

# Reflection of Women's Issues in the First Legislative Term of the National Consultative Assembly (Based on Parliamentary Debates)

Mehrosadat. Ashrafpour<sup>1\*</sup>, Soheila. Torabi Farsani<sup>2</sup>, Feyzollah. Boshaseb Gosheh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD Student, Department of History, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of History, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

\* Corresponding author email address: stfarsani1963@gamil.com

Received: 2023-09-02

Revised: 2023-11-01

Accepted: 2023-11-07

Published: 2023-12-28

Women's issues, as one of the prominent factors in the development and progress of society, have always been the subject of attention and debate. The significance of this study lies in examining the extent to which the institution emerging from the Persian Constitutional Revolution paid attention to women's issues despite women's participation in that movement. Women were not allowed to attend the First National Consultative Assembly to present their views and issues; nevertheless, the representatives discussed and examined some of the most important matters concerning women, such as women's political rights, women's financial support for the establishment of the National Bank of Iran, women's pensions, and the buying and selling of girls. This study aims to examine the reflection of women's issues during the First Legislative Term in Iran based on the official debates of the National Consultative Assembly. The study seeks to answer the question of which women's issues were raised during the First Legislative Term. Answering this question can play a significant role in revealing the overlooked aspects of the history of the Assembly and the transformations in modern Iranian history. This research investigates the performance of the National Consultative Assembly during its First Legislative Term regarding matters related to women's issues. In this article, the focus is first on the issues raised about women in the First National Consultative Assembly. Based on the research findings, the results indicate that due to disagreements among the representatives during this period and the large volume of social and political problems, no significant steps were taken. The research method in this study is library-based, using books, newspapers, and parliamentary debates, and the analysis method will be descriptive-analytical.

**Keywords:** Women, National Consultative Assembly, Legislative Term, First Term, Quchan Girls.

## How to cite this article:

Ashrafpour, M., Torabi Farsani, S., & Boshaseb Gosheh, F. (2023). Reflection of Women's Issues in the First Legislative Term of the National Consultative Assembly (Based on Parliamentary Debates). *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, 2(4), 111-121. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.isslp.2.4.13>

## 1. Introduction

The structure of Iran's society during the Qajar era was traditional. The lives of women, as half of the population, were confined to domestic activities. They had little role in social, political, or cultural activities. However, their presence in some social movements, such

as bread riots and the Tobacco Protest, cannot be ignored (Najmabadi, 1993).

In general, Iranian women during the Qajar period were unable to attain a position in society due to the lack of suitable social, political, and cultural conditions. During the reign of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, when the idea of reforms laid the groundwork for fundamental social



changes, the basis for social critique also emerged. The victory of the Persian Constitutional Revolution marked a transformation with multiple dimensions, involving many social strata and creating an opportunity for women's issues to move from the private sphere to the public sphere (Torabi Farsani, 2018).

Despite the unequal views toward women in Qajar society, they did not cease their efforts. They participated in social protests, supported the clergy in gatherings, and made financial sacrifices to advance the goals of the Constitutional Revolution (E'Zam Qudsi, 2000).

After years of struggle and anticipation, the constitutionalists attempted to promptly hold elections and establish the parliament. The National Consultative Assembly's First Term must be regarded as one of the most important legislative periods in Iran both in terms of the composition of its representatives from different social classes and its crucial duties. Despite facing the principled opposition of despotic courtiers, the power of princes and khans, and sometimes the influence of foreign agents, this Assembly managed to secure the ratification of the Constitution of Iran—comprising 51 articles—by Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar on December 30, 1906, and later, under harsh conditions and in the midst of the struggle between constitutionalists and their opponents, to obtain the signing of the Supplement to the Constitution by his despotic successor Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar on October 7, 1907 (Shojaei, 1993).

In each city under a province, six social classes elected their own representatives, who were sent to the provincial capital, and from among themselves they chose their class representative to send to the parliament. Women had neither the right to vote nor the right to be elected to parliament, and this legal restriction continued until the twenty-first term of the Assembly. Although women were not present in the Assembly, issues concerning them were nonetheless raised and discussed.

This article seeks to answer the question of which issues concerning women were raised during the First Legislative Term. Answering this question can play a crucial role in revealing the overlooked aspects of the history of the First Assembly and the transformations of modern Iranian history. In terms of methodology, this study is historical research, employing a library-based approach and a descriptive-analytical method. The data

were collected using note-taking from books, newspapers, and the parliamentary debates related to this study.

This study aims to examine the performance of the First National Consultative Assembly, as a modern institution emerging from the Constitutional Revolution, in addressing women's issues and to what extent it endeavored to raise and resolve these issues during its first sessions. To this end, debates of the Assembly related to women were studied and analyzed. Since examining the parliamentary debates and internal discussions can shed new light on the topic, this study examines the evolution of women's issues from a different perspective. It clarifies the role of the Assembly in the political, social, and cultural transformations concerning women. It should be noted that parts of the official debates of the First Assembly were lost during its bombardment, which has created gaps in the available records.

