Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran
http://www.qajarwomen.org, accessed February 16, 2015.
Reviewed by Sean McConnell, Archivist, Rosenberg Library

Digitization gives archivists the opportunity to showcase rare and oftentimes overlooked collections and provides researchers access at the click of a button. Such unprecedented access is proving to be a boon for historians, students, and those simply curious. The Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran (WWQI) digital archive, part of the Harvard University Library network, sits at the forefront of this revolution, presenting letters, photographs, legal documents, books, oral histories, objects and artwork from Iran during the Qajar period (1796-1925). This digital archive importantly sheds light on women, who are often overlooked in many studies on Qajar Iran.

Qajar Iran lacked institutions that collected and preserved information on women, so WWQI's creators solicited materials from families, museums, and organizations within Iran and beyond generating a digital archive of materials dispersed globally. According to co-founder Afsaneh Najmabadi, these digitized materials "*become* an archive—albeit one for which a unified physical counterpart in the traditional form of accession numbers and boxes would never exist." By April 2013, the digital archive accumulated "over 33,000 images recorded from 43 private family collections and 10 institutional collections."[1]

Items are organized in a variety of schemas, including collections sorted into six genres: manuscripts, objects, legal & financial, letters, photographs, and audio files as well as groupings based on people, place, and subject. Users may browse materials by genre, grouping, or period, defined by each shah's reign. A brief description accompanies every digitized item, along with metadata and links to similar items based on genre, people, subject, and place. Userscan easily enlarge and rotate images, as well as gain access to copyright information. Images are of superb quality and resolution, and do a great service to the materials at hand. Marriage and birth records featuring ornate calligraphy are particularly captivating.

WWQI builds upon databases like the Online Archive of California (OAC). Archivists and librarians developed the OAC in the mid-1990s, creating a finding aid database for collections from repositories throughout California. WWQI similarly gives access to digitized material from multiple repositories, but without supplying finding aids.

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[1] Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran Digital Archive and Website: What Could Writing History Look Like in a Digital Age?," *Perspectives on History*, November 2013, 32-33.

While WWQI provides better access to specific items than the OAC, the lack of finding aids inhibits understanding of an item's context. Users may not see how items such as a government document or personal letter fit into thematic or functionary series or larger collections. WWQI's dearth in this regard highlights a weakness of digital repositories that do not give the same collection level description most traditional physical archives provide.

WWQI maintains, however, a highly accessible and searchable format. Users may choose either an English or Farsi version, and may search for related materials by keyword. WWQI uses the ElasticSearch full text search engine to improve search results. ElasticSearch, an open source system integrated with ApacheLucerne™, provides immediate query data and analysis. The system adeptly allows for multilingual searches, an important factor for an online repository like WWQI with metadata in multiple languages.

Although WWQI has excellent searching and browsing functionality, some barriers to access do exist. Farsi and English speakers will easily navigate the site, but only Farsi speakers will understand the primary documents and sources. Many manuscripts and all oral histories lack translations and transcriptions. Qajar women's lives would open to a broader audience and create fresh understandings of Iranian culture if Farsi speakers translated and transcribed the material. WWQI also needs deeper descriptions. Users who have not studied the region's history would benefit from a short essay on Qajar Iran. Many researchers likely desire more information on each item's provenance. The site's creators note that they are not authorized to provide additional information on donors, but gleaning as much information as possible would supply helpful historical context for the items. Individuals featured in the digital archive also need a more comprehensive biographical section, especially considering most of these women came from walks of life not considered in earlier studies. Providing this context would place these items and women in a larger historical framework.

Many tools found on WWQI mitigate the current drawbacks as the archive continues development. These tools incorporate web 2.0 technologies that allow users to contribute to the archive's formation. Users may click on Facebook, Twitter, and numerous other social networking share buttons found on every collection's webpage in order to share the material. Each item's webpage contains "Research Activities" links, allowing users to engage in a variety of activities, from submitting questions to starting discussions. A research platform webpage brings together a list of these questions and discussions. Registered users may submit answers to the questions. Users may also submit corrections if they notice an error, and even supply transcriptions and translations. Innovative techniques such as these tear down barriers among archivists, researchers, and curious visitors. These tools unfortunately do not appear to be heavily used. As previously mentioned, there are few to no translations and transcriptions. WWQI would benefit from advertising these features and building upon the momentum that other transcription projects have established. The [Ancient Lives project](#), for example, allows users to transcribe

Egyptian papyri even if they do not speak or read any ancient languages. Members of different institutions, including Oxford, developed the project so that users can match letters on the papyri to letters listed in an adjacent alphabet. If WWQI provided a similar service, many of the transcription and translation problems would disappear. WWQI's creators correctly allow visitors to help shed light on the rich lives women led in Qajar Iran. Promoting and enhancing such participation would improve access.

Archivists creating digital repositories need to combine quality search functionality and audiovisual reproduction with traditional tools. Digitized material becomes accessible when reproductions are coupled with the context that finding aids and physical collections provide. WWQI remains on the right path towards achieving this goal, and performs wonderfully considering the absence of a physical counterpart. Although WWQI needs more time to become truly accessible, especially regarding translation and contextual issues, people from all backgrounds will find something of interest. Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran supplies an exemplary example of how archivists can bring special and rare collections to the attention of interested users everywhere.