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Examining the Role of Iranian Women During the Famine of the First World War (1914–1918)

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Drought and its most significant consequence—famine—have long been regarded as natural phenomena in a land such as Iran. In addition to these environmental factors, human elements—particularly wars—have played a decisive role in the emergence of devastating famines by severely restricting Iranians' access to food resources. The First World War represents one of the most prominent examples of human involvement in the formation of famine conditions in Iran. During this period, Iranian women, despite severe economic and social hardships, bore the heavy burdens of daily life and left enduring and remarkable scenes of sacrifice and resistance in the history of this land. The present study aims to examine the role of Iranian women during the famine caused by the First World War. This research is a historical study, and its data were collected through library-based methods and written using a descriptive–analytical approach. The findings indicate that Iranian women, despite the constraints imposed by the traditional social structure of the time, played a pioneering role in popular protests triggered by famine and the presence of foreign forces, and in some cases actively participated in social uprisings and political developments. This role can be considered a foundation for the emergence of new ideas oriented toward the articulation and pursuit of women's rights in Iran.

Keywords: *women; famine; First World War; bread; uprising*

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1. Introduction

Throughout Iran's history, the occurrence of numerous famines has been documented. Some of these famines were confined to specific regions, while others encompassed the entire country. The primary cause of famine in Iran has consistently been the forces of nature and climatic fluctuations, which compelled people to look to the sky and tie their hopes to rainfall. Although, through prudent measures such as the construction of qanats and water-transfer channels, Iranians were to some extent able to mitigate water scarcity, natural factors alone do not fully explain the recurrent famines. Alongside environmental causes, human interventions also played a significant role in the emergence of periodic famines. Among the most influential of these factors were internal and external wars, which repeatedly embroiled Iran throughout history, with the principal victims being the defenseless populations of cities and villages. In this context, the First World War, whose flames extended into Iran, inflicted more irreparable damage than any other conflict. Despite Iran's declaration of neutrality, the war led to economic chaos, insecurity, and the collapse of the food supply system, ultimately resulting in a widespread famine (Amin, 2017; Floor, 2024; Majd, 2021).

Under such circumstances, Iranian women, as in previous periods, found themselves on the front lines of confrontation with the crisis. As those traditionally responsible for managing food supplies and, to a large extent, household livelihoods, women initially attempted to reduce the pressure of food shortages through rationing and frugality during the first months and years of the famine. However, as the war continued and reserves were exhausted, they could no longer secure daily sustenance and were compelled to raise their voices in protest in streets and marketplaces. Although the traditional social structure did not accept women's presence in public arenas, hunger and the suffering of their children forced them to break these taboos. Women's protests against the incompetence of rulers and governmental mismanagement drew men into the arena as well, and these protest movements generated significant social and political consequences (Baghdar Delgosha, 2023; Keddie, 2024; Shafiei, 2021).

The present study is grounded in the central question of what role Iranian women played during the famine caused by the First World War. Accordingly, the primary objective of this research is to analyze and elucidate the role of Iranian women in confronting the famine of the First World War period.

Numerous sources have addressed the issue of famine during the First World War. Among them, Mohammad Gholi Majd, in his book *The Great Famine*, examines this phenomenon with an emphasis on the role of Britain, and his works are particularly valuable due to their reliance on early reports by Dunsterville and Donahoe, although the human casualty figures he presents require further scrutiny and precision (Majd, 2021, 2023). Willem Floor, in his two works *A History of Bread in Iran* and *Food Security in Iran*, discusses the importance of bread in Iranian livelihoods and the crises resulting from its shortage (Floor, 2019, 2024). In addition, studies have examined women's roles in social activities and political protests in modern Iranian history, though often without a specific focus on famine conditions (Baghdar Delgosha, 2023; Ettehadieh, 2019). Other research has addressed the First World War famine from documentary and regional perspectives, as well as its social and economic consequences in the late Qajar period (Alisoufi & Ghafouri, 2017; Majd, 2020). Nevertheless, the direct and active role of women in confronting the famine of this period has received comparatively limited scholarly attention.

In addition to official documents, which constitute indispensable sources for any historical period, memoirs left by contemporaries provide valuable insights. Among them, Abdollah Mostofi, who served as head of food supply affairs in Tehran, offers detailed accounts of the bread crisis and popular protests—particularly those led by women—in his memoir *My Life Story* (Mostofi, 1992). Furthermore, several foreign travelers who visited Iran during the famine recorded extensive observations on the country's conditions. In this regard, William Brittlebank, in his travelogue describing Iran during the famine, documented precise and valuable observations of Iran's social and economic situation in that era (Polak, 1989; Rosen, 1990).

2. The Status and Role of Women in Traditional Iranian Society Prior to the Outbreak of the First World War

Throughout Iranian history, from ancient times to the end of the Qajar period, women played diverse roles in political, social, economic, and cultural spheres in accordance with the requirements of each era. Although the observance of veiling and restrictions on appearing before non-mahram men (except close relatives) constituted the dominant social norm, women exercised considerable influence in domestic affairs and even, at certain levels, in administrative and governmental matters. As Avery aptly observed, "women were able to exercise power even from behind the veil" (Avery, 1984). Nevertheless, they continued to face extensive limitations. As reported in contemporary accounts, "Iranian women are in every respect subordinate to men; they receive no education … and are unable to reveal their talents" (Fathi, 2004). Despite this, the social position of women during the Qajar era—within the broader context of Iran's transition from tradition to modernity—underwent fundamental changes compared to earlier periods (Delrish, 1996).