## 2. Research Background

Most of the surviving historical sources from that period make little to no reference to this topic. Library searches and reviews of available Persian sources revealed no independent and comprehensive study devoted to this subject. However, some sources have sporadically addressed the First National Consultative Assembly but have not considered women's issues. For example, *The National Parliament (A Study of the Political Orientations of the First National Consultative Assembly of Iran)* by Mohammadamin Nezhdanjanian uses primary Constitutional Revolution sources to examine various aspects of the Assembly but does not address women's issues. Similarly, *The First Assembly and the Institutions of Constitutionalism* by Ali-Asghar Haqdar presents reports and analyses of the fundamental actions of the Assembly during the First Legislative Term based on the official debates, yet does not discuss women's issues. What distinguishes the present study from previous works is its focus on the issues raised about women in the First Assembly based on the complete parliamentary debates (Torabi Farsani, 2010).

## 3. The First Legislative Term

The First Assembly opened on October 7, 1906, following the election of the Tehran representatives, while

provincial elections continued in the subsequent months. This was the first parliamentary experience for the representatives, most of whom initially lacked sufficient knowledge of parliamentary procedures. The First Assembly is considered one of the most significant legislative periods. The fervor of victory over the despots and the prevailing anti-foreign atmosphere enabled the First Assembly to take actions to protect domestic capital, resist foreign influence, and limit the political power of the royal court (Torabi Farsani, 2005).

However, the First Assembly faced many crises. These included the intervention and influence of foreign powers, conflicts between the powers of the government, the Assembly, and the Shah that led to political instability, military campaigns and civil wars by claimants to the throne, and the activities of pro-absolutist forces. On one side were the efforts of centrifugal forces and the activities of the *mashruteh-khah* (constitutionalists), and on the other, the actions of associations and newspapers demanding deep socio-political reforms that positioned them as critics of the socio-political conditions. All of this took place in the context of the backward Qajar society, which had never practiced democratic methods in thought or action, creating chaos. In such circumstances, most constitutionalists focused on preserving the foundation of the nascent constitutional system. Ultimately, socio-political crises undermined the foundations of the Constitutional Revolution, and Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar shelled and dissolved the Assembly on June 23, 1908 (Shojaei, 1993).

During the First National Consultative Assembly, several issues related to women were raised. This study addresses those issues that received the most attention from the representatives and were discussed in multiple sessions. The general topics concerning women that were mentioned only briefly and without much follow-up are not the focus here. For instance, regarding the education of girls, the only instance mentioned in the debates was in the fourth session, held on November 26, 1906, when a letter from a woman requesting attention to and facilitation of girls' education was read aloud. Notably, this was the first time during the First Assembly that a letter from a women's rights activist was sent to the parliament (Habal al-Matin, 1907; Zaban-e Zanan Newspaper, 1920).

The women's issues that received the most attention from the representatives included: women's political rights, the National Bank of Iran, women's pensions, the buying and selling of girls, and especially the story of the Quchan girls (Habal al-Matin, 1906; Najmabadi, 2002).

#### 4. Women's Political Rights

Although women played a role in the events leading to the Persian Constitutional Revolution, Articles 2 and 3 of the Electoral Law of the National Consultative Assembly classified them—alongside minors, foreign nationals, and criminals—as ineligible to vote or be elected as representatives (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 140, July 31, 1907). At the time, some women protested this exclusion. They argued that the “justice-seeking brothers” among the constitutionalists had insulted women by placing them in the same category as the insane and the weak by denying them suffrage, while it could be proven that “women are not behind men by even a step.” They maintained that if women had the same educational and developmental opportunities as men, they would show even better results (Habal al-Matin, 1907; Najmabadi, 1993).

Later, the Zaban-e Zanan Newspaper also protested the denial of women's suffrage in an article titled “*The Pen Was in Men's Hands*”, arguing that if women had the right to vote, they would not, like men, choose despots and landlords but would instead elect those concerned with the affairs of the oppressed nation and the advancement of freedom (Zaban-e Zanan Newspaper, 1920).

Furthermore, women were also deprived of the right to vote and be elected under the Provincial and District Councils Law and the Municipal Law. In the municipal councils, women were explicitly barred from voting or being elected. Members of the municipal councils were chosen from city districts, and voters and candidates had to meet specific qualifications, while certain individuals were entirely excluded from the elections (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 69, March 19, 1907).

In Session 56 (March 5, 1907), Mirza Morteza Qoli Khan, a representative from Isfahan, for the first time raised the issue of women's associations in parliament by presenting a ticket from a women's society. This ticket was read aloud, though its text was not recorded in the proceedings, which merely stated, “A ticket concerning

an association was read" (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 56, March 5, 1907).

