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

The Role of Women's Organization in Fars Women's Public Health and Hygiene (1966-1979)

Abstract

Hygiene has always been one of the most important concern of human beings. The negligence of this crucial issue is regarded as the source of many diseases affecting the society. In Iran, during the Pahlavi epoch, with the establishment of medical institutions, attempts were made to pay attention to sanitary problems, and issues related to women were no exception. During this period, associations were formed to defend women's rights, including women's health issues. One of the most important governmental organizations during the era of Pahlavi II was the Women's Organization of Iran, which focused on women's educational, health and legal affairs and established various branches throughout the country, one of which was the Fars Women's Organization. This study, by employing a descriptive-analytical method, was carried out based on the available documents and library resources to examine the activities of the Fars Women's Organization in the field of health during the years 1966-1979. Research findings suggest that the Fars Women's Organization tried to improve the conditions of women by forming commissions and designing programs in the field of women's health and hygiene. However, owing to the lack of due attention given by the government to the issues related to women and the shortage of funding, the activities of Women's organization and its commissions failed to go beyond sending some annual reports to the headquarter and hence its activities were confined to some superficial issues, most of which were left unfinished.

Key words: Women, Iranian Women's Organization, Health, Shiraz, Fars Women's Organization, Hygiene

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Esmat Babadi¹ 
Hamid Hajianpour² 

1- Ph.D. student of History of Iran, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

2- Associate professor, Department of history, Shiraz university, Faculty of literature and humanities, Shiraz, Iran

Correspondence:

Hamid Hajianpour
Associate professor, Department of history, Shiraz university, Faculty of literature and humanities, Shiraz, Iran

hhajianpour@yahoo.com

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Introduction

Undeniably hygiene is of crucial importance to every community and its impact on the society is inseparable from the quality of human life. In addition to the important role of hygiene in human health, it, in effect, contributes to disease prevention and disease control. Meanwhile, compared to men, women are more sensitive to lack of sanitation. In Iran, until the Second World War, due to the lack of hygiene, numerous diseases afflicted people and women as the member of society were also adversely affected by different diseases. Towards the end of the Qajar period, some associations were formed, paying close attention to women's issue. Among them, the most known associations were the "Etehadieh Gheibi Nesvan" (lit. Occult Women's Union), the "Anjomani Azadi Zannan" (lit. Women's Liberation Association) (Khosropanah, 2002, pp. 227-229). These associations, while mainly focusing on housekeeping and child rearing, paid some scant attention to women's public health, as well. In the first Pahlavi period, associations such as the Women's Association were after women's rights. In addition to motivating literacy, the Women's Association encouraged women to observe their own and their children's hygiene (Report of the 10th academic year of the Women's Association, 1945, p. 3). The Iranian Women's Organization was one of the most important governmental organizations in the second Pahlavi period which, with the support of the government, sought to improve the cultural, social and economic conditions of women in the 1960s. In doing this, the organization also took special interests in women's health issues. The Fars Women's Organization, headquartered in Shiraz, which was also one of the most important branches of the Iranian Women's Organization, in line with the statute of the Iranian Women's Organization, took measures to improve the conditions of women in the province. To the best knowledge of the researchers, so far no independent research has been done on the activities of the Fars Women's Organization in the field of women's hygiene and health.

This study seeks to find out what efforts the Fars Women's Organization made to improve the health status of women. It seems that the Fars Women's Organization tried to improve the health status of women in the province by holding health education workshops, educational seminars and family control programs. However, issues like the government's view on women issues, budget shortages and the programs involving a limited number of women inhibited the effectiveness of such organizations in the society.