A close examination of historical sources indicates that women in the Qajar period occupied an unfavorable position under traditional and patriarchal structures. In prevailing discourse, they were referred to with terms such as "za'ifeh" (the weak) or "zhalileh" (the abject), and through certain interpretations were even regarded as "deficient in reason," to the extent that involving them in

social affairs was considered a sign of ignorance. Such attitudes not only restricted women's social participation but also deemed elementary education for girls and their literacy in schools to be contrary to "Islamic educational principles," despite the fact that both Islam and Zoroastrianism accord a significant status to women. Public perceptions of women's literacy were often negative, so much so that "the ability to write a letter" itself could provoke suspicion. In contrast, among a segment of enlightened women, the belief gained strength that deprivation stemmed from ignorance of human and social rights: "All our misfortunes are of our own making; we have neither knowledge nor awareness of our rights … today European women hold prominent positions in all administrations … yet we Iranian women are entirely excluded from the world of humanity" (Shafiei, 2021).

Within the patriarchal Qajar structure, motherhood was the socially sanctioned and institutionalized role for women, and childbearing—especially the birth of sons—played a crucial role in reinforcing paternal authority and the family unit. Infertility was regarded as one of the greatest misfortunes, and an infertile woman, according to Polak, was "rejected by her husband" and ridiculed by other women (Polak, 1989). In such an environment, women were largely absent from public life, and some men attributed to them "no more value than their horses or mules." In accounts cited by Cliff, women's nature was reduced merely to "reproduction," and their presence held meaning only from the perspective of fertility (Cliff, 2022). Similarly, women were perceived as inferior to men (Rosen, 1990), and life in polygynous households was accompanied by anxiety and exhausting rivalry. Status distinctions were reproduced through titles such as "Khanom" or "Biyuk-Khanom" for women of elite lineage, while derogatory forms of address were used for others (Colliver Rice, 1987; Delrish, 1996).

The patriarchal order deprived Iranian women of independent agency and confined them to a domestic and obedient existence. Even among some statesmen and princes, acknowledgment of women's unfavorable status can be found, yet attempts at reform were often stigmatized as "immoral" or "irreligious" (Molitor, 2024). The principle of male "guardianship" (qiwāma) was interpreted as social tutelage over women (Shafiei, 2021), and economic dependency further deepened inequality: only about one percent of women owned houses, and the proportion of women owning shops was even lower (Ettehadieh, 1999). Women's limited presence in occupations deprived them of financial independence; medical practice was usually learned within family settings, while others worked as servants, laundresses, wet nurses, or caregivers in aristocratic households and harems. Some engaged in street vending, but physical constraints, pregnancy and breastfeeding, and an unsafe public sphere reduced opportunities for stable employment. Consequently, marriage was regarded as the safest means of subsistence, and women without male support were often driven into poverty, begging, or prostitution (Shafiei, 2021).

The customary attire of Qajar women consisted of garments such as the tunic, face veil, chador, and chāqchur. Loose, pleated gray or dark blue chadors covering the feet naturally restricted mobility outside the home. Literacy rates were low overall, and even lower among women, although the number of literate women exceeded common assumptions. According to Martin, girls—likely from middle-class families—were permitted to attend maktabs until approximately the age of seven, after which education generally ceased (Martin, 2010). Despite these obstacles, the earliest forms of women's social presence can be traced to religious gatherings and women-only mourning assemblies, semi-public spaces that—due to the exclusion of men except the preacher—provided opportunities for assembly, dialogue, and networking, particularly among pious housewives (Shadi-Talab, 2002).

According to *'Alam-e Nesvan* magazine, in an article titled "Perpetual Poverty Is the Result of Ignorance," knowledge was likened to a precious treasure while describing the plight of women who, due to family beliefs and the prejudices arising from them, were deprived of education (Fathi, 2004). Access to higher levels of education for girls was largely possible only when families could afford private tutors or when a clerical relative undertook their instruction (Shafiei, 2021). More than any other factor, the opening of Iranian society to international relations, the presence of foreigners, the establishment of new schools, and the expansion of print culture profoundly affected women's status. From the mid-Naseri period onward, critical, allegorical, and satirical treatises challenged traditional patriarchal interpretations. The Constitutional Revolution opened new horizons in women's thought

and transformed women's empowerment into a concern of intellectuals. Although the Qajar social structure constrained the articulation of equality, efforts toward women's education began, and the first girls' schools were established by American, British, and French missionaries. Women realized that "it was possible to live differently" (Nahid, 1981).

