

Women in Contemporary Islamic Society: A Study of Iran

Ashaq Hussain¹

Post Doc Fellow in Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir

Safa Altaf²

Doctoral Scholar in Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir

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Abstract: *With the overthrow of the Shah and the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, Iran changed from a monarchy to an Islamic regime based on an Islamic Constitution and Islamic laws. As a result, a western stereotype of Iranian women as veiled and helpless creatures got created. This stereotypical view has dominated public opinion since 1979 in both Western societies in general, and among western scholars in particular. Meanwhile, a remarkable development related to Iranian women has been taking place in the years after the revolution, i.e. a growth in labor force, political participation and increasing access to education. In this context it can therefore be argued that paradoxically the Islamic revival in Iran has been having a positive influence on the development of the status and the position of women in the public sphere in contemporary Iran. This paper aims to highlight the current position of women in Iran and how far they have been able to utilize the rights and privileges granted to them by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

Keywords: *Women, Ayatollah Khomeini, Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic law.*

Introduction

The overthrow of The Shah (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) marked the end of an era of accelerated Westernization, and there got established in its place an Islamic state embodying certain traditional Islamic doctrines. The reintroduction of these Islamic doctrines has had a major effect on several sectors of society, a display of which can be seen in the status envisioned for women within the new republic. [1] The establishment of an Islamic state necessitated the reinstatement of the *Shar'iah* (Islamic law) which involved extensive regulation of men, women, and the family, including areas such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and husband/wife relations. The leaders of the new republic have relied heavily on the *Shar'iah* in defining the position of women within the new republic. This reliance is exemplified in the preamble of the constitution, which embodies the *Shar'iah* doctrines regarding the importance of the family and of women's position within the family. [2]

The preamble to the Constitution for the Islamic Republic of Iran states:

The family is the fundamental unit of society and the major center for the growth and advancement of man. Compatibility with respect to belief and ideal is the main consideration on the establishment of a family, for the family provides the primary basis for man's development and growth. It is the duty of Islamic government to provide the necessary facilities for the attainment of this goal. This view of the family unit delivers women from being regarded as an object or as an instrument in the service of consumerism and exploitation. Not only does the woman thereby recover her momentous and precious function of motherhood, rearing alert and active human beings, she also becomes the fellow struggler of man in all the different areas of life. Given the weighty responsibilities that the woman thus assumes, she is accorded in Islam great value and nobility. [3]

The present Iranian society is characterized by both traditional and modern forces. On the one hand the authority over *Shar'iah* and the reconfirmation of the Islamic identity have led to conscious reawakening of traditional values, beliefs and practices. On the other, consciousness of the importance of industrialization and technical progress has motivated to modernize. This duality of tradition and modernity is reflected by the contemporary

¹ Email: dr.aashiquislam@gmail.com

² Email: meer.safa@gmail.com

Iranian women since the Islamic Republic provided them with a double role. Now the ideal Iranian woman has come to be considered as one who acts according to the traditional, Islamized society, while preparing herself for the difficulties of modernization and the demands of a revolutionary society. [4] Therefore, the new Muslim Woman is one who understands her responsibilities primarily in the family and meanwhile she is also expected to be a responsible member of society, participating in socio-political matters, and acting as a soldier of the revolution. The implementation of *Shar'iah* together with its interpretation by the revolutionary government though indicated less legal rights for women, paradoxically this has made women major protagonists of social, cultural and political change, regardless of their social and political stands. This is also reflected by an increasing number of women in the public sphere. For instance, the privileges granted to men especially their right to divorce and polygamy caused concerns among women resulting into many seeking a job to become financially independent. It can furthermore be argued that the policies of the Iranian government have not aimed to ban women from public life and keep them uneducated. Although the Islamized Iranian society stresses on motherhood the most and emphasizes its importance in maintaining and protecting stability in the family, according to the needs of a revolutionary and modernizing society women are also encouraged to participate in socio-economic and political developments.