The state of public health in Fars in the past

During the Second World War and the beginning of the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, the hygienic condition of the society was poor and people were suffering from diseases such as typhoid, malaria, typhoid and dysentery. According to the statistics of infectious diseases in Fars province in 1946, in Shiraz, 62 persons; in Mamasani, 229 persons; in Firoozabad, 6486 persons; in Borazjan, 2430 persons; in Ardakan, 34 persons; in Fasa, 821 persons; in Bavanat, 514 persons; in Estahbanat 294 persons; in Abadeh, 616 persons ; in Darab, 424 persons and in Jahrom 3323 persons were infected with infectious diseases (Heidari, 2020, p. 76). This might because of using unsafe drinking water. The people of Shiraz, for instance, used to drink from the running water



or well water which was not free from contamination. This was mostly because people used to wash their clothes or even bathed in the same water in its passage to reaching their homes. In addition, those residing in villages and towns did not have private baths in their homes. Hence, they had to use public baths, called Khazine, which was the main source of infectious and contagious diseases. The geographical location of Fars was another contributory factor for the occurrence and transmission of diseases. The transit route of the Persian Gulf (Bushehr-Kazerun-Shiraz) to Isfahan passed through Fars province and this route was one of the busiest routes for transporting goods imported by sea to the north of the country (Tehran) (Heidari, 2019, pp. 49-50).

Following this, after World War II, the Iranian Ministry of Health asked the United States for help, and the US military sent 28 physicians and medical assistants to Iran, to help control infectious diseases, especially malaria. However, because of the poor public hygiene, the southwestern regions of the country were still affected by the disease. Since 1951, the cooperation between the Ministry of Health of Iran and the United States, especially the "Public Health Cooperative Organization" decreased the rate of diseases, such as typhoid and cholera. One of the activities of this organization was the establishment of Shiraz Health Center in 1953 with the financial support of the United States, in which several American doctors and nurses worked. This center paid special attention to pregnant women and maternal and child health. This was, in fact, a prelude to focusing on women's health in the second Pahlavi period (Heidari, 2019, pp. 79-85). Of course, the English hospital of Morsalin in Shiraz also played an important role in maternal health and control of sexually transmitted diseases in the first Pahlavi period, (Heidari, 2019, pp. 49-52). In the second Pahlavi period, especially from the 1960s onwards, compared to the Qajar period, more attention was paid to Iran's progress, which led to the improvement of the health status, and construction of more medical centers. Until the end of the second Pahlavi period, certain cities of Fars enjoyed having a limited number of doctors and clinics. Until 1978, some hospitals were built in Abadeh, Jahrom, Fasa, Kazerun, Firoozabad. However, there was not any hospitals in Mamasani, Neyriz, Marvdasht and Estahban and there were just a few medical centers and few doctors in practice in these areas (Statistics of Fars Province, 1980, pp. 7-26).

The Iran Women's Organization

The Women's Organization of Iran, in line with the White Revolution of the Shah and the Nation in the 1960s, was established during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, playing an active role in the process of modernization of the country under the leadership of Ashraf Pahlavi in 1967. The main members of the Central Council of the Iranian Women's Organization were mostly men and Farrokh Ro Parsa was the only female member of the Central Council of the Iranian Women's Organization (Yearbook of the Iran Women's Organization, 1967, p. 98).

The ultimate goal of the Iranian Women's Organization was to improve cultural, social, and economic knowledge of women, and as Ashraf Pahlavi stated it was a non-political organization. However, after the foundation of Rastakhiz Party in March 1976, the Iranian Women's Organization joined the party and in fact took a political stance (Karnameh of the Iranian Women's Organization, 1977, pp. 4-10). Despite this, gener-



ally speaking, the Organization aimed at expanding women's literacy, vocational education, and their presence in various economic, cultural, and social fields (Welfare Centers of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1973, p. 4).