With the consolidation of constitutionalism and the prominence of slogans such as "equality," conditions became more favorable for changes in women's social status. The expansion of the press created space for articulating new demands. From 1910 until the rise of the Pahlavi period, women's journals such as *Danesh*, *Shekufeh*, *Zaban-e Zanan*, *Nameh-ye Banovan*, and *'Alam-e Nesvan* were published (Shafiei, 2021). These publications and associations were formed through the efforts of women such as Mirzabaji Khanom Navab Samii, Sediqeh Dowlatabadi, Monireh Khanom, and Golin Khanom (Delrish, 1996). Activities during this wave centered on education, health, and social and legal rights, giving rise to a core of "women's consciousness" (Keddie, 2024) that later evolved into demands such as suffrage. Through raising awareness, networking, and collective organization, these activists played an effective role in social events. Iranian women did not wait for state assistance; drawing on earlier experiences, they creatively established girls' schools. Bibi Khanom Astarabadi founded the *Dabestan-e Doshizegan* in Tehran in 1906, followed by Tuba Azmudeh, who established the *Dabestan-e Namus*. Despite strong opposition amid wartime insecurity and political and economic crises, the expansion of girls' schools became a formal objective after the end of the period of Minor Despotism, and the Democratic Party explicitly emphasized women's right to education in its platform (Delrish, 1996).

Subsequently, women sought to influence political and social conditions through the establishment of political associations, which represented major achievements in acquiring social legitimacy. The *Ettehadieh-ye Gheibi-ye Nesvan*, as the first organization formed after the granting of constitutionalism, played a serious role in drafting and ratifying the Supplementary Constitutional Law. The National Women's Association in Tehran was established to oppose foreign intervention, while associations such as *Mokhaddarat-e Vatan* and the Women's Committee of Tabriz worked to convey the people's grievances to the international community and counter foreign influence. Women's activities on a broad scale were noteworthy, as reflected in official reports highlighting speeches on women's movements, education, and their benefits for social progress (Fathi, 2004). In 1921, the *Peyk-e Sa'adat-e Nesvan* society was founded in Rasht to pursue women's political and social rights, establishing literacy classes, schools, libraries, and reading rooms to enlighten women. The *Nesvan-e Vatan-khah* association, led by Mohtaram Eskandari in Tehran, was another progressive organization (Delrish, 1996). At times, however, certain parties and perspectives sought to steer the women's movement in directions aligned with their own agendas (Fathi, 2004). At the same time, traditionalist institutions published journals defending religious rulings concerning women, which paradoxically contributed to attracting women to parties advocating women's freedoms. Rising educational levels, expanded social participation, and increased awareness of rights drew women into politics. Writers in women's periodicals called upon them to engage socially, and the cumulative effect of these factors increased women's presence in social and political arenas (Ettehadieh, 2019). In this context, *Zaban-e Zanan*, in an article titled "Our Mother Iran," addressed women as follows: "O dear sisters … has the time not come to roll up our sleeves in service to the motherland and gather around her?" (Baghdar Delgosha, 2023). In a somewhat exaggerated yet illustrative formulation, "some Iranian women, with a short leap, became among the most progressive women in the world" (Afary, 2006). Although prior to constitutionalism women had participated in movements such as the Tobacco Protest and in famine-related uprisings—such as the bread riots of 1861 and the Tabriz unrest of 1895—these actions lacked prior organization and planning by women themselves. In such moments, women were often mobilized reactively and under male direction to arouse the government's emotions, and there was little evidence of sustained and active female participation in social junctures. It was with the catastrophic famines following the First World War that this pattern fundamentally changed. Even women's presence during the Constitutional Revolution was more political than socially institutionalized, largely reflecting the continuation of liberal thought, albeit on a broader scale and over a longer period (Fathi, 2004).

This overarching portrayal of the status and role of women in traditional Iranian society provides a clearer framework for understanding their agency during the famine caused by the First World War. It was in this context that women moved from the "inner/domestic sphere" to the "public sphere," and through the convergence of subsistence necessities and new forms of awareness, became decisive actors in bread protests and social transformations. Undoubtedly, the establishment of schools for girls and women, followed by associations and journals in Tehran and other cities, increased women's public presence and advocacy of rights, fostering deeper reflection on crises such as foreign occupation, the First World War, and the devastating famine that followed.

3. Iranian Women's Responses to the First World War Famines

Following the October Revolution of 1917 and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Iran's northern frontiers, Britain expanded the scope of its influence and military presence in Iran (Amin, 2017; Majd, 2023). The violation of Iran's neutrality during the First World War by foreign powers entailed severe economic, political, and social consequences. In the wake of these interventions, internal conflicts and administrative corruption intensified mass deprivation and sharply worsened the living conditions of vulnerable social strata. Under such circumstances, famine raged across Iran and claimed many lives each day. As reflected in a telegram, Kurdish notables and merchants appealed to the government for assistance to alleviate the "heartrending misery" caused by the absence of a governor, security, and an orderly police force, which had disrupted livelihood and public nourishment to such an extent that the authorities could not even prevent the deaths of women and children in the streets.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Iran's economic and agricultural crisis had deeper roots that extended back to the late seventeenth century. One of the most important drivers of this crisis was the decline of artificial irrigation capacity in the country (Lambton, 1960). Iran's economy was also substantially dependent on monocrop and narrow export structures—commodities such as raw silk, cotton, opium, and carpets—so that fluctuations in their production and export could exert significant spillover effects on other sectors of the national economy (Seyf, 1994). Reports relating to 1880 indicate that carpet weaving in Kermanshah held major economic importance and contributed to the wealth of the province. This craft was also widespread in villages and among nomadic tribal encampments and was performed largely by women and children. In this period, beyond participation in carpet weaving, women also played roles in agriculture and other economic activities, and they experienced the intensifying poverty generated by multiple factors, particularly foreign interference. Napier, who traveled to Iran in the 1870s on a secret mission, recorded that among the Turkmen, every tent contained a carpet loom and that women—unlike men—were highly active and industrious (Seyf, 1994).