Some representatives attempted to introduce conditions for forming women's associations, framing their support in terms of religious considerations from Islamic history and law, and ultimately defended the equality of men and women as "Iranians," thus concluding the debate in favor of supporting women's associations (Najmabadi, 1993). Representatives such as Mirza Mahmoud and Haj Imam Jomeh opposed forming such associations, while others, including Vakil al-Raaya and Taghizadeh, supported them. They invoked Article 21 of the Constitution of Iran to argue that women's assemblies were permissible, which reduced opposition. Thus, the positions of some representatives in support of women's associations and gender equality ultimately benefited women.

### 5. Women's Contributions to the Establishment of the National Bank of Iran

One of the major concerns of the First National Consultative Assembly was to prevent the rising foreign debt, curb the political and economic influence of foreign banks, and repair the state treasury's finances, which threatened national independence. It therefore sought to reform the budget, limit royal and court expenses, and mobilize domestic capital by proposing the establishment of the National Bank to counter the Imperial Bank of Persia. The statute of the National Bank of Iran was approved on November 28, 1906, and announced on December 14, 1906.

Although people from all walks of life—including women, children, the poor, and students who sold their books—came forward with savings to support this cause, the bank could not be established due to numerous obstacles (Torabi Farsani, 2005). Nonetheless, this initiative demonstrated women's presence in society and their sense of responsibility toward addressing the government's needs, as they had already shown their social presence in other ways.

In several sessions, the parliament discussed women's support for establishing the bank, such as:

- Reading a proposal on women's participation in paying off state debts,
- Reading a letter from a woman from Qazvin to Saad al-Dawlah about assisting in founding the bank,
- Commendations from Mirza Abolhassan Khan for women who contributed to the bank's capital,

– Reading a letter from a woman donating her savings to create the bank, and

– Reports of Azerbaijani women donating gold to the relief fund for the government's financial needs (E'Zam Qudsi, 2000).

In Session 1 (November 22, 1906), a petition was read stating:

"We, the whole nation, have given up our lives and property to defend our rights from foreign encroachment... The women of this nation are ready to help repay the debts and meet the government's needs..."

In Session 42 (January 22, 1907), a letter from a woman of Qazvin was read, expressing willingness to help but noting that many could not reach Tehran to purchase bank shares. She mentioned even a widowed neighbor who sold her child's toys to contribute.

In Session 70 (March 17, 1907), it was reported that some women had contributed 5,000 tomans by selling their diamond and jeweled necklaces to invest in the bank.

In Session 112 (June 20, 1908), a statement from the Tabriz Union Association praised the patriotic zeal of Azerbaijani women who, despite hardships, were donating their necklaces, earrings, and bracelets to the fund for defending the constitutional cause (Habal al-Matin, 1906).

These actions show that some women sought to participate in the country's economic affairs and asserted their equality with men in resolving the nation's challenges. Thus, the fervent atmosphere of the era also drew women into the sphere of politics and society.

### 6. Parliament and Women's Pensions

The issue of customary stipends or pensions dating from the pre-Constitutional era confronted the First National Consultative Assembly. On the one hand, it was impossible to abolish them outright; on the other, the government's fiscal difficulties made their payment arduous. One item subject to reduction concerned women who, after the death of their husbands, had married other men and yet continued to receive the former husbands' stipends (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 178, October 30, 1907). In addition, there were women whose pensions were relatively high and, following the demands of the Finance Commission, had a portion of their stipends reduced (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 184, November 9, 1907).

*Habal al-Matin* reported a parliamentary action to secure funds to pay stipends to widows who had staged a sit-in at Toopkhaneh Square. It wrote that many princes, commanders, and other wealthy individuals presented sums to the parliament to resolve the matter, while some other princes refused to do so (*Habal al-Matin*, 1907).

Regarding the women whose pensions had been reduced, the Assembly spent two sessions responding to their objections, stating that some had remarried and come under the guardianship of another man, and others had been receiving high pensions and so experienced reductions rather than total suspension. The Speaker, addressing the suspension of stipends for widows who had remarried, stated: “You know I came to regularize the second financial term; I was so busy I could not join the commission, but to some extent I am informed. What is said about pensions being cut is not so. If people were informed, they would be thankful. The reductions are of several kinds. One concerns those who in the last two years drew funds without basis—even a single person under multiple names; those were cut. Second, very large lines, like ten thousand tomans and the like, were reduced. Third, some respected women who had gone and remarried also had some reduction” (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 178, October 30, 1907).