Formation of Fars Women's Organization

Owing to the historical background of Fars province, it has always been considered as one of the most important provinces of Iran. The Fars Women's Organization was one of the most important branches of the organization. It had some branches in different cities of the province, each being named after the name of the city in which it is settled, such as the Shiraz Women's Organization, the Nurabad Mamasani Women's Organization, the Abadeh Women's Organization, and so on. Educational (literacy and vocational), legal, hygienic and welfare affairs were among the most important activities of these branches, aiming at changing the status of women in the social arena (Iranian women from paddy field to ministry, no date, p. 43; Afkhami, 2003, p. 60). Despite their importance, these issues failed to receive proper and constant supervision. The first secretary general of the Fars Women's Organization was Meymant Dana, who was elected by the Supreme Director of the Iranian Women's Organization in 1968 (Pars newspaper, 1968, April 29, p. 2; Sakma, No. 293-045110, p. 26).

The Women's Organization in Shiraz formally started functioning with the cooperation of other organizations, administering cultural and social activities. According to the report of Shiraz Women's Organization in 1969, the municipality of Shiraz assigned the Mayor's residential for the activities of the Women's Organization (Sakma, No. 293-041177, p. 58) and in return, the Women's Organization cooperated with the municipality and appointed a group to supervise the improvement of the quality of life in the city. To accomplish this, the women's organization regularly visited baths, dairies, shops, and in case of violating the hygienic rules of health, their work license would be revoked by the municipality (Sakma, No. 293-040063, p. 12). This was one of the collaborations of Shiraz Women's Organization with different guilds. The Fars Women's Organization, in order to improve women's condition, built women's centers in different cities of the province, undertaking educational, hygienic and legal activities. (Figure 1) However, these centers, which were supposed to support and promote these activities, were often underfunded, inhibiting it from accomplishing its goals. Sometimes the construction of these centers was just limited to official correspondence and was left uncompleted. As a result, members of the women's organization had to work in buildings rented for a certain amount of time. Women's Organization in Shiraz, for instance, six years after its foundation, was still asking the municipality to assign a permanent location to this organization. Finally, in 1972, it finally succeeded to move to a permanent place in the Valiahd Park (now Valiasr Park) (Sakma, No. 98-293-1083, p. 49). This was the same for its branches in other cities of Fars. In many cities, until the 70s, there was no precise location being assigned for them and their activities. Despite this, Fasa Women's Organization, which did not have an exact location until 1972, and often faced serious problems in paying the monthly rent, was quite active in executing its assigned programs. (Sakma, No. 293-041177, p. 2).



Holding seminars on psychology and hygiene

In 1972, a seminar was held on health and family planning in collaboration with the Shiraz Women's Organization, the Farah Pahlavi Charity, women affiliated with the Iran Novin Party, and the Shiraz Jewish Women's Organization, examining issues related to unbalanced population growth, birth control and hygiene. (Pars newspaper, 1972, p. 2). The most important purpose of this seminar was the inclusion of health education and family planning in the high school curriculum, holding meetings of the 'Home & School Association' to get parents acquainted with family planning and increasing the number of health and family planning clinics in densely populated areas, especially in the underprivileged areas of the city (Ejtema Melli newspaper, 1972, p. 2). Holding seminars and conferences focusing on health in Fars could increase health and hygienic awareness among women in the city. However, this was limited to a minority of women and students living in Shiraz, and no health seminars and conferences were held in other cities of Fars. (Figure 2)



Figure 1. One of the Iran Women's Organization's Legal Centers (Welfare Centers of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1973, p. 15)

Establishing welfare centers

Establishing welfare centers The establishment of welfare centers was another service provided with the Women's Organization of Iran in order to improve the life condition of women in cities. The activities of these centers included family health and planning, family counseling and legal affairs, day-care and training. The purpose of the organization in the health and family planning unit was maternal and child health education,



public health education, medical first aid and referring patients to welfare centers in cooperation with the Ministry of Health (Welfare Centers of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1973, pp. 10-17). Birth control was very important in the second Pahlavi period so much so that welfare centers took more measures to pregnancy prevention programs. Although the welfare centers had useful goals in the field of health, unfortunately, in most cases, not enough care was given to the construction of such centers. For instance, the construction of the welfare center in Shiraz lasted until 1977. The local newspaper Pars gave a report of the opening of the welfare center of the Women's Organization in Farah Street, Hemmat Alley and Khayyam Street, Borhan Alley in 1977 (Pars newspaper, 1977, p. 2).