A significant portion of the country's agricultural output was purchased by foreign armies, and this policy drastically reduced the domestic supply of foodstuffs (Malekzadeh, 2013). According to a report carried by the newspaper *Ra'd*, by 1916 the price of one *man* of wheat was 30 *shahi* (Majd, 2020). The winter of 1917 was marked by low rainfall, and spring sowing of wheat and barley failed to sprout; consequently, the price of wheat rose to 30 tomans per *kharvar* and barley to 25 tomans (Salour & Afshar, 2001). In Isfahan, merchants who brought grain from outside the city sought to sell each *kharvar* for 40 tomans, but by order of the Shaykh al-Islam, the head of the municipality, they were compelled to offer it five tomans cheaper; thereafter, they refused to bring new supplies (Rajaei, 2007). It was even reported that "each *kharvar* of corn (wheat) reached 200 tomans," whereas previously its price had not exceeded 15 tomans (Majd, 2021).

More than anything else, famine was experienced through the shortage of bread. According to Mostofi, with the first signs of scarcity, grain holders sealed their warehouses and would not release "even one *mesqal*" until the state was forced to approach them, allowing them to sell at whatever price they wished (Mostofi, 1992). Majd, drawing on U.S. State Department reports, characterizes the famine of 1917–1919 as among the greatest catastrophes in Iran's history and estimates that between 1910 and 1920 approximately 10 to 13 million Iranians died as a result of hunger and disease. He also treats the decline in Tehran's population as an indicative marker, while noting that Russia and Britain attempted to minimize the scale of the catastrophe (Majd, 2023).

In this context, the principal driving force behind urban protests fell disproportionately on women. Yet authorities, seeking to "prevent bread riots," regarded the control of women and "lutis" (urban toughs) as the solution rather than crisis management, and they branded protesting women with humiliating labels (Mirkiaei, 2023). Groups of women went to the British embassy to demand the alleviation of bread shortages—shortages that coincided with a 20 percent increase in the price of wheat (Kouhestani-Nejad, 2002). In many households, hunger culminated in death, and the calamity was perceived as escalating into an ever-present scene of catastrophe. In popular perception, the purchase of foodstuffs by foreign forces was understood as the principal cause of the crisis; 'Ayn al-Saltaneh wrote that Russian military offices on one side and Britain on the other continuously seized Iran's provisions and stockpiled them for their own troops, and that the Imperial Bank was also instructed to purchase and warehouse grain (Majd, 2021; Salour & Afshar, 2001). Economic pressures of war and bread scarcity thus brought women—this time not as followers of clerics or parties, but as defenders of household subsistence and hungry children—into the first ranks of protest, transforming them into catalysts and, at times, vanguards of men (Ettehadieh, 2019). Moreover, prevailing social norms and officials' reluctance to confront women directly provided them a degree of operational space; in Tehran, it was reputed that whenever women rose against a cabinet, the government's position was endangered (Delrish, 1996).

Women's roles as mothers and managers of household provisions placed them at the center of "bread protests." Bread constituted the staple food of the majority—especially daily-wage laborers and lower classes (Floor, 2019). Beyond occupation and coercive foreign policies, recurrent droughts, agricultural pests (such as locust infestations), and severe cold further intensified inflation and famine (Gurney & Sefatgol, 2009). Road insecurity and the disruption of food transport—particularly around Tehran—aggravated the crisis (Kasakovsky, 1976). In addition, the hoarding of grain by landlords, the shah, princes, and other influential figures multiplied public anger (Nategh, 2010). The consequences of famine permeated society and produced horrific deviations; reports recorded incidents of "cannibalism" in Hamadan and the rapid issuance of death sentences—often against women defendants—intended to placate public outrage (Alisoufi & Ghafouri, 2017). Waves of popular protest at times culminated in assaults on bakeries (Nategh, 2010).

During the First World War years, the food crisis persisted. With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, imports to Iran were effectively halted. Some local governors—such as Samsam al-Saltaneh—reassured the public that no shortage existed and attributed the disruption to recent rainfall, claiming the problem would be resolved within days, yet the economic situation deteriorated steadily. In many regions, agricultural production was destroyed by drought and famine became widespread; the effects of the Russo-Ottoman conflict further intensified the crisis in Tabriz, Urmia, Hamadan, and Kermanshah. Disorder among Russian forces in February 1917 and the plundering of certain areas worsened matters (Floor, 2024). Molitor, the Belgian director of customs, attempted to organize the supply of foodstuffs, provoking the ire of hoarders and profiteering landlords and giving rise to conspiracies against him (Molitor, 2024). Alongside these dynamics, governmental weakness meant that hundreds died each day from hunger compounded by influenza; Sepahsalar Tonekaboni accused the government and Ahmad Shah of selling personal wheat stocks and derisively labeled the monarch "Ahmad the Fodder-Seller" (Floor, 2019).

