in Iran," *The Yale Journal Forum* 129, (2020) 503.
[116] Ali Raza Naqvi, "The Family Protection Act of Iran," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 3 (1967): 242.
[117] Ali Raza Naqvi, "The Family Protection Act of Iran," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 3 (1967): 244.
[118] Ali Raza Naqvi, "The Family Protection Act of Iran," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 3 (1967): 243.

legality of women's social status, educational reforms contributed to the pursuit of a women's movement within the White Revolution.

Social Reforms Impact on Women

Prior to women's educational reforms in the White Revolution, women's education was addressed in urban spaces and continued to progress under Mohammad Reza Shah. Under the Pahlavi dynasty in 1935, women were formally allowed to attend the University of Tehran.[119] Higher education opportunities for women continued throughout the Pahlavi dynasty. By the end of the Pahlavi dynasty, women's enrollment at universities had reached 30.9%.[120] Higher educational institutions became another avenue for the mission of modernization of the White Revolution. Institutions were secularized, in an effort to align with the West.[30121] The secularization of the higher institutions, in addition to their proximity to urban spaces, separated rural and urban women. While women were steadily incorporated into higher education, that increase was not indicative of Iranian women as a whole.

Under Mohammad Reza Shah, literacy reforms were a vital part of the education reforms established by the White Revolution. The Shah's sister, Ashraf Pahlavi, was an advocate for literacy programs. Ashraf Pahlavi was the chairman of the International Panel for the World Literacy Awards and led programs in Iran aimed at eradicating illiteracy.[122] The Shah was credited as a pioneer for literacy through his promotion and endorsement of the outreach of literacy research at the International Institute for the Study of Teaching Methods in Fighting Illiteracy in

[119] Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," *International Review of Education* 51, no. 4 (2005) 333.
[120] Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," *International Review of Education* 51, no. 4 (2005) 334.
[121] Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," *International Review of Education* 51, no. 4 (2005) 333.
[122] Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, "Iran's Contribution to Literacy." *Convergence* 4, no. 4 (1971) 1, https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/irans-contribution-literacy/docview/1437905229/se-2.

Tehran.[123] The efforts of the Shah's literacy programs led to further educational opportunities that were not exclusive to urban spaces. The perceived eradication of illiteracy was a prominent component in the White Revolution, although the methods that powered literacy programs did not have the same outcomes throughout the different demographics in Iran.

The Literacy Corps was a prominent component in the mission to eradicate illiteracy and actively served rural women. The Literacy Corps was staffed by high school graduates who received rudimentary training and worked in remote areas in Iran.[124] The efforts to eradicate illiteracy contributed to a rise in literacy rates. The Literacy Corps catered its pedagogy to women differently from what was taught to men. The girls who were taught by the Literacy Corps were taught how to read, home economics, and how to be agents of the facilitation of modernization in the White Revolution.[125] While the pedagogy of the literacy corps enabled girls to read, it imposed a patriarchal model on girls. The mission of the Literacy Corps did not envision a systemic change for women, and perpetuated women's status as vital in the domestic sphere. The impact of the Literacy Corps in rural areas had issues with the established religious schools that functioned as the educational institutions that served the rural villagers.[126] Although the Literacy Corps attempted to support the rural populations, the already established education systems were hard to infiltrate. Regardless of the acceptance of the literacy programs in rural areas, there was a gap in the effectiveness of literacy programs in urban and rural spaces.

From 1956 to 1966, there was an increase in literacy rates amongst rural and urban women, although, when compared to urban women, rural women experienced a paucity in the increase of literacy. Educational opportunities prior to the White Revolution were more

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[123] Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, "Iran's Contribution to Literacy." *Convergence* 4, no. 4 (1971) 2, https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/irans-contribution-literacy/docview/1437905229/se-2.
[124] David Mitch and Gabriele. Cappelli, *Globalization and the Rise of Mass Education*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 318.
[125] David Mitch and Gabriele. Cappelli, *Globalization and the Rise of Mass Education*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 318.
[126] David Mitch and Gabriele. Cappelli, *Globalization and the Rise of Mass Education*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 319.

accessible in urban areas than in rural areas. A line of continuity in the illiteracy disparities between rural and urban women continued throughout the White Revolution. Jacqueline Rudolph-Touba pulled from the Iranian census to compare the lives of rural and urban women throughout the 20th century. The Iranian census conducted in 1956 found that 20.5% of urban women were literate, compared to 1% of literate rural women.[127] The literacy rates of 1966 still asserted the gap in outreach to rural women. In 1966, 36% of urban women were literate compared to 3.4% of rural women.[128] While both sectors presented a shift towards higher literacy rates over ten years, urban areas saw about a 15.5% increase in literacy, while rural areas only saw a 2.4% increase.