Figure 2. A view from the meetings of the Iran Women's Organization (Welfare Centers of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1973, p. 23)

Health education and family planning

Health education and family planning was one of the important programs of the Iranian Women's Organization in the provincial capitals, which was formed in consistent with the main objectives of the government, including birth control. At the beginning of the formation of Shiraz Women's Organization in 1968, the three executive groups "Public Relations", "Hygiene" and "Family Planning" took responsibility to familiarize women with the principles of childbearing, family planning and hygiene (Sakma, No. 293-040063, pp. 13-16). The organization held classes on hygiene and family planning every Sunday at the secretariat, near Bagh Safa Bridge in Shiraz (Pars newspaper, 1968, October 9, p. 2). Hygiene education included the most basic issues such as food hygiene, personal hygiene, hygiene during pregnancy and family planning, and the



Ministry of Health, to some extent, assisted the Women's Organization by employing members of *sepah behdasht* (lit. health corps) and midwives in urban and rural areas (Afkhami, 2003, p. 63). Although the establishment of the health corps in the 1960s was effective in improving the health of the country, more than 45% of physicians were in Tehran. There was no medicine in many rural areas, and the distance to the nearest medical center was usually long. The remoteness and dispersion of the villages made it difficult for the villagers to go to the cities for treatment (Rafei et al., 2018, p. 31).

One of the ways to expand the activities of the Iranian Women's Organization in the field of health was to train high-school graduate girls as family hygiene counselors to serve their city after graduation (Sakma, No. 98-293-10269, p. 7). After graduation, they were supposed to be employed in one of the social welfare centers, including hospitals, welfare centers, kindergartens, health and family planning centers, orphanages, and municipal educational welfare centers. (Figures 3 and 4) The overall purpose of their training was to educate women about childbearing, health, nutrition, family planning issues, and encouraging them to participate in adult-literacy classes (Sakma, No. 98-293-10269, p. 10). Lack of trained staff to properly use welfare services was one of the reasons for training family counselors. (Figure 5)



Figure 3. One of the Iran Women's Organization's Kindergartens (Welfare Centers of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1973, p. 9)

Another issue after training family advisers was their involvement in the administrative affairs of the country and their employment in the relevant institutions. Although family counselors received useful training, some institutions were reluctant to recruit them due to lack of funding. The Shir-o- khorshid (lit. Red Lion and Sun) population of



Shiraz in 1970 announced to the governor of Fars that they lacked the required budget and legal authority to hire them, and their employment would be feasible if their salaries were paid by the Women's Organization (Sakma, No. 98-293-10269, p. 1). On the other hand, the Fars Health Department announced to the governor in 1971 that "if it gets the legal permission for employment, it would hire those who have two years of experience and are trained by the Women's Social Services Law" (Sakma, No. 98-293-10269, p. 2). Then, after graduation, some of these family consolers, who were not hired, could not, in effect, help the local women. In addition, these rural girls, who migrated to the city for studying, assimilated the city's culture, and after graduation, confronted some cultural conflicts with their hometown. Thus, many of them decided to continue their education and work in Tehran whereas they were supposed to use their knowledge in the villages or towns they came from (Ahmadi Khorasani and Ardalan, 2003, p. 505).

