

A History of Modern Childhood in Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis

In recent decades, historians have increasingly regarded childhood as a social and cultural construct, akin in many respects to gender. The prevailing cultural concept of childhood as a life stage marked by play, education, dependency, and separation from the adult world possesses its own historical trajectory, which varies across regions and societies. My forthcoming book will trace the emergence of modern childhood in Iran, exploring its evolution and the challenges it posed to Iranian society.

The book will scrutinize the evolving perceptions of Iranian childhood, as well as the changing patterns and practices in the lives of children between the late 19th century and the aftermath of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's White Revolution. This period witnessed the rise and dissemination of modern education, the growth of Iranian nationalism, and the expansion of capitalism, which will serve as the overarching framework for this study. These transformative processes underscore the cultural shift inherent in the adoption and adaptation of modern childhood, which will be the focal point of my analysis.

The book's opening chapter will delve into the early shifts in the discourse surrounding children and childhood, evident in the writings of Qajar educational reformers. This chapter will employ various sources, including newspaper articles, literary works, and children's photographs, to shed light on the status of children in Qajar Iran and the novel perspectives introduced by Western-oriented reformers. Prominent texts like Abd el-Rahim Talebof's *Book of Ahmad* not only articulate the authors' views on what children should be taught but also outline how children should be treated by their families and society. These texts introduce fresh conceptions of childhood and children's desired characteristics and abilities, with debates on educational content and disciplinary methods reflecting modern medical knowledge and evolving notions of child development. Photographs, meanwhile, offer visual evidence of evolving ideas about family relationships, gender, social status, and everyday dress practices. Although these early

changes primarily impacted the privileged offspring of affluent, Western-leaning families, their repercussions resonated in subsequent discussions of education, child-rearing, and the state's role in relation to children. This chapter sets the stage for comprehending the extensive transformations that unfolded in children's lives and adult perceptions of children in the ensuing decades.

The second chapter of the book will examine children's roles within the national community. It will elucidate the prominent position of children in the expanding nationalist discourse, whether as future citizens or as symbols of the nation's salvation. This chapter will also explore children's active participation in the Constitutional Revolution and how Reza Shah's regime emphasized children and youth as central figures in its propaganda, portraying them as symbols of Iran's rejuvenation. It will underscore how modern childhood ideals, which called for distancing children from politics in their supposed best interest, curtailed Iranian children's political agency, which had been more evident in earlier eras. The chapter will illustrate how children's identity as "future citizens" paradoxically hindered their full recognition as present-day citizens.

The third chapter will focus on the growing role of the state in children's lives during the Pahlavi era. The state positioned itself as the guardian of children, to some extent replacing the traditional roles of parents and extended families. Institutions such as schools, orphanages, youth clubs, maternal clinics, and children's hospitals as well as new legislation proliferated, disseminating new concepts and practices of childhood. The reformation of Iranian children's lives became integral to the broader project of modernizing the country and aligning it with Western nations. Concurrently, children were called upon to display patriotism and loyalty to the Pahlavi dynasty, participating in ceremonies, organized activities, youth movements with international affiliations (such as the Boy Scout Movement and the Young Red Lion and Sun), and athletic competitions. This chapter will explore the dynamics between the Pahlavi state and its youthful citizens by examining various institutions and organized activities designed for children.

The book's final chapter will delve into the evolving daily experiences of children and the anxieties expressed by adults regarding the younger generation. As the notion that children required distinct spaces, pastimes, consumer products, and cultural materials gained traction, more Iranian children had access to the privileges associated with modern childhood. Children increasingly became consumers of a wide array of products designed specifically for them, ranging from toys and sweets to magazines and films, all crafted with the modern child in mind. Homes and neighborhoods began to incorporate nurseries and playgrounds, a concept hitherto absent in Iran. This chapter will scrutinize children's new roles as consumers of goods and spaces, as well as the occasional moral panics stemming from their changing status in society and detachment from the "adult world".

Throughout the book, I will explore the challenges stemming from the elevated status of children in society, as the transition from a "gerontocracy" to a "neontocracy" – to borrow David Lancy's terminology¹ – unfolded. Modern childhood challenged entrenched notions and realities concerning children's roles within families and society. The shift from child labor to formal education disrupted the economic dynamics of many families and raised concerns about children's ability to achieve financial independence. Placing children at the center of family life posed a significant challenge to patriarchal ideals that vested power in the eldest male relative. Furthermore, gender norms came under scrutiny as girls and boys proved equally capable and talented in academic pursuits and other activities. The state's increasing guardianship over children encroached on parental authority, introducing state influence into family decision-making. These tensions, among others, will guide my analysis, drawing upon a wide range of sources, including newspapers, memoirs, photographs, textbooks, legislation, magazines, oral history, and literature. My goal is to employ a "childist"² approach to Iranian history, shedding light on the complex interplay between childhood and societal change.

¹ David F. Lancy, *Anthropological Perspectives on Children as Helpers, Workers, Artisans, and Laborers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.

² John Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism: Reconstructing the Scholarly and Social Imaginations," *Children's Geographies* 20, no. 3 (2022): 257–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912>.