The state's incompetence in managing the crisis and its failure to meet external commitments—so that, as Mostofi put it, "even in the matter of bread, Iranians were left with their hands stained with henna," unable to act—drew women into direct protests against hoarding and state policies (Mostofi, 1992). Wheat and rice, more than other commodities, were stockpiled in warehouses and offered only at exorbitant prices. At times, rather than confronting the crisis, the state signaled alignment with certain merchants in profiting from food sales (Amin, 2017). Thousands of *kharvars* of grain—even in royal warehouses—were "rotting and infested with weevils," yet failed to reach the hungry population (Molitor, 2024). Popular reactions became widespread, and because the issue was subsistence, women assumed a more prominent role: groups of women entered shops and grain depots and compelled hoarders to distribute grain among the people. Morgan Shuster regarded such events as exemplifying Iranian women's courage in confronting injustice (Shuster, 2007; Tavana, 2001). Women anxious

about their families' daily bread, beyond marketplaces, also went to mosques and government offices; these actions can be considered among the earliest manifestations of women's entry into the arena of "social politics" in Iran (Shuster, 2007).

Women repeatedly went to bazaars, chanted slogans against price gouging, organized small groups to identify grain depots, and broke into some warehouses (Takmil Homayoun, 1998). In many instances, they were not merely participants but leaders of these movements; women from the middle and lower classes guided protests through speeches and collective organization (Ahmadi Khorasani). This courage was reflected in contemporary literary and historical sources as well: Malek al-Sho'ara Bahar praised Tehran women's actions in identifying hoarders' depots and forcing distribution of wheat, describing it as a manifestation of women's "courage and management" (Bahar). The reverberations of women's pleas over bread shortages were also visible in Isfahan's press: "As we pass through any quarter, we see a group of women collapsed on the ground, tears streaming from their eyes, crying out to the true avenger" (Rajaei, 2007).

Despite all the suffering, the First World War opened new horizons for Iranian women. Women increasingly demanded participation in economic and social life and viewed the country's backwardness as a consequence of ineffective male governance. In the height of bitterness, the journal *Shekufeh* wrote: "We entered into a partnership and alliance with our southern and northern neighbors such that whatever they possess remains theirs, and whatever we possess becomes theirs as well; yet even that did not work" (Shafiei, 2021). These experiences raised women's level of awareness and generated new social capital that enabled their later forms of activism.

The outbreak of the First World War had a profound impact on women's tangible and serious public presence. By demonstrating sustained social activity, women were able to show that they could be effective in social and political affairs, participate alongside men in social struggles, and—given that in Iran the number of men is often reduced by wartime losses—support men and create collective acts of resistance. In the face of famine, foreign presence in Iran, and the cascading hardships that followed, women protested and acted, and this form of social agency represented a major step taken by women in that historical juncture (Fathi, 2004).

4. Women's Uprisings Against Famine in Different Cities and Their Consequences

Political agency in the Qajar period was not confined to women in the capital. Just as women in Tehran played influential roles at critical junctures, women in other cities had also been present for years before the First World War and even prior to the Constitutional Revolution. Their participation extended beyond bread protests to include defensive mobilizations and material, logistical support for clerics, *mujāheds* (fighters), and local forces; in Isfahan, for example, "women and men competed with one another in providing charitable contributions" (Rajaei, 2007). In the episode involving the abduction of a Kalhor tribal leader, women of his household took the lead in demanding his release from jurists and the governor of Kermanshah and thereby compelled the public to respond (Martin, 2010). From the mid-nineteenth century onward, women's protests over bread scarcity and price inflation were recorded across Iran: the uprising of Tehran women in 1849, unrest at the Jāme' Mosque of Isfahan centered on women, and the disturbances in Shiraz (1865), Isfahan (1893), and Astarabad (1895), which involved *bast* (sanctuary-seeking), attacks on embassies, and even confrontations with the shah. As Najmi reports, "hunger had stripped women of shame … before the shah's eyes, crowds of women looted a bakery" (Najmi, 1991).

With the outbreak of the First World War and Iran's neutrality policy, women activists resumed protest mobilization. In parallel with Tehran, women in famine-stricken cities—and even villages—entered the public arena. In many rural areas, women resisted officials who confiscated grain and, in some instances, formed local groups that forced them to retreat. Reports from Azerbaijan and Kermanshah—highlighted as more prominent than other provinces—underscore women's tangible achievements in managing famine, including creative reliance on wild plants such as *kākuti* and pennyroyal as substitutes for grains (Amin, 2017; Bolukbashi, 1965). Famine in Azerbaijan was exacerbated by Russian occupation: the confiscation of grains and legumes, the fivefold increase in wheat prices in Tabriz in 1918, and the daily deaths of dozens from

hunger intensified fears of rebellion and expanded plunder (Molitor, 2024).