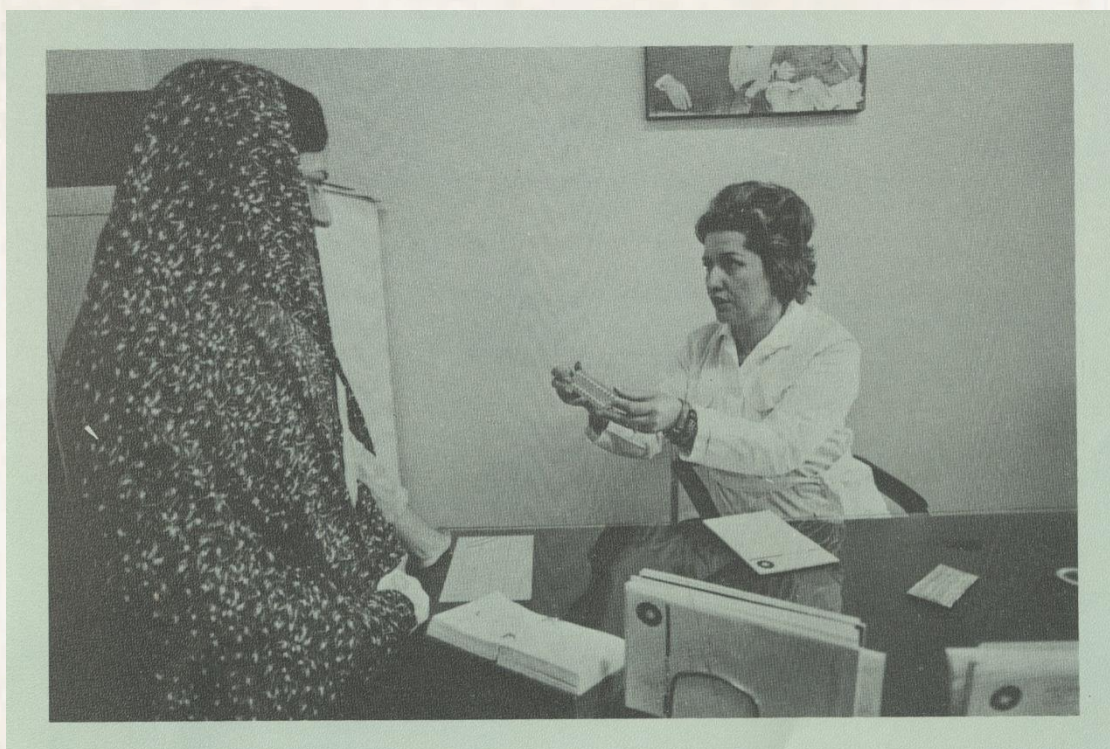


Figure 4. One of the Iran Women's Organization's Health Centers (Welfare Centers of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1973, p. 13)

Activity of women's organization in Fars cities

The Fars Women's Organization had a much poorer performance in the field of women's public health in cities other than Shiraz, and was content to just write reports and send them to the center. As observed in the report of the health activity of Jahrom Women's Organization, the mere activity it undertook was to encourage patients to refer to the doctors who had missions going from one rural area to others, explaining the issues of hygiene and family planning to women (Sakma, No. 293-043696, p. 127). In addition, in 1971, a commission was formed in Jahrom for motivating women to participate



in the social affairs of their village, and it was decided that the villagers would be trained by girls recruited by sepah danesh (lit. literacy corps) and even boys recruited by sepah tarvij (lit. promulgating corps), cooperatives and village associations. In the report we found from this organization, the cooperation of the sepah behdasht (lit. health corps) with the Jahrom Women's Organization was observed. There, it was decided that there should be two members of sepah behdasht in Khafr area (belonging to Jahrom branch), a mobile family planning team and a psychology graduate with a bachelor's degree to work together in order to improve the life and health conditions of the villagers (Sakma, No. 293-043696, p. 11).



Figure 5. Tailoring training in the Iran Women's Organization (Welfare Centers of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1973, p. 21)

Sarvestan Women's Organization branch, from which there is not enough information, was located in Sarvestan, a city in Fars province. The first meeting of Sarvestan Women's Organization was held in 1969, but there is no information about its activities with regard to improving the public health of women (Pars newspaper, 1969, p. 4). This organization was placed in a rented building until 1970, unable to pay its rent (Sakma, No. 98-293-943, p. 8; Sakma, No. 293-039658, p. 14).

