

***Anonymity, Agency, and Art: Iranian Women Through/Behind the Photographic Lens
during the 1950s–1970s***

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1. Research Outline and Context

Since photography was introduced to Iran in 1842, women have been frequently portrayed in photographs. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, this role was largely passive, with Iranian women photographers a rare exception. While photographs of Qajar women later became ubiquitous, they were primarily captured in private settings by male photographers, court officials, or foreign women with privileged access.

The field of Iranian photographic studies, initiated in the 1980s, predominantly examined Qajar-era imagery. This exclusive focus potentially reinforced Orientalist stereotypes of 19th-century Middle Eastern women as *haram* dwellers. Subsequent revisionist scholarship challenged these assumptions, exploring the complex interplay of gender, agency, and representation in 19th-century Qajar photography. These later studies posit that photographic portrayals of gender roles were not monolithic but fluid and multifaceted, often subverting traditional norms. Afsaneh Najmabadi's identification of 'mustached women and beardless men' underscores this aspect of representation of women to challenge heteronormativity and disrupt established gender binaries imposed by European modernity on Qajar photography.

While recent research has uncovered the multifaceted roles of Iranian women in photography, Western media, exhibitions and even scholarship continue to predominantly focus on Middle Eastern women, especially Iranian women, through an Orientalist lens. This perspective often portrays them as veiled and oppressed. For example, the colossal attention given to certain artworks by artists like Shadi Ghadirian (born 1974) and Shirin Neshat (born 1957), which feature veiled women in traditional settings, reflect this representational cliché. While critically acclaimed, these works have inadvertently reinforced these stereotypes through their focus on veiled women within domestic spaces. The substantial market demand for such imagery has compelled contemporary Iranian contemporary artists to conform to these expectations to

achieve commercial success. This cycle highlights the enduring influence of Eurocentric gender constructs on Iranian and broader Middle Eastern artistic production.

A crucial yet understudied period in the history of photography is the second Pahlavi era, particularly the two decades from the 1950s to the 1970s. This period is not only understudied in the history of photography and image-making but also marks a significant divergence in gender roles and representations due to state-led modernization, educational advancements, and cultural initiatives. By examining visual representations of this era, we can explore the fluidity, nuance, and complexity of female identity and gender in modern Iran.

This monograph argues that the photographic landscape of this period, characterized by the emergence of women as both subjects and photographers, reveals a dynamic interplay between gender roles and women's representation. Organized into three long chapters and introduction and conclusion chapters, this work examines the photographic art produced by female photographers between the 1950s and 1970s in Iran during the second Pahlavi era. It focuses on women photographers' perspectives and puts them in dialogue with broader societal representations of gender roles in and around the second Pahlavi period. Through examining the work, career, and reception of female photographers active in this period, it argues that these photographers negotiated, coded, and graphed gender roles and femininity within the context of Iranian patriarchal modernity, intellectual artistic spheres, and the Orientalist stereotypical understanding of Iranian women.

2. Chapter Summary

Introduction: Women Behind/in Front of the Camera: Tracing an Iconographical Bias

The introductory chapter outlines the iconography of women in Iranian photography from the Qajar era onward. Building on existing scholarship, it develops a theoretical framework for analyzing both representations of women and images created by women. The chapter then addresses the methodological bias favoring specific imagery and periods, particularly the neglect of Pahlavi modernist photography. Finally, it identifies three key factors contributing to this bias: logistical challenges, methodological shortcomings, and over-reliance on 19th-century traveller accounts.

Chapter One: Intellectuals, Artistic Spheres, and the Femme Moderne

This chapter examines photographic art and their accompanying texts published in magazines, newspapers, and exhibition catalogs. Through the lenses of both male and female photographers, it delineates

how the *femme moderne* iconography emerged as a complex figure in the 1950s-1970s. The chapter demonstrates that while the artistic and intellectual spheres remained predominantly male-dominated, photography offered a space for negotiating and challenging traditional gender norms. Photographic representation of and by women departs significantly from both Qajar and post-revolutionary representations.

Chapter Two: Iranian Women Artists and Cultural Institutions

This chapter examines the reception of women's art, specifically photography exhibitions, within the intellectual and artistic spheres, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. It focuses on the work and careers of the first generation of Iranian women photographers, including Soodabeh Ghasemloo (born. 1943) (the first female photography student of photojournalism), Maryam Zandi (born 1946) whose solo exhibition at Talar-e Ghandriz was groundbreaking, Nadereh Anvar (born 1932), and a few other female artists. Combining oral history with corroborating archival evidence, this chapter analyzes these women's careers in relation to art institutions and exhibitions. It reveals that, in many cases, their work was marginalized both at the time of their exhibitions and in subsequent decades.

Chapter Three: "Women at Home, in Factories, and the Battle": Socio-political Agency

This chapter delves into the work of Hengameh Golestan (b. 1952), Maryam Zandi, and Mahshid Farhmand (dates unknown) active in the 1970s. It analyses their photo series produced and published in relation to of leftist-Marxist movement of the 1970s and the turbulent time of the revolution. The chapter demonstrates the evolving role of women from traditional domestic spheres to image-makers with public-facing careers, exploring the complexities of this transformation in the photographic space. The chapter demonstrates that the camera afforded these women unprecedented political agency and a unique subjective perspective in the years leading to the revolution.

Conclusion: Anonymity, Agency and Art

3. Current Status of Monograph

Archival research and artist interviews are complete. Chapters one and two are in progress. Chapter three has a preliminary draft. The introduction and conclusion will be finalized by November 30, 2025. A book proposal will be submitted to an academic publisher by January 2026.