In Isfahan, as in other provinces, people resorted to borrowing or taking food from relatives and the affluent due to nutritional deprivation. To sustain household subsistence, women shifted consumption patterns toward alternative foods: meals based on wild plants (such as *khobāzir*, *ālushang*, *torshak*, purslane, mountain mushrooms, garlic, celery, and similar items), consumed with yogurt or *kashk* or prepared in soups. Although such substitutes could fill the table, they increased malnutrition and vulnerability to influenza and disease. Local oral accounts describe disturbing scenes of conflict over the flesh of dead animals and the preparation of *hariseh* from carcasses (Taji, 2025). Families also witnessed how worm-infested wheat was thrown into the Zayandeh River, which fueled public anger and women's dissatisfaction (Darreh-Gozani, 2022).

One organized form of women's response to food shortages and famine was the creation of support and charitable networks. In Isfahan and Mashhad, women organized vows and public donations to provide food and clothing for the needy (Bahar; Shuster, 2007). By 1907, nearly 60 girls' schools had reopened in Tehran, and the budgets of girls' schools, clinics, orphanages, and adult education classes were funded through personal contributions—largely through women's own efforts and via fundraising among women's associations (Afary, 2006). A wave of protests rose from various cities, and the press extensively reflected women's suffering: *Zaban-e Azad* (Issue 6, 1917) reported that a woman fainted after hours in the bread line and died, and it noted from Zanjan that a group of women stoned the governor's house, set fire to the grain warehouse of a hoarder, and compelled him to distribute wheat. In a letter by the priest Jessup dated 31 October 1917, it is reported that "for weeks the bakeries have been filled with hungry women who fight with one another for their turn at bread and ultimately return hungry" (Majd, 2020). As in Tehran, women in other cities went directly to bazaars, chanted against profiteers, identified warehouses, and at times broke into them; this participation interacted synergistically with religious practices and charitable activities and, in some cases, placed women in leadership of bread riots (Ahmadi Khorasani; Shafiei, 2021).

This accumulated experience continued in the years after the First World War. The awareness and skills gained during the "Great Famine of 1917–1919" evidently proved useful in confronting subsequent crises, including the famine of the Second World War. In Isfahan and Najafabad, alongside Tehran, women participated in bread protests. Iranian women, contrary to the prejudiced view attributed to Bullard, the British ambassador ("hunger is an unparalleled method for controlling this country"), demonstrated that hunger renders populations politically mobilizable rather than submissive (Saberi, 2018). In the second half of 1942, with the interruption of grain imports and the arrival of Polish refugees, central and southern regions experienced famine; the first protest reactions occurred in Kermanshah on 28 October 1941 and then in Darab that December, where protesters were met with gunfire. Similar protests recurred in Golpayegan, Qazvin, Malayer, and other cities, and the public accused the Allied forces of disrupting the economy and exporting grain (Saberi, 2018).

5. Consequences

Iran's major famines, beyond the human catastrophe, produced profound social and cultural consequences.

1. **Redefinition of gendered and economic roles:** The death or migration of men compelled women to manage household economies, ranging from semi-industrial home production to the administration of family farms (Lambton, 1960). This experience increased women's self-confidence and bargaining capacity and facilitated broader participation in the formal economy and social movements (Shuster, 2007).
2. **Expansion of social influence and network capital:** The formation of local associations and support networks strengthened women's social influence in urban and rural communities and became a turning point in transforming their social position (Ahmadi Khorasani).
3. **Strengthening solidarity and cultural cohesion:** The organization of religious rituals (rain prayers, vows, and similar practices) reinforced morale and sustained social cohesion (Bolukbashi, 1965), demonstrating that women

could play local leadership roles beyond "domestic management."

4. **Transmission of survival knowledge and cultural resilience:** In the midst of crisis, women contributed to intergenerational resilience through storytelling, the teaching of survival skills, and the preservation of subsistence customs. As Najmabadi suggests, this process represented a pivotal moment in the transition toward modern forms of women's activity (Najmabadi, 2024).

In sum, women's bread uprisings and support-oriented agency in Iran's cities and villages demonstrate that the linkage between "subsistence necessity" and "social awareness" generated a force that moved women from the margins to the center of social politics—an asset that later manifested in their civic and political participation in subsequent decades.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the famine resulting from the First World War moved Iranian women from the margins of "domestic management" into the center of "public agency." Women initially acted as managers of household subsistence by rationing, substituting food items, and organizing mutual aid networks to mitigate the pressure of bread shortages. Subsequently, in response to hoarding and ineffective governance, they entered streets, bazaars, mosques, and administrative centers, organized gatherings, and in some cases assumed leadership of bread protests. The need to secure bread for themselves and their families drew women into economic and social arenas. In this way, they transcended the traditional role of inward-looking domestic care and became influential actors in social politics.

From this crisis experience, three enduring consequences emerged. First, a redefinition of gender roles occurred, as women's economic and social responsibilities expanded in practice, enhancing their self-confidence, bargaining power, and practical capacities. Second, social capital accumulated through charitable networks and local mutual aid, preserving collective cohesion at the height of embargoes and the stagnation of the bread market. Third, horizons for civic and political participation opened, in the sense that women's subsistence-oriented actions evolved into conscious claim-making and continued in subsequent years through more visible participation in associations, the press, and urban movements.