The organization's programs were generally limited to celebrations, anniversaries, and national celebrations attended by a limited number of officials, members of the organization, and students (Sakma, No. 350-002859, p. 3). However, in April 1978, Nasrin Homayouni, the secretary of this organization, mentioned in a report the interest of rural



women in holding health, vocational and art classes. Following this, some women were sent to the welfare centers of Shiraz Women's Organization and participated in intensive classes (Sakma, No. 98-293-792, p. 3).

The health programs run by Fasa Women's Organization comprised delivering some bi-monthly lectures on health and birth control for newly literate people in 1971 and giving contraceptive pills to women (Sakma, 293-067240, pp. 11-17). The Family Welfare Center affiliated with the Fasa Women's Organization had a day care, two vocational classes, and ten adult literacy classes in Fasa and dependent villages. This center also had a family planning and hygiene unit as well as a legal unit (Pars newspaper, 1974, p. 2). It seems that Fasa was the only city in that Fars province that had a proper family welfare center.

Kazerun Women's Organization was another branch of the Iranian Women's Organization in Fars. In this city in 1968, classes were held by the organization, one of which concerned hygienic issues held through chairing a health commission. There, it was decided to take steps in the development of women's condition, as well (Sakma, No. 293-052958, p. 89).

Among the activities of the Health Commission of Kazerun Women's Organization in 1971, one was delivering lectures for members of the Health Commission by Ms. Dana, a specialist in health and family planning, on Tuesdays at the Kazerun Girls' college. There were also some training courses held for fourteen members to establish a health and family planning clinic. All these programs were exclusively run for members of the Women's Organization (Sakma, No. 293-025958, p. 17).

Documents obtained from the Mamasani Women's Organization were also related to years after 1970. The Mamasani Women's Organization began its activities along with the "Urban and Rural Improvement Commission". This commission, with the help of the municipality, tend to monitor food prices, the condition of the streets and the observance of the principles of public health (Sakma, No. 293-032112, p. 53). In 1970, after appointing the "Health Commission", this organization succeeded in sending forty-five persons to health and family planning centers (Sakma, No. 293-032112, p. 48). In 1971-1973, the organization, together with the "Urban and Rural Improvement Commission", managed to inspect different sections of the city, control the price of goods and report problems to the municipality (Sakma, No. 98-293-11813, p. 47). In 1973, a total of 200 persons were encouraged to refer to the health and family planning center, four for receiving contraceptive pills, five for receiving condoms, and four for IUDs (Sakma, No. 98-293-11813, p. 58).

Neyriz Women's Organization also started its activities by setting up commissions in 1972. The Neyriz Health and Family Planning Commission implemented health and family planning programs, referring pregnant women and encouraging 350 persons to refer to the clinic. In addition, the treatment of four patients with alopecia, the treatment of twelve patients with trachoma with ointment and medication were its other activities. Meanwhile, "Urban and Rural Improvement Commission", cooperated with the Governor's Office, made an attempt to improve the condition of the city by blocking the stalls and places violating hygienic principles. Kurd (Sakma, No. 98-293-16250, p. 87). It also, in cooperation with the municipality, inspected grocery stores and butchereries to



see if they observed the hygienic principles of the city.

The activities of the Fars Women's Organization in the field of women's hygiene were limited to sending annual reports to the secretariats of the organization's branches to be shared with the headquarter, but there is no accurate information on the functions and outcome of their performance. In some cases, people were not even aware of the existence of the women's organization. In Neyriz, for instance, Ms. Mehran Zare, the secretary, announced in a letter that no one had known about the organization before 1975. This was the case eight years after the establishment of the Women's Organization (Sakma, No. 98-293-16250, p. 18-20). In the case of family planning classes, in addition to the lack of information and the limited number of members of the women's organization, another issue was the incorrect use of contraceptives. As Mahnaz Afkhami, who was the secretary general of the Iranian Women's Organization in the 1970s, pointed out that sometimes women did not know how to use the contraceptive pill properly, and in some cases a woman gave the contraceptive pill to her husband every morning instead of taking it herself. (Afkhami, 2003, p. 64).

