

# Traditional Iranian Women: How They Cope <sup>(1)</sup>

## Traditional Feminine Role

The author introduces the article with a picture of a woman wearing a heavy black chador<sup>(2)</sup> and carrying a muffled up baby, thus symbolizing the main roles of the traditional Iranian woman: bearing children and adhering strictly to religious law. Failing to perform this double duty means losing her status, prestige, political allies, the comfort of having intimate relations with children and their support in old age.

The traditional Iranian woman also plays a social role. Through interaction with other women, she maintains political ties between her family and other families. Frequent visits, meetings, cooperation in housework and exchange of gifts help to maintain socio-political ties among families and allows them to arrange marriages and concern themselves with weddings, pregnancies and births.

Participation in religious activities, such as pilgrimages and attending religious schools, because it has the approval of their husbands, gives them an opportunity to leave the house, to hold social gatherings and to obtain solidarity and companionship.

Their economic dependence on men forces them to comply with their wishes. Conflicts with husbands and in-laws might lead them to seek divorce, commit suicide or return to the father's house, but such revolts are rare and sporadic.

## Class Differences

The author conducted her fieldwork in a village near Shiraz, to which she gave the pseudonym "Alia-bad". In her article, she points out the differences in status between rural women who were rather isolated and not allowed to join in religious rituals, and a wealthier group, the wives of the Seyyid traders, who identified themselves as descendants of the Prophet through a male line. These women were more active in social relations and in religious practices. They had had more interaction with men and other family members and had participated in trading activities. As a result they were assertive and competent in domestic and kin settings. They had sufficient leisure, intensive participation in women's groups and exposure to the outside world.

On the other hand, women in urban areas, like those in rural ones, were far more secluded than the wives of the Seyyid traders. The same was true

of poor workers who migrated from rural areas to Tehran, and found some compensation in religious practices. Urbanization and the decline of their economic dealings put more restraint on their activities.

## Women and the Revolution

The Revolution brought an upsurge of religious activities, ritual and education. When women joined in demonstrations, they carried their children and marched in separate groups from men, thus increasing their segregation. They were involved in extensive networks of social interaction. They preached socio-economic equality and the end of corruption and immorality. Women of the Seyyid trader group, many of the poor migrant women, and traditional middle class and lower class women of Shiraz, participated in the Revolution, but not so the peasant women who were cynical about the ability of the revolution to improve their condition.

After the revolution, women were disappointed because they did not obtain the expected freedom and equality. They were forced to return to their homes and wear the chador. Enforced veiling and more rigid control over behavior became symbols of political power; of the strength of the lower classes against the modernized, Westernized classes, who had encouraged imperialism.

Though women did not join the revolution as feminists, they hardly expected the resulting tightening of restrictions. Controlled by their economic dependence on men, traditional Iranian women attempt to achieve a certain degree of security by obeying the laws imposed on them. After the revolution, force and fear of government and strangers were added to economic dependence, social pressure of husbands and social control networks. "The veiling and seclusion of women symbolizes the success of the revolutionary Islamic ideology".

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(1) Abstract of an article by Mary Elaine Hegland, based on personal and other anthropologic fieldworks in Iran between 1975 and 1980, published in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 36, no. 4, Autumn 1982.

(2) A dress which covers the whole body showing only the face and hands.