Accordingly, the main research question can be answered by characterizing women's role during the First World War famine as dual, continuous, and cumulative—from micro-level management of survival and household subsistence to macro-level public agency. The famine was not merely a "bread crisis" but also an "opportunity to claim women's social roles," eroding constraining customary barriers. Although this transformation did not eliminate all mechanisms of discrimination in the short term, it paved the way for gradual changes in subsequent decades and opened a new chapter in Iran's social history.

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.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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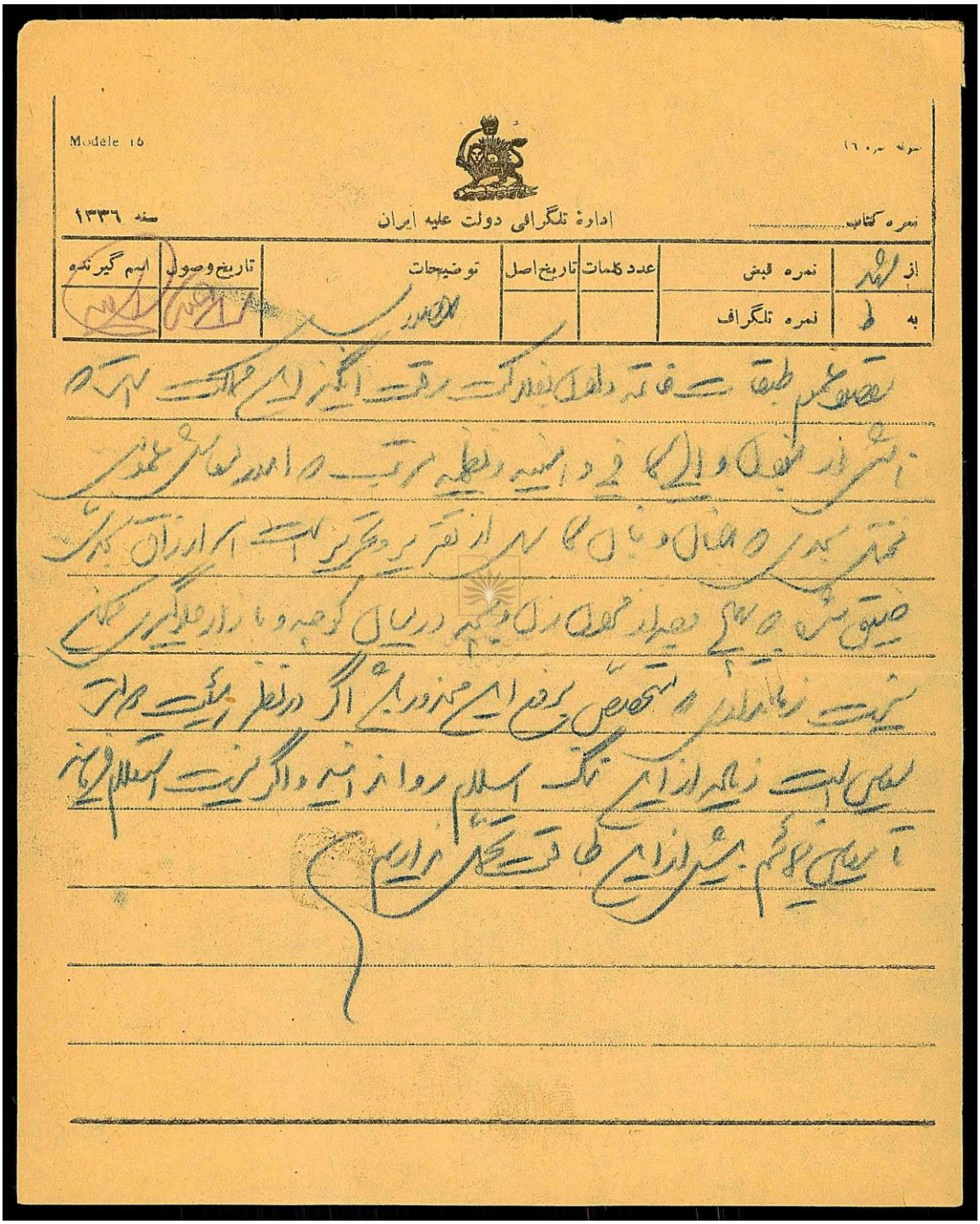