An important point that should not be overlooked is that the members of the women's organization in Fars and other cities themselves needed health and hygienic training. However, because of fund shortages, this was not feasible. It is worth mentioning that most members of the Women's Organization in Fars Province were teachers or the spouse of high-ranking people of the city who did not seem to have enough information about health issues. The membership of the wives of high-ranking officials was also symbolic, enhancing the recognition of the activities of the women's organization. Among the high-ranking members of the Fasa Women's Organization, e.g., we can mention Ms. Alavi Nejad, the wife of the head of provincial education, Ms. Abrari, the wife of the head of the National Bank, and other women whose names were mentioned in the documents (Sakma, No. 293-067240, p. 87). The members of the Mamasani Women's Organization were also mostly teachers, school principals or assistants, as follows: Maryam Balbali (teacher), Fakhri Mohammadzadeh (principal), Sakineh Yaghoubzadeh (guidance school assistant) and many other like women. (Sakma, No. 98-293-11813, p. 20). Similarly, the members of the women's organization in other cities of Fars were either teachers or wives of high-ranking people of the city.

Therefore, although the Fars Women's Organization was one of the most important branches of the Iranian Women's Organization, it always suffered fund shortages. This was mainly because of the fact that the government never took women and their problems seriously. One of the reasons for the shortage of funding of the Iranian Women's Organization in the cities other than capital was that most of the organization's budget was spent on international conferences with the aim of promoting the status of women. Although the branches of the organization in the cities were in an unfavorable financial condition, the organization easily donated money to the Women's Support Center at the World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975. Ashraf Pahlavi, the President of the Organization, allocated \$ 500,000 to the International Fund for Women's Year, \$ 500,000 to the Asian Center for Women's Education and Research, and \$ 1 million for the initial costs of establishing the International Women's Research Center in Tehran. (Report on the activities of the Women's Organization of Iran, 1974-1975, p. 26). Most



of the activities of the Iranian Women's Organization were just for the purpose of propaganda in defense of women's rights, which were concluded by some reports written on progress in various fields of education, health and welfare of women.

Conclusion

One of the goals of the White Revolution in the 1960s was to pay more attention to women. Meanwhile, the Iranian Women's Organization also tried to take steps to improve women's condition in cities, including those of Fars province, by holding health education and family planning classes, establishing welfare centers, and seminars. This was an important step for the province and could be effective in improving the condition of women, but the study of documents showed that, in fact, the measures taken involved a few number of women and the majority of women were not even aware of the existence of the women's organization. In addition, most members of this organization themselves needed training in issues like health and hygienic problems because they were either school teachers or spouses of high-ranking members of the city. In many cities of Fars province, this organization faced shortage of funds, even for assigning a building for this organization. Moreover, their programs were not taken as seriously as they deserved. Although, by the end of the Pahlavi period, compared to the Qajar and the first Pahlavi period, the number of health centers and clinics in the province increased, many cities and villages still faced lack of health facilities. Although the Fars Women's Organization tried to design the programs of the Women's Organization in various cities of the province, these also were unimplemented programs, just written on the paper, and not more than the reports sent to the center. Finally, the performance of the Iranian Women's Organization in Fars in the field of women's public hygiene was far from satisfactory, in need of more support and supervision of the government. Generally speaking, the measures taken can only be considered as a prelude to paying attention to women's health in this period. Finally, the women's organization and its activities were mostly limited to family planning, and a little attention was paid to women's public health issues at large. Their activities, involving a very limited number of women in the province, comprised holding health education classes, sending doctors from village to village to visit patients, holding seminars on the use of contraceptives and birth control.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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