

Women Empowerment in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Women empowerment is an issue of crucial importance in the world today. This concept has its roots in the women's movements throughout the world and has guided developmental policies on under-developed and developing