A group of women affected by the reductions were former wives of Naser al-Din Shah. They too objected to the parliamentary action and sought to receive their pensions as before. In a session on Thursday, November 27, 1907, part of the debates concerned the petition of several former wives of Naser al-Din Shah. Mohaqqeq-al-Dowleh announced that, because of the reductions, they had taken sanctuary in front of the Assembly building in protest and had submitted a letter to parliament seeking redress; the letter was read aloud (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 192, November 27, 1907). The representatives were divided on how to respond. Some, such as Aqa Mirza Mahmoud and Taqizadeh, strongly opposed granting the request, arguing that the petitioners possessed sufficient movable and immovable property to meet their needs and that the reduction would not harm them; they also warned that accommodating the request would disrupt the budgetary framework that had taken much time to prepare. Others, like Asadollah Mirza—a Qajar prince—believed that, in view of their belonging to the royal family and in some cases their need, consideration should be shown. Aqa

Sheikh Hossein opposed this reasoning, noting that many women from families of ‘Alawi descent were more in need than the former royal spouses and deserved attention. Aqa Seyyed ‘Ali-Naqi ended the dispute by stating that the adjustments to pensions for beneficiaries were undertaken solely on the basis of merit and need and had nothing to do with princely status or royal affiliation. In closing, Taqizadeh implicitly criticized the custom and manner of polygyny frequently practiced by Naser al-Din Shah (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 192, November 27, 1907). No further discussion appeared in subsequent debates, and it seems that the former royal spouses’ request was not granted. For broader context on the royal household and political elites of the period, see (*Shojaei*, 1993).

## 7. The Buying and Selling of Girls

In the Qajar period, it had become customary in some provinces for rulers to sell peasants’ children to meet assessed taxes. A considerable number of these children were girls. These girls, mostly from Kerman and Baluchistan, were bought and sold as maidservants. Farmers in these regions were more exposed than elsewhere in Iran to weather-related difficulties and often were unable to meet the government’s tax demands. In Session 268, dated Thursday, May 8, 1908, Shams al-Hokama, representative for Kerman, presented a bill requesting that the buying and selling of peasants’ children from Baluchistan—girls and boys alike—be legally halted. After the bill was read, the Speaker proposed calling upon the Minister of the Interior to act to prohibit slave-dealing. Aqa Mirza Mahmoud suggested that the Assembly telegraph the Kerman Provincial Council, asking it to stop this abhorrent practice. Haj Sheikh Hossein proposed legislating a statutory prohibition; the Speaker, however, argued that there was no need for a new law because such conduct was fundamentally wrong. Aqa Seyyed Mohammad-Jafar, citing Islamic rulings, declared the act forbidden and those who sold Muslims to be infidels, thereby endorsing the Speaker’s view that the matter was already determined by the sacred law. Nevertheless, Aqa Sheikh Mohammad-‘Ali contended that, although Islamic law contained rules regarding buyers and sellers who were Muslims, something should be written from today forward so that anyone committing the act in the future would be punished; he proposed ten years’

imprisonment. The Speaker replied that enacting any law to prohibit slave-dealing and prescribe penalties required passage through the Assembly's legislative stages in accordance with its internal regulations; however, immediate action was needed, so the Minister of the Interior should be asked to proceed at once, after

which the Assembly would take appropriate legislative steps (Parliamentary Proceedings, Term 1, Session 268, May 8, 1908). For the broader historical background on the "Girls of Quchan" and related practices during the Constitutional period, see (Najmabadi, 2002).

**Table 1**

*Summary of Sessions and Topics Raised on Women's Issues in the First National Consultative Assembly*

Topics Raised Regarding Women	Date & Session (Parliamentary Proceedings)
Reading of a bill on women's participation in paying state debts and meeting fiscal needs	Session 1 — Thursday, 5 Shawwal 1324 / November 22 1906
Reference to a letter from an educated woman requesting the Assembly to facilitate girls' education	Session 4 — Tuesday, 10 Shawwal 1324 / November 27 1906
Letter from a woman of Qazvin to Saad al-Dowleh regarding assistance in founding the National Bank of Iran	Session 42 — Tuesday, 6 Muharram 1325 / February 19 1907
Reading of a telegram from Langarud on an unlawful and security-threatening ruling by Sheikh Mohammad concerning a woman accused of an obscene act	Session 64 — Tuesday, 25 Safar 1325 / April 9 1907
Statements by Hasan-Ali Khan regarding the discovery of a woman's body and emphasizing lack of public security	Session 64 — Tuesday, 25 Safar 1325 / April 9 1907
Approval of provisions in the duties of provincial councils to assist indigent men and women	Session 67 — Sunday, 30 Safar 1325 / April 14 1907
Approval of an article in the Municipal Law concerning care for needy persons, men and women	Session 68 — Tuesday, 2 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325 / April 15 1907
Statements by Mirza Abolhassan Khan praising women for contributing to the National Bank's capital	Session 70 — Saturday, 6 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325 / April 19 1907
Reading of a letter from a woman donating her savings to help establish the National Bank	Session 70 — Saturday, 6 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325 / April 19 1907
Cooperation of Azerbaijani women selling their gold to contribute to the relief fund for the government's fiscal needs	Session 112 — Monday, 18 Jumada al-Awwal 1326 / June 20 1908
Approval of Articles 3 and 5 of the Electoral Law of the National Consultative Assembly prohibiting women from voting or being elected	Session 140 — Thursday, 19 Rajab 1324 / September 8 1906
Torture of Shi'a women by the Ottoman Empire government	Session 147 — Tuesday, 1 Sha'ban 1325 / September 9 1907
Approval of articles in the Law on the Formation of Provinces and Districts and the Governors' Instructions on aiding indigent men and women	Session 151 — Sunday, 6 Sha'ban 1325 / September 14 1907
Approval of an article in the same law prohibiting unlawful commingling of men and women	Session 151 — Sunday, 6 Sha'ban 1325 / September 14 1907
Debate on cutting the stipends of widows who had remarried	Session 178 — Thursday, 23 Ramadan 1325 / October 30 1907
Debate on the reduction of pensions for the wives of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar	Session 192 — Thursday, 21 Shawwal 1325 / November 27 1907
Attention to the livelihoods of survivors among official pensioners in several articles of the Duties Law	Session 249 — Thursday, 16 Safar 1326 / March 20 1908
Adoption of the bill by Shams al-Hokama (representative for Kerman and Baluchistan) abolishing the sale of peasants' children, girls and boys	Session 268 — Thursday, 6 Rabi' al-Thani 1326 / May 8 1908