Education

The founder of the Islamic Revolution Imam Khomeini, referred to the differences between men and women's education stating:

“While men's education is an important factor for work and occupation, for women it is a factor for growth and ascension and it is a predestinating factor. Hence it seems that women's education to having access to better job opportunities is only part of the objectives of their education and more importantly, it is aimed to help them raise awareness and to acquire knowledge which will leave a positive impact on the future generations and therefore, it is highly significant. In other words, even if a limited percentage of women enter social arena for employment it would not hinder to increase investment on women's education since it would help to educate elite women and highly acknowledged mothers”. [5]

The spiritual Leader is also reported to have stated:

“It is hoped that all girls and women could walk on the path of education with greater and stronger steps”. [6]

Based on the Principle 3 of the Constitution, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is bound to provide all necessary opportunities regarding education that are clearly mentioned in Principles 2, 3 and 9 of the constitution:

Principle 2: To raise public awareness in all areas through the correct use of mass media and the press.

Principle 3: Free education and physical training for all in all material and spiritual areas.

Principle 9: Eliminate improper discrimination and to provide equitable educational opportunities for all in all material and spiritual areas.

Principle 30: The government should provide free education facilities for the entire nation (men and women) until the end of high school level and to provide free equipment for their higher education until country's self-sufficiency.

The number of educated women has been growing steadily since the Iranian Revolution. Whereas men outnumbered women in the academic year 1999-2000, in 2003-2004 female students outnumbered male students in public universities. Moreover, whereas women made up 30 percent of the student population in 1978 at the university level, both public and private, in 2003, 62 percent of the university population was female. Furthermore, they consisted of 50 percent of all graduate students and a third of all doctoral degrees were granted to women. [7] Nowadays, women are a visible force at university campuses in Iran. A significant increase of female students at all levels of the educational system is evident after the Iranian Revolution, which clearly indicates that the Islamisation of education has provided more educational opportunities for women. Today in Iran women have become very active, are more educated and have a more visible role in life than their counterparts in other Islamic countries. According to UNESCO world survey, at primary level of enrollment Iran has the highest female to male ratio in the world among sovereign nations, with a girl to boy ratio of 1.22 : 1.00 and around 65 percent of university students are women which makes Iran also the highest female to male ratio of university students in the world. [8] This increased access to education has led to changing attitudes among young Iranian women both in

larger as well as smaller cities. Women from rural areas move to cities and live independent from their families in order to attend college. As a result of their access to universities, Iranian women have gained respect and independence. They have found the way to empowerment by enforcing their knowledge and awareness through education.

Economic Participation

In a developing nation, after education, labor force participation is commonly acknowledged as one of the main pillars of women's status and employment. After the Iranian Revolution, as a result of strict *Shar'iah* laws and government policies that stressed women's position in the private sphere, one would expect a sharp decline of the presence of women in the job market. But since the Iranian government encouraged gender segregation, it resulted in the creation of new job opportunities for women. For instance, because all girls attending middle and high schools were expected to be taught by female teachers, more space and resources were devoted to training women as teachers. [9] Economic independence, ownership and employment are among the basic rights of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In order to achieve this goal, measures have been undertaken by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the macro policies of the fourth national development Plan, which describes the role of women in the following way: [10]

- a) To achieve continuous economic growth sustainable and fast pacing in commensuration with the goals of the vision.
- b) Create measures appropriate to growth of productivity of production factors.
- c) Create productive jobs and drop in the unemployment rate.
- d) Support entrepreneurship, innovation, and technical and research talents.
- e) Support provision of housing for low income and unprivileged groups.
- f) Capacity building for empowerment of cooperation through facilitation of access to resources, information, technology, communication and development of technical, economic and financial links.

As a result of the above mentioned measures, a growing number of women are now active in the informal sector and have obtained financial independence. For many educated working Iranian women, participation in the labor force has become a fundamental part of their identity. These women, who establish social relationships through their activity outside of the home, perceive work as a means to gaining autonomy and respect. Nahid, 32, who works for the municipality of Isfahan, argues similar to many of her female colleagues:

"I have been working since the age of 18 and I am used to work. I cannot stand staying at home. I think that housework is burdensome whereas activity outside of the home makes me feel that I am part of society... I absolutely need my financial independence. I am also persuaded that my financial independence and my participation in breadwinning have earned me autonomy and decision-making authority. Besides, both my husband and my extended family respect me". [11]

In the Islamic Republic today, females have professions which were earlier limited to men and considered as 'male employment' which include for instance firemen, policemen, taxi drivers, referees, and university professors. The increasing involvement of women in public life has changed the dominant ideological discourse on women. Authorities now acknowledge women's social role and are more attentive to women's specific problems. However studies on women's labor force participation in Iran generally indicate low participation rates especially when compared to other relevant variables such as education and health. For example a study by Nomani and Behdad demonstrates that even after adjustments are made for the rising share of female education, the labor force participation rates are low. [12] Studies by the World Bank conclude that after two decades of rising education and declining fertility, the slow pace of increase in the women's labor force participation is puzzling. [13]

