

The American Girls' School in Tehran and Gender, Class, and Nationalism in Iran

Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi

Department of History, California State University, Fullerton

jrostan@fullerton.edu

From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1930s, foreign missionary schools in Iran played a significant role in disseminating education for girls. Foreign schools, and American Presbyterian Mission schools especially, graduated children of the Iranian political and economic elite of urban and rural areas and attracted religio-ethnic minority and Muslim students who later became part of the new urban middle classes and participants in reform movements of the twentieth century. Based on the writings and correspondence of American Presbyterian educators and administrators and the memoirs of and interviews with Iranian graduates of American Presbyterian schools, this paper will examine encounters between students of the American Presbyterian Mission girls' school in Tehran and missionary teachers and the impact of American missionary education on modern Iranian identity by responding to the following questions. What models of gender and education did American missionaries promote? How did Iranians respond to such models, and what were the perceived advantages? Despite the promotion of modern American norms and Protestant teachings, the graduates of American Presbyterian schools in Iran developed a strong sense of loyalty to both Iran and Islam, turning an evangelist mission into an important feature of the construction of Iranian nationalism and modernity. Contrary to later twentieth-century privileging of nativism, authenticity, and the construction of nationalism based on local models, early twentieth-century Iranian nationalism relied on universal, global models and tried to adapt to them. These models were not rejected as foreign, imported or Western, but rather embraced if an emerging modern nation were to survive.