## 8. The Quchan Girls

The sale of girls from Quchan to Ashgabat Turkmens and Armenians during the governorship of Asaf al-Dowleh in Khorasan, his son Amin Hossein Khan in Quchan, and Salar Mohtasham in Bojnord occurred in spring and autumn 1905 (1323 AH). The capture of women from the Bashqanlu tribe also took place during Salar Mohtasham's rule in Bojnord in Ramadan of the same

year, during an attack by Turkmens on the region (Najmabadi, 2002).

Mirza Abolqasem Khan was dispatched from Tehran by Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar to investigate the complaints of Quchan peasants. It was rumored that Ayn al-Dowleh, the prime minister at the time, had received bribes and gifts from Asaf al-Dowleh and thus ignored proposals to reduce Quchan's taxes. He telegraphed Asaf al-Dowleh, insisting that taxes must be paid at the previous years' rate. Asaf al-Dowleh added his personal dues (*haqq al-*

*hokumeh*) to the state taxes and ordered the tax officials to collect them. Some tax collectors themselves became buyers of the peasants' daughters, calculating each girl as equivalent to 12 *man* of wheat and selling them to Turkmens for between 15 and 40 tomans. They thus filled their pockets twice over—once through their share of collected taxes and again from the profit of selling the girls to the border Turkmens (Najmabadi, 2002).

The sale of peasant girls to Turkmens and Armenians was not confined to Quchan; many other provinces, including Astarabad, were also afflicted by this problem. The recounting and public hearing of these events became intertwined with the other struggles that

ultimately led to the issuance of the Persian Constitutional Edict. This incident, as much as anything, ignited public protests and became one of the sparks of the Persian Constitutional Revolution.

Its national significance was such that from the earliest months of the National Consultative Assembly's First Term, investigating the case of the Quchan girls became one of the nation's demands for justice against despotism. This matter occupied a substantial portion of parliamentary debates and many sessions of the First Assembly. The table below summarizes the sessions that addressed the "Quchan girls" in the official proceedings, followed by an explanation of the key debates.