The literacy disparity is not confined to the failures of the White Revolution via literacy reforms. Prior to the White Revolution, the elite urban families sent their children to schools abroad.[129] Urban women had a propensity to have access to educational opportunities, with educational institutions occupying urban spaces. Cultures in urban and rural areas were not synonymous, and the application of the education reforms did not produce the same results in both areas. In Urban spaces, women had different job opportunities that were not available to rural women.

Women were integral to both the urban and rural workforce, yet there were still large disparities in the conditions of women in the rural sector. Land reforms changed the traditional family environment in rural areas. This coincided with a pull for rural women to enter the domestic sector, as farmers gained assistance outside of their immediate family. Rural women also occupied one of the most underpaid and degrading conditions in the workforce: the textile sector. Rural women occupied cloth weaving and carpet weaving jobs, which were the

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[127]Jacqueline Rudolph-Touba, "Impact of Societal Institutional Changes on the Iranian Family," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 3, no. 1 (1973) 64.
[128] Jacqueline Rudolph-Touba, "Impact of Societal Institutional Changes on the Iranian Family," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 3, no. 1 (1973) 64.
[129] Jacqueline Rudolph-Touba, "Impact of Societal Institutional Changes on the Iranian Family," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 3, no. 1 (1973) 63.

occupations that paid the lowest wages and had poor working conditions.[130] In urban areas, women had the capacity to work in professional jobs, such as teaching, clerical work, and even government jobs. In 1971, an estimated 200,000 urban women were in the professional sector, with 45% in teaching positions, 44% in clerical work, and 11% in the medical sector.[131] A prominent contributor to the polarizing status of rural and urban women was educational accessibility. Education was more accessible in the urban areas, which contributed to a higher literacy rate and enabled women to seek jobs that were not as labor-intensive.

Women's Political Mobilization

The Women's Organization of Iran perpetuated disparities in the advocacy for different demographics of Iranian women. The Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) reinforced reforms that addressed the women's movement embedded in the White Revolution. The WOI was a mainstream organization that connected the women's movement to the Shah. In "Performance the economic-society of the Iranian women's organization for the working women of Iran," Shaukat Afshari described the creation of the WOI as an avenue to appease leftist groups that advocated for women's and workers' rights.[132] The restriction of the WOI because of the involvement of the government controlled how the WOI served women. The Shah controlled the narrative of the WOI with policy proposals vetted by the Shah himself.[133] The WOI was a prominent women's organization for affluent women in Iran, but the WOI functioned as an entity supported by the Iranian government. In addition to the government restrictions, the WOI relied on the involvement of educated, affluent women as leaders of the organization and strong activists for the WOI.

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[130] Fred Halliday, *Iran Dictatorship and Development* (Penguin Books, 1979), 191.
[131] Fred Halliday, *Iran Dictatorship and Development* (Penguin Books, 1979), 192.
[132] Shoukat Afshari, "Performance the economic-social of the Iranian Women's Organization for the working women of Iran since 1966-1976 AD," *Economic History of Iran* 13, no. 1 (2024): 344.
[133] Janet Afary, "Steering between Scylla and Charybdis: Shifting Gender Roles in Twentieth Century Iran," *NWSA Journal* 8, no. 1 (1996): 39.

The WOI was not independent from the Iranian government or the Shah. Asharf Pahlavi, a women's rights activist and sister to Mohammad Reza Shah, served as the WOI president.[134] Ashraf was instrumental in the consolidation of 17 other women's organizations in Iran, which was replaced with the High Council of Women's Organizations, situating herself as an honorary chair.[135] The involvement of Ashraf Pahlavi in the WOI and the proximity to the government popularized the organization. The influence that Asharf had was used for important legislation like the Family Protection Act, although this bill remained controversial with Nezhat Nafisi, a woman elected to parliament, because the bill was not more protective of women.[136] Ashraf Pahalavi was a product of her environment, she was directly aligned with the Shah, which impacted the activism she led but also enabled her to bring awareness towards women's rights. The circumstances that affluent and privileged women like Ashraf were in remained consistent with those of the women involved in the WOI.