Political Participation

Next to educational, religious and social fields, female leaders with strict Islamic backgrounds have also been active in formal politics, although their participation in political decision-making has been more limited. Principle 3 and Principle 20 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran acknowledge the equal rights of men and women. In article 8 of Principle 3, the law stipulates that there is no discrimination against men and women in determining the political, economic or socio-cultural fate and principle 20 also claims all citizens - men and women alike are supported by the law and enjoy all forms of human, political and socio-economic rights based on the Islamic *Shar'iah*. Imam Khomeini is reported to have stated:

“The role of women members of parliament is no different to the role of men; they should both conduct research and study on legislations and ratify them”.

The political status of women in the most critical events of time like the Islamic revolution, have always been highly significant. Hence efforts have been made to deal with women’s affairs and to set patterns and draw plans in order to help in the development of women in various walks of life based on the Islamic teachings. The rate of women representatives in the rural and urban Islamic Councils have increased by 79.76%. There are 48 women representatives in the women’s affairs areas, in the ministries and government organs and 30 women as directors in the provinces. All ministries and executive branches agree on women’s presence for two main reasons:

- 1) For the increase in the number of women graduates who have high potentials to work in various areas.
- 2) It would be through their active participation that their problems could be diagnosed in terms of both their family and social responsibilities.

In addition to local councils, women’s principle involvement in the process of decision-making has been in the *Majlis*. The *Majlis* became an important institution for women as an attempt to change and reform the laws more favorable to women. The increase of women’s participation in the *Majlis* is significant, given the ability to change laws. [14] Moreover, women have the right to vote, and they actively utilize this power. Currently in the tenth government, women occupy positions as vice presidents for science and technology, as advisor to the president in women’s Affairs, as vice president for legal affairs and as Health Minister. [15] Also women have been holding positions in the Islamic Consultative Assembly at various periods since the Islamic revolution. Although women’s participation at decision making levels as vote casters is more than men but despite the achievements made, women still lag behind men in terms of sharing in the decision making areas as half of the total population. As part of its agenda, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has included the Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of women to promote the quality of women’s share in power and decision makings through the development plans.

Overall Assessment

Although in the western perspective women are the most repressed group of Iranian society, they are also the most dynamic segment, next to the youth. Some of the young Iranian women, who were born and raised in the Islamic Republic, increasingly oppose obligated veiling. The black chador is worn more by high-level female officials or street demonstrators who participate in religious activities. The participation of Iranian women in the public sphere is not entirely determined by Islamic laws. There have been significant changes in women’s presence and participation as a result of the marginal impact of the institution of the Islamic government. It can therefore be safely assessed that Iran’s patriarchal society is not infinite, since women do have a presence in public life, especially compared to other Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia. As a consequence, women’s public behavior has led to changing lifestyles and rising expectations and demands by women who are readapting modern values and behavior, restructuring their lives, questing for autonomy, aiming to equal rights and opportunities, and shaping new identities, all within an Islamic framework. Iranian women who do not consider themselves only as mothers and wives but also as individuals, now question the conservative interpretations of Islamic laws and institutions that tend to implement patriarchal structures, both within the public and the private spheres. [16]

Conclusion

Over the years, policies implemented by the government of the Islamic Republic have paradoxically led to women’s empowerment as a result of a sharp increase in urbanization, increase of women’s average age of marriage, a significant decline in the total fertility rate, a decrease in the gap between urban and rural areas, and women’s increasing access to education. They now consist of a high number of enrolled students within schools and universities, and the percentage of Iranian girls enrolled at primary school level far exceeds the average of the Middle East and North Africa. This high percentage of educated women is likely to utilize their knowledge in the future and influence political and economic developments that could transform gender roles and women’s status in Iran.

Notes and References

1. Islamic revival refers to a revival of the Islamic faith in Muslim societies, which began roughly sometime around 1970s and is manifested in greater religious piety and in a growing adoption of Islamic culture. In the context of Iran, it is used in the sense that pre 1979 era was exceedingly westernized by the dictatorial Reza Shah Regime. After its collapse in 1979, Iranian Muslims starting reviving their faith and culture.
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