THE STATUS OF WOMEN AMONG
THE QASHQAI OF SOUTH IRAN

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Introduction

The anthropological studies dealing with the status of women have grown rapidly in recent years. In her review of the materials dealing with the subject, including the feminist movement in the U.S., Naomi Quinn states: “Apart from their personal interest in women’s status, the movement itself has cast them in the key intellectual role defining women’s place in a revised theory of the evolution of human society. Beginning in the early 1970’s and rising to a current crescendo of books and articles, anthropologists representing all theoretical persuasions, most of them American and most of them women, have produced an entire new literature on the status of women cross-culturally”.1

Despite these developments, the position of women among the pastoralists of Iran and the Middle East in general is still a subject of controversy and remains to be more fully investigated. The anthropological studies dealing with the nomads of the Middle East are not concerned with the status of women in these societies or present contradictory views either. Generally speaking, those ethnographers writing on women’s status seldom take into consideration the women’s view of themselves. As Cynthia Nelson has stated: “If we had better knowledge of the “Lived-in-World” of nomadic women, we might come up with different image of the society and the definition of power”.2

It seems that in the few cases where the women have expressed themselves, their views have not been taken seriously because of frequent assumption that such views derive from their cultural ideals and, therefore, do not represent their actual or real status. The article by

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Reza Fazel is a case in point: “... Decisions which affect the whole camp are reached in a loosely organised assembly consisting of most of the adult males present. To the observer this constitutes the whole decision-making body, and the men themselves are quick to confirm it. Interestingly enough, the female informants give further credence to the cultural ideal that men enjoy power and authority in such matters. Yet, if one is not completely dazzled by the formal features of the so-called “male dominated” society, one will soon realize that in practice the reality is somewhat different, sometime even radically so”.

As is clear from the above statement, the pastoral nomads have rightly expressed their own view, but the ethnographer thinks differently.

Furthermore, the ethnographic sources contain little or no information about the legal status of women among the nomads of the Middle East. Consequently, with few exceptions we have almost no information on the legal rights of women in these societies, while the status of women could be better understood if we take into consideration their legal rights, and the women’s view of their own social status. Following this perspective, the present paper examines the legal rights of women, their participation in decision-making, and finally their image of their own social standing. It is based mainly on field materials of the author and his own observations.

The Qashqai

The Qashqai are a Turkic speaking people who live in Fars province in south Iran. They number over 30,000 families. Traditionally they were organised into a tribal confederacy known as il-i-Qashqai (the Qashqai tribe), which was under the control of an Ilkhan (paramount chief). The confederacy consisted of five major tribes each of them having a Kalantar (tribal chief). The entire tribe depended on animal husbandry and pursued a nomadic way of life.

In recent years, the Qashqai like other tribal groups of Iran have begun to change. Their political organisation was disrupted as a result of direct governmental intervention. Later on, other governmental...