Upper-class women from prominent families were represented in the WOI. Urban affluent women from politically motivated and educated families had the opportunity to have access to education in Iran and even abroad. Women who were able to engage with higher educational opportunities and had support from their families were enabled to contribute to the WOI. The Iranian Oral History Project collected the stories of leading women in the women's movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Amongst the women interviewed through the Oral History project was Maryam Shamlu. Shamlu was a member and leader in the WOI in the 1970s. Shamlu was born in Iran but was educated in France.[137] In France, Shamlu was involved in the women's

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[134] "Statement regarding the Passing of Princess Ashraf Pahlavi." *AllAfrica.Com,* 2016, https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/statement-regarding-passing-princess-ashraf/docview/1755828656/se-2.

[135] Zhinia Noorian and Brian Griffith, *Mother Persia: Women in Iran's History*, (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 212.

[136] Zhinia Noorian and Brian Griffith, *Mother Persia: Women in Iran's History*, (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 213

[137] "Interview with Maryam Shamlu" by Mahnaz Afkhami, *Foundation for Iranian Studies.* 1983, https://fis-iran.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Maryam-Shamlu-English.pdf (accessed November 16, 2025)

movement, and continued her work within the women's movement in Iran.[138] Shamlu was already involved in an outside women's organization in her time in France, prior to her involvement in the WOI. Farangis Shahrokh, a secretary of the high council for the WOI, was born to an affluent family.[139] Shahrokh was from a Zoroastrian family and leveraged her social standing towards activism for not only women but relationships between the muslim community and the Zoroastrian community.[140] Social class and education influenced the accessibility of women's organizations like the WOI. The women's movement exhibited by the WOI was one that aligned with the elite, not only because of the partnership that the WOI had with the government, but women who were represented by the organization.

The White Revolution failed to resonate with a diverse demographic of women. A systematic change in women's status or the unification of women through Iran was not a part of the mission of the White Revolution. Class divide transcended employment pursuits, education, and political mobilization of women. The Shah had a vision of modernity for the White Revolution, which placed the status of women as facilitators of modernity. The discrepancies with which women were served by the reforms put urban affluent women, women who had already been exposed to higher education, as the main beneficiaries of the reforms. The outreach towards rural women through the literacy corps had little impact on a shift in rural women obtaining a formal education. For women, the mission of the White Revolution was not to change the systemic position of women. The inauthentic and general implementation of reforms contributed to women's dissatisfaction with the Shah. While women gained considerable legal rights, the reforms were not indicative of the culture of rural or middle- and lower-class spaces.

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[138] "Interview with Maryam Shamlu" by Mahnaz Afkhami, *Foundation for Iranian Studies.* 1983, https://fis-iran.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Maryam-Shamlu-English.pdf (accessed November 16, 2025)
[139] "Interview with Ms. Farangis Shahrokh" by Mahnaz Afkhami, *Foundation for Iranian Studies.* November, 1983, https://fis-iran.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Farangis-Shahrokh-Yeganegi-English-pdf.pdf (accessed November 16, 2025).
[140] "Interview with Ms. Farangis Shahrokh" by Mahnaz Afkhami, *Foundation for Iranian Studies.* November, 1983, https://fis-iran.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Farangis-Shahrokh-Yeganegi-English-pdf.pdf (accessed November 16, 2025).

The Shah's reforms were aligned with a Western vision of modernity, one that did not resonate with the traditional systems in place in Iran. Women's dissatisfaction with the reforms manifested in political action and the mobilization of women against the Shah.