Modèle 16

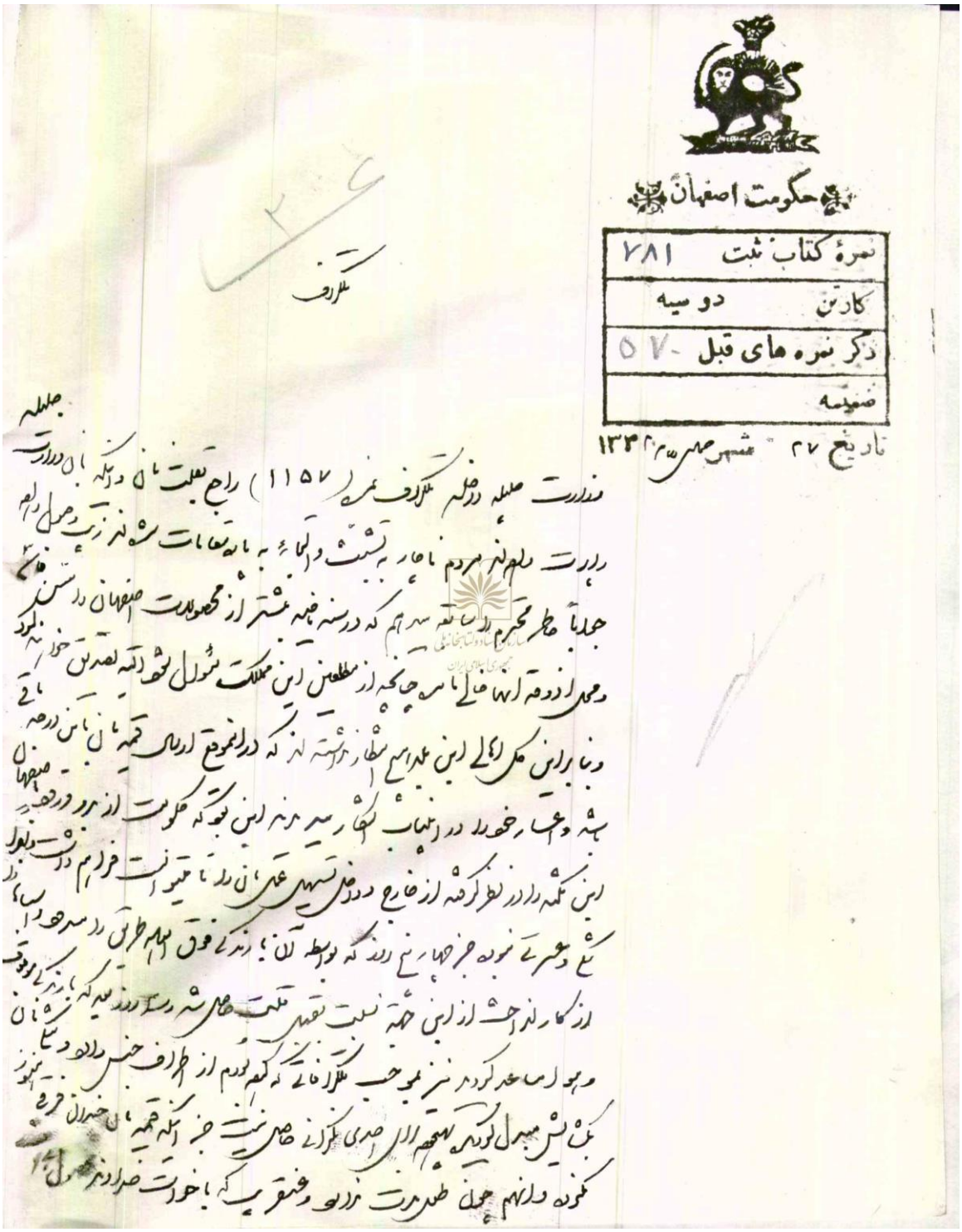
نمونه نمره ۱۶

اداره تلگرافی دولت علیه ایران

نمره کتاب ..... سنه ۱۳۳۶

از	نمره قبض	عدد کلمات	تاریخ اصل	توضیحات	تاریخ وصول	امضاء گیرنده
به	نمره تلگراف					

بتصدق حضرت ... طبقه ... فقره دلخراش بسیار وقت انگیز ... مملکت ... که
... شرف نزول ... فرمودند ... مرتب و امور معاش عمده
... بسیار و ... و ... بسیار از تقریر و تحریر ... اوراق بیرون
... چیق شده که بعیال خود نان و ... دریان کوچه و بازار جلوگیری نمایند
... نظامیه ... متخصص برفع این محذورات اگر در نظر همایون
... نظامیه از این ننگ اسلام رواند ... اگر نیست استعفا
... بیش از این کاری ... ندارم



حکومت اصفهان

نمرهٔ کتاب ثبت	۲۸۱
کارتن	دو سیه
ذکر نمره های قبل	۵۷۰
ضمیمه	

تاریخ ۲۷ شهر صفر ۱۳۳۲

تلگراف

جلیله

وزارت جلیله داخله تلگراف نمره (۱۱۵۷) راجع بتعلیمات ... وزارت جلیله داخله در باب تشتت و اغتشاش به بانه معامات شده نزد ... وصول دارم راپورت واصله از مردم ناظر به تشتت و اغتشاش به بانه معامات شده نزد ... جداً خاطر محترم را مستحضر میدارم که در سنه خمسه عشر از محصولات اصفهان دارستن ... نبود و محصول از دوقه آنها خالی نماند چنانچه از مطلعین این مملکت سئوال نمائید تصدیق خواهند ... و بنابراین ملک اهالی این بلد امسال بیکار نشسته اند که در اینموقع ارزاق قحطی ... اصفهان بیشه وجها خود را در اینباب آشکار میسازد این نیست که حکومت از ورود ... این نکته را در نظر گرفته از خارج و داخل تسهیلی عملی آن را ... کشاورزی نموده خواهد شد زیرا که بواسطه آن ... از کارگران از این جهت نسبت بقحطی ... و بهبود اوضاع کرده نیز بموجب تلگرافاتی که کرده ... بکلی مبدل گردیده بمحض ورود این تلگراف ... کنونه و انهم چون طبیعت ... که با خوشحالی ...