**Table 2**

*Summary of Sessions Concerning the Quchan Girls*

Date & Session	Topic Raised Regarding the Quchan Girls
Session 34 – Monday, January 28, 1907 (12 Dhu al-Hijjah 1324)	Sale of girls
Session 41 – Monday, February 4, 1907 (4 Muharram 1325)	Sale of Quchani children and girls
Session 42 – Tuesday, February 5, 1907 (6 Muharram 1325)	Representatives' inquiries on government action regarding girl-selling and the capture of a woman in Astarabad
Session 44 – Saturday, February 9, 1907 (13 Muharram 1325)	Sale of Quchani girls
Session 44 – Saturday, February 9, 1907 (13 Muharram 1325)	Seyyed Hossein's question to the acting Interior Minister on the capture of women in Khorasan and Astarabad
Session 52 – Monday, March 11, 1907 (2 Safar 1325)	Telegram from Astarabad authorities to the Interior Ministry suggesting it would be beneficial to buy back Quchan captives
Session 59 – Saturday, March 22, 1907 (15 Safar 1325)	Capturing and selling girls
Session 59 – Saturday, March 22, 1907 (15 Safar 1325)	Statements by Aqa Mirza Abolhassan Khan on parliament's failure to compel the Interior Minister to free the captives; mention of <i>The Times</i> report on girls being sold in Tbilisi and some women sold to Turkmens
Session 61 – Tuesday, March 25, 1907 (18 Safar 1325)	Asaf al-Dowleh found culpable in the girls' capture
Session 61 – Tuesday, March 25, 1907 (18 Safar 1325)	Reading of a report bearing Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar's handwritten decree on returning captives
Session 66 – Saturday, April 5, 1907 (29 Safar 1325)	Proposal to form a tribunal to try Asaf al-Dowleh
Session 66 – Saturday, April 5, 1907 (29 Safar 1325)	Proposal by Aqa Mirza Seyyed Mohammad Mojtahed to seek help from Sardar Mohtasham Larijani to resolve the captive issue
Session 74 – Saturday, April 12, 1907 (13 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325)	Debate on Interior Ministry negligence in freeing the captives
Session 74 – Saturday, April 12, 1907 (13 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325)	Captivity of Quchani girls
Session 74 – Saturday, April 12, 1907 (13 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325)	Debate on whether to pay the Turkmens to secure the captives' release
Session 74 – Saturday, April 12, 1907 (13 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325)	Proposal to publish an announcement to identify captives and their owners
Session 81 – Thursday, April 24, 1907 (25 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325)	Taqizadeh urging swift trial and punishment of Asaf al-Dowleh and the release of captives
Session 81 – Thursday, April 24, 1907 (25 Rabi' al-Awwal 1325)	Mohtasham al-Saltaneh stating that 22 Astarabadi captives had been found and appointing Mofakher al-Molk to free them
Session 98 – Saturday, May 9, 1907 (26 Rabi' al-Thani 1325)	Aqa Mirza Mahmud Khansari proposing appointing six MPs to oversee Asaf al-Dowleh's trial in the Ministry of Justice
Session 124 – Saturday, July 26, 1907 (19 Jumada al-Thani 1325)	Reading of the Justice Commission's verdict by Seyyed Mohammad-Taqi on the acts of Asaf al-Dowleh and his accomplices

Session 140 – Thursday, September 11, 1907 (19 Rajab 1325)	Seyyed Mohammad-Jafar remarking that the debates on the Quchan captives had been fruitless
Session 145 – Saturday, September 20, 1907 (28 Rajab 1325)	Negligence regarding the punishment of Salar Mohtasham and statements by Seyyed Hossein Vares
Session 164 – Monday, October 28, 1907 (27 Sha'ban 1325)	Reading of a protest letter from two owners of Astarabadi captives regarding the lack of punishment for Salar Mohtasham and the failure to free the captive women

## 9. Parliamentary Debates in the First National Consultative Assembly on the Quchan Girls

One of the most important women-related subjects debated in the First National Consultative Assembly was the sale of girls from Quchan and, shortly thereafter, the capture of several women from Astarabad. The refusal of Asaf al-Dowleh, the governor of Khorasan, to allow the convocation of an electoral association for choosing representatives to the National Consultative Assembly led the parliament to take up the issue of the sale of Quchan girls. This incident had occurred during his tenure and dated to shortly before the Constitutional Revolution. (Najmabadi, 2002)

On Monday, January 28, 1907 (12 Dhu al-Hijjah 1324 AH), a telegram arrived via the Ministry of the Interior from Asaf al-Dowleh denying any obstruction of elections in Khorasan; the deputies, however, were not satisfied by his denial. Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi, the deputy for the Tabriz constituency and guild representative (blacksmiths, farriers, nail-makers, horseshoe-makers, and screen-makers), stated regarding the sale of girls: “The first redress of rights that parliament must effect in this matter is to recover every girl whom Asaf al-Dowleh has sold. In this regard, during the Foreign Ministry’s tenure, questions and answers were exchanged; Ayn al-Dowleh said he could not prevent it and that the sales would continue. That day the Interior Minister said the matter must be ascertained beyond doubt. Now that certainty has been attained, those girls must be redeemed at any price; the parliament must not show leniency in this affair.” (Parliamentary Proceedings, First Term, Session 34, Monday, 12 Dhu al-Hijjah 1324). For background on how the Quchan episode entered national politics and public discourse during the Constitutional period, see (Najmabadi, 2002).

It is noteworthy that deputies from Tabriz—hailing from a more revolutionary region—were especially sensitive to the Quchan girls’ issue and spoke repeatedly about it in the Assembly. Among them were: Seyyed Hossein

Borujerdi, Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh, Seyyed Morteza Mortezaei, Mirza Mahmoud Khan Moshāver al-Mamālek, Mirza Abolhassan Khan Mo‘azez al-Saltaneh, Seyyed Mohammad-Taqi Herati, Mirza Yahya Khu‘i (the Friday Prayer Leader), Mohammad Esma‘il Aqa Tabrizi Maghāzeh, and Mirza Fazl-‘Ali Aqa Safa. (Torabi Farsani, 2018)

Several more times during Dhu al-Hijjah, deputies raised the matter of Asaf al-Dowleh. In the session of 16 Dhu al-Hijjah, the Minister of Justice was reproached by Sa‘d al-Dowleh. Following a debate on the scope of ministers’ duties and responsibilities, Farmanfarma, the Minister of Justice, was questioned about Asaf al-Dowleh’s actions. Sa‘d al-Dowleh, a Tehran deputy, asked: “With all these complaints lodged against Asaf al-Dowleh, you, as Minister of Justice, what have you done?” The minister replied: “I have heard, but no one has told me anything or asked anything of me....” These exchanges revealed the ambiguities surrounding ministerial authority. According to Seyyed Abd al-Hossein Shoshehane, the Khorasan deputy, the selling of girls had been practiced in Khorasan for twenty-four years for two reasons: either peasants sold children to raise money demanded by local rulers, or small groups trafficked in such sales as a trade—though the latter were fewer in number (Parliamentary Proceedings, First Term, Session 36, Thursday, 16 Dhu al-Hijjah 1324). (Najmabadi, 2002)

These questions and answers culminated, by the end of Dhu al-Hijjah, in Mohammad ‘Ali Shah’s decree dismissing Asaf al-Dowleh from the governorship of Khorasan and summoning him to Tehran. This dismissal was the first display of popular power against entrenched authority. Under public pressure and persistent questioning, the Shah was compelled to remove Asaf al-Dowleh—one of his intimates, whose family had governed multiple provinces for decades. The significance of this assertion of popular will was not lost on other powerholders, who realized that their connections to the court could no longer guarantee wealth and power unchallenged. (Najmabadi, 2002)

In the session of Monday, February 4, 1907 (4 Muharram 1325 AH), the Speaker announced that the Foreign

Minister had replied to several parliamentary inquiries. Concerning the “sale of Quchani children,” he said: “Documents on this subject exist in the Foreign Ministry. The occurrence of this matter is true; orders concerning it were issued and it was under discussion, but today the matter is not pursued with the same intensity.” (Parliamentary Proceedings, First Term, Session 41, Monday, 4 Muharram 1325). (Torabi Farsani, 2010)

Seyyed Mohammad-Taqi Herati, the Tabriz deputy representing the guilds (coppersmiths, gunsmiths, carriage-makers, dagger-makers, founders, and tinsmiths), read a telegram from Ashgabat. According to the proceedings, after the telegram was read, the entire chamber and the audience wept profusely, unable to restrain themselves. Hajji Mohammad Esma‘il Aqa, a merchants’ representative, declared: “I submit that after these tears, the best we can do is to demand from the government the stern punishment of the person responsible, and that whosoever inflicted this grief upon Iranians be punished, so that hearts may be consoled.” (Parliamentary Proceedings, Session 41, Monday, 4 Muharram 1325). The session coincided with the days of mourning for Husayn and his companions at Karbala; in this atmosphere, the chamber’s tears upon hearing the telegram cast the Quchan girls’ tragedy as a calamity akin to Karbala in collective memory. (Torabi Farsani, 2018)

In Session 44 (Saturday, 13 Muharram 1325 AH), Vazir-e Afkham appeared on behalf of the Interior Minister; once again the time had come for questions and answers between the deputies of the nation and the custodians of the old order. Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi, on the “sale of Quchani girls,” said: “Sixty-two women have been carried off; and what do you say concerning four hundred and fifty Quchani captives? ... Asaf al-Dowleh must be adjudged guilty; all the captives and the sixty-two women must, by any means—by payment if need be and on equal terms—be recovered and returned, and after that he must be punished so that it may serve as a lesson to others.” (Parliamentary Proceedings, Session 44, Saturday, 13 Muharram 1325). (Najmabadi, 2002)

In Session 59 (Saturday, 15 Safar 1325 AH), the continuing lack of results provided an occasion to clarify the features of the constitutional order. The session recorded the efforts and support of Mirza Abolhassan Khan and Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh, who pressed the matter forward (Parliamentary Proceedings, Session 59, Saturday, 15 Safar 1325). (Torabi Farsani, 2010)

At the close of that session, the Assembly resolved to summon the Ministers of Justice, Interior, and Finance. They appeared in Session 61 (Tuesday, 18 Safar 1325 AH). In that sitting, several dimensions of parliamentary power vis-à-vis the ministers and the Shah were tested and contested. Although Asaf al-Dowleh’s summons had formally occurred at the Interior Minister’s request and by royal rescript, constitutionalists interpreted it as a triumph of popular sovereignty and a sign that ministers were now answerable to parliament. The deputies described the dismissal of governors as the result of public *ijma‘* (consensus)—either in the jurisprudential sense of the community’s agreement or in the concrete sense of people’s assembly and pressure upon parliament. On multiple fronts, deputies laid down requirements for the ministers—especially concerning the “Quchan girls.” (Parliamentary Proceedings, Session 61, Tuesday, 18 Safar 1325). (Torabi Farsani, 2005)

In Session 74 (Saturday, 13 Rabi‘ al-Awwal 1325 AH), the Assembly again devoted its debates to the “captivity of the Quchan girls,” arriving at two decisions. Some deputies held that intervening directly to recover captives was not parliament’s task; rather, parliament should supervise while the responsible ministry executed the task. Two approaches to recovery were advanced: the use of force, or payment of ransoms. Dabir al-Molk, the Deputy Interior Minister, favored the latter, arguing that coercion required raising troops and would squander time, rendering access to the captives impossible. One deputy criticized the indecision in both parliament and the government: “...I have seen this discussion of recovering the captives arise ten times, and I truly marvel at our Islamic zeal. The Turkmens have carried off these women, and after all these debates—what result have we obtained? ... They are our sisters; if we possess Islamic zeal, we should not sleep. I do not know why we have become so without zeal; why our Islamic spirit has weakened....” Ultimately, after lengthy debate, deadlines were set: fifteen days to try and punish those responsible, and up to forty days to recover the captives. It was further resolved to issue a public notice calling upon anyone with information on the fate of the abducted girls and women to inform the Assembly (Parliamentary Proceedings, Session 74, Saturday, 13 Rabi‘ al-Awwal 1325). (Habab al-Matin, 1906)

The failure to punish Asaf al-Dowleh justly by the Ministry of Justice, together with the continued non-

recovery of the Quchan girls under unconvincing pretexts, fostered disregard for the captives' fate. This engendered despair and, paradoxically, enabled Asaf al-Dowleh's political resurgence, culminating in his appointment as Minister of the Interior—events that laid bare the long-festered wound in old Khorasan. (Torabi Farsani, 2018)

Before the end of its two-year legal term, the First Assembly was shelled on June 23, 1908 (23 Jumada al-Awwal 1326 AH), by Colonel Liakhov, commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, and several other Russian officers, acting amid Mohammad 'Ali Shah's opposition to the constitutionalists and the intrigues of foreign powers through reactionary elements. Several deputies, journalists, and constitutionalists were imprisoned in the Bagh-e Shah; some were killed; many deputies sought refuge in foreign legations. Under these conditions, the First Assembly was dissolved and martial law was proclaimed nationwide (Shaji'i, 1993, vol. 4, p. 196). (Shojaei, 1993) Taken as a whole, the Constitutional Movement—grounded in a quest for justice—sought, despite myriad obstacles after victory, to respond to the “women's question”; yet notwithstanding some agenda-setting, women's problems did not become a central parliamentary priority in this period. (Torabi Farsani, 2018)

## 10. Conclusion

The subjects concerning women raised in the First Assembly were not pre-planned; they entered the deputies' debates suddenly in response to unfolding events—subjects such as the sale of girls from Quchan, the formation of women's associations, and attention to women's livelihoods when payments of their stipends were delayed. Among these, the Quchan girls' affair set parliament and government at odds and elevated the matter into a national issue. During this term, other protective measures were enacted for the care of the poor and destitute, including unprotected women and girls. Yet the deputies often lacked the necessary solidarity; ideological divisions emerged from the very outset of constitutional drafting, producing two political factions. Meanwhile, many members of the cabinet were the same old notables who adopted a constitutionalist veneer without inward conviction. This constellation of factors impeded serious attention to resolving problems; amid a parliament consumed by political strife, expecting

special attention to women's issues was unrealistic. Overall, no dramatic change occurred in women's status during the First Term, though the transition of women from tradition to modernity drew parliamentary attention in subsequent terms.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

## Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

## References

- E'Zam Qudsi, H. (2000). *My Memories or 100 Years of Iranian History (E'zam al-Vozara)* (Vol. 1). Karang.
- Habal al-Matin, D. (1907). Habal al-Matin Daily.
- Habal al-Matin, W. (1906). Habal al-Matin.
- Najmabadi, A. (1993). Zanhayi-millt: women or wives of the Nation? *Iranian Studies*, 26(1-2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869308701786>
- Najmabadi, A. (2002). *The Story of the Girls of Quchan: Forgotten Aspects of the Constitutional Revolution*. Roshangaran and Women's Studies.
- Shojaei, Z. (1993). *Iran's Political Elites from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution* (Vol. 4). Sokhan Publications.

- Torabi Farsani, S. (2005). *Merchants, Constitutionalism, and the Modern State*. Tarikh-e Iran.
- Torabi Farsani, S. (2010). *Selected Documents of the Educational System and the Iranian Parliament (Third to Fifth Terms)*. Library, Museum, and Documentation Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly.
- Torabi Farsani, S. (2018). *Iranian Woman in Transition from Tradition to Modernity*. Niloofar.
- Zaban-e Zanan Newspaper. (1920). Zaban-e Zanan.