Political Mobilization Against the Shah

Repression from the Iranian government motivated women to mobilize against the Shah. The Shah controlled the political scene in Iran with the use of police supervision and surveillance, which restricted women's movement.[141] The restriction of women's mobilization under the Shah encouraged women to seek out other methods of organization that were not controlled by the government. Women who were dissatisfied with the Shah's conduct in power were unable to join prominent women's organizations like the WOI that had the ear of the Shah. Reforms associated with women's rights were conducted through the approval of the government by groups of upper-class women, with the government approving the reforms in pursuit of the expansion of the Shah's mission.[142] Leftist women, independent women's movements, and rural women gravitated to spaces that expressed dissatisfaction with the government and enabled discussion on the women's movement that diverged from what was parroted by the WOI.

Dissatisfaction with the Shah enabled women to gravitate to leftist political movements. Leftist movements in Iran offered women an alternative to the mainstream WOI that was aligned with the same government that continued to restrict political expression. The Tudeh party in Iran, a communist party, allotted resources to support Iranian women before the reforms on women's rights of the White Revolution.[143] The accessibility of leftist organizations to lower class women emulated the exclusionary practices of the mainstream organizations. Educational space provided

[141] Haideh Moghissi, "Islamic Cultural Nationalism and Gender Politics in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2008): 545.
[142] Haideh Moghissi, "Islamic Cultural Nationalism and Gender Politics in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2008): 545.
[143] Hammed Shahidian, "The Iranian Left and the 'Woman Question' in the Revolution of 1978–79," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 2 (1994): 224

the opportunity to engage with other politically motivated people. Radicalization was fostered by the environment that women were in, including their educational and social environment. In "Women and Clandestine Politics In Iran, 1970-1985," Hammed Sahidian delineated the propensity of women who lived in cities with a historic precedent of radicalization to circulate leftist ideas along with engagement in a community of leftist organizations.[144] The association with others that affirmed and perpetuated ideas within the leftist movement impacted the exclusion of rural women. Sahidian explained that with different family dynamics and labor force, those factors created social pressure on lower-class rural women that impacted the accessibility of political participation.[145] Women in rural areas were employed by the textile sector that had exploitative labor practices, and with the rise of land reforms by the White Revolution, women were pulled into earning another income for their household.

Leftist women took on a directly combative role against the Shah as opposition to the Iranian government continued. The increase in women involved in the leftist Guerrilla movement in the 1970s put women in fatal positions, with women being executed and killed in shootouts.[146] The increase in the mobilization against the Shah in the late 1970s increased the momentum of women in leftist organizations. The Shah's forces killed 172 women who were a part of the Central Committee of the Iranian People's Guerrillas.[147] Leftist movements were monitored by the Iranian government through the SAVAK (Iranian secret police), which imprisoned and killed leftist women.[148] The stories of the mistreatment of Iranians who opposed the government further incited movements. Women who were killed by the Shah's military were publicized as martyrs through the circulation of portraits and stories of the women who were killed.[149] Leftist women

[144] Hammed Shahidian, "Women and Clandestine Politics in Iran, 1970-1985," *Feminist Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 16.
[145] Hammed Shahidian, "Women and Clandestine Politics in Iran, 1970-1985," *Feminist Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 14.
[146] Afshin Matin-Asgari, "Twentieth Century Iran's Political Prisoners." *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 5 (2006): 699.
[147] Zhinia Noorian and Brian Griffith, *Mother Persia: Women in Iran's History*, (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 231.
[148] Arielle Gorden, "From Guerrilla Girls to Zainabs: Reassessing the Figure of the 'Militant Woman' in the Iranian Revolution," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 17, no. 1 (2021):75.
[149] Arielle Gorden, "From Guerrilla Girls to Zainabs: Reassessing the Figure of the 'Militant Woman' in the Iranian Revolution," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 17, no. 1 (2021):75.

remained integral to the mobilization against the Shah, with women imprisoned and killed. Women were also involved in political action through demonstrations. A third of the demonstrators in 1977 and 1978 were made up of women's participation.[150] Opportunities to engage in mass demonstrations were largely held in cities, like Tehran, which hindered the opportunity to engage in political action. Tehran remained a vital hotspot for demonstrations that included women leading up to the Iranian Revolution.

The uprising against the Shah in the late 1970s further mobilized Iranians across the political spectrum. The unification of diverse political factions was driven by the unjust and odious actions of the Shah, which culminated in the uprisings against the Shah from 1977-1978.[151] In "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution," Ervand Abrahamian identified the disparities between social classes that were exacerbated in the White Revolutions despite the efforts by the reforms.[152] Abrahamian connected the increase in poor living conditions as the White Revolution continued, not only in cities but in the country, with few beneficiaries of the welfare reforms.[153] Rural families were not solely dissatisfied with the Shah, as Iranians across the country identified the injustices in the Shah's regime. In January of 1978, street protests organized by a religious group of students advocated for the exiled religious leader Khomeini.[154] Protests continued against the Iranian government with the assembly of different political factions mobilized through their joint outrage.[155] The collectivized mobilization from multiple political factions to oust the Shah was backed by a culmination of motives. Different factions were motivated to unify through dissatisfaction with the Shah's actions. Demonstrations accelerated the movement to oust the Shah, with women involved in direct action through protest and

[150] Zhinia Noorian and Brian Griffith, *Mother Persia: Women in Iran's History*, (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 234.
[151] Peter Seeberg, "The Iranian Revolution, 1977–79: Interaction and Transformation." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41 no.4 (2014): 488.
[152] Ervand Abrahamian, "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, no. 87 (1980): 23.
[153] Ervand Abrahamian, "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, no. 87 (1980): 23.
[154] Fred Halliday, "THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION: UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGIOUS POPULISM," *Journal of International Af airs* 36, no. 2 (1982): 191.
[155] L. P. Elwell-Sutton,"The Iranian Revolution," *International Journal* 34, no. 3 (1979): 406.

demonstrations.

Women's political mobilization continued in Tehran, with the involvement of women in the Jaleh Square Massacre. On September 8, 1978, a demonstration of 20,000 people commenced in Tehran's Jaleh Square.[156] The demonstration in Jaleh Square was in protest of the Shah's repressive rule and was powered by the growing conservative religious movement.[157] Women dissatisfied with the Shah were not only mobilized through leftist organizations but also through religious demonstrations. In the Jaleh Square protests, women wore traditional veils as they marched and were subjected to violent altercations between the demonstrators and the Shah's soldiers.[158] Women who wore veils contributed to political action, as Reza Shah had previously outlawed the veil, and Mohammad Reza Shah continued with the regulation of women's religious clothing. Iranian women who aligned themselves with the conservative religious movement contributed to women's political mobilization. The reforms led by the Shah were a point of contention for the contributions of conservative religious women who were politically active.

Village women contributed to political action against the Shah's regime as a result of the dismissal of their needs. Mary Hegland asserts that village women in Aliabad were not motivated by feminism or through the pursuit of women's rights, but instead mobilized because of the mistreatment of their village by the Iranian government.[159] Aliabad women maintained a network that supported them to commute to a larger city, Shiraz, to participate in a mass demonstration.[160] The mass demonstration that the Aliabad women participated in included women across different

[156] *Black Friday In Tehran, Iran (8 september 1978)* from https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/black-friday-tehran-iran-8-september-1978/docview/1679044256/se-2.
[157] Los Angeles Times, "Iranian Soldiers Fire on Crowd; 58 Reported Slain:Iran Protest Deaths," September 10, 1978. https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/iranian-soldiers-fire-on-crowd-58-reported-slain/docview/158638294/se-2?accountid=7122. (Accessed December 1, 2025).
[158] Los Angeles Times, "Iranian Soldiers Fire on Crowd; 58 Reported Slain:Iran Protest Deaths," September 10, 1978.
[159] Mary Elaine Hegland,"Women and the Iranian Revolution: A Village Case Study," *Dialectical Anthropology* 15, no. 2-3 (1990): 185.
[160] Mary Elaine Hegland,"Women and the Iranian Revolution: A Village Case Study," *Dialectical Anthropology* 15, no. 2-3 (1990): 189.

political factions.[161] Through general land reforms aimed at appeasing the rural population but perpetuating injustices, the Shah unified people unjustly affected by the reforms. The reforms led by the Shah alienated the rural population and contributed to the factionalization with religious movements.

The Iranian Revolution evolved women's social and legal status. The fall of Mohammad Reza Shah through the efforts of diverse political groups enabled Ayatollah Khomeini to rise to power. In February of 1979, Khomeini took power and began to sever the unification of non secular groups with his religious agenda.[162] Early in Khomeini's rise to power, he restored the Islamic courts and law and enforced the veiling of women that was previously outlawed by the Pahlavi dynasty.[163] The previous Family Protection Laws were annulled under Khomeini.[164] Discarding the FPL, which regulated women's legal rights in marriage, divorce, and custody of their children at the beginning of Khomeini's rise to power, set the tone for Khomeini's agenda regarding women. Women remained politically active throughout the rise of Khomeini and continued to publicly protest the injustices of a new regime.

Women were active in protests for the advocacy of women's rights in 1979 following Khomeini's descent to change women's rights. On March 8th, 1979, which marked International Women's Day, protests broke out in major Iranian cities such as Tehran, Tabriz, and Abadan.[165] In a memorandum issued by the CIA, protests led by women stemmed from Khomeini's criticism of the clothing of the women who worked in the government and Khomeini's announcement to end

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[161] Mary Elaine Hegland, "WOMEN AND THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION: A VILLAGE CASE STUDY," *Dialectical Anthropology* 15, no. 2/3 (1990): 189.
[162] Nikki R.Keddie, "IRANIAN WOMEN'S STATUS AND STRUGGLES SINCE 1979," *Journal of International Af airs* 60, no. 2 (2007): 22.
[163] Nikki R.Keddie, "IRANIAN WOMEN'S STATUS AND STRUGGLES SINCE 1979," *Journal of International Af airs* 60, no. 2 (2007): 22.
[164] Nikki R. Keddie, "Women in Iran Since 1979," *Social Research* 67, no. 2 (2000): 401.
[165] United States Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center Office of Regional and Political Analysis. 1979. Iran: Women's Movement. https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/iran-womens-movement/docview/1679063567/se-2?accountid=7122.

coeducation in Iran.[166] Mass protests powered by women resulted in violent altercations for those who protested. In a New York Times article that followed the news of the outbreak of protests for women's rights, there were reports that women were stoned, verbally abused, and even stabbed.[167] Participants in the protests willingly risked their safety for their activism. The rise of Khomeini shifted the political activism that women powered, and women continued to emerge as prominent components in the mobilization against another unjust government.

Separated by social class and geographic location, women throughout the White Revolution faced an evolving status. Land Reforms on the rural population were resolved by the Shah to counter poverty, but were not indicative of the culture of what the rural population needed to have social mobility. Additionally, the land reforms tied women to an exploitative labor force, with land reforms evolving the family structure, allowing women to contribute to the income of the family. The income of rural women was supplemented by employment in the textile sector, which gave low wages and housed poor working conditions. The pursuit of the eradication of literacy programs alleviated a small portion of the illiteracy in the country, and did not lead to higher educational opportunities that changed the job opportunities that rural women held. Inversely, women in urban areas were affected disproportionately more than rural women. Upper class women had a propensity to live in urban areas with access to higher education, not only in Iran but abroad. Higher education opportunities enabled women to segue into mainstream advocacy organizations, like the WOI.

While the WOI was directly affiliated with the Shah's regime, women in the WOI were able to openly advocate for a fixed agenda for women's rights. Without intent, the Shah's White

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[166] United States Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center Office of Regional and Political Analysis. 1979. Iran: Women's Movement. https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/iran-womens-movement/docview/1679063567/se-2?accountid=7122.

[167] Youssef Ibrahim, "Foes of Khomeini Focusing on issues of Women's Rights,"The New York Times, 1979. https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/foes-khomeini-focusing-on-issue womens-rights/docview/120938001/se-2.

Revolution empowered women across the political spectrum to mobilize. During the White Revolution, urban women took on a proactive role in the pursuit of amending the position of women, which was pursued through legislation. As the White Revolution progressed and dissatisfaction with the Shah grew, women outside of the mainstream purview of women's organizations, like leftist organizations, were prominent in the political mobilization against the Shah. While rural women still faced difficulties in their political advocacy, rural women were presented with opportunities to join in demonstrations that called for the ousting of the Shah. Additionally, the White Revolution unified women who were aligned through a common enemy, the Shah. The disparities between rural and affluent women were aggravated by the White Revolution through the injustices present in the reforms, and women sought out a political outlet through the ousting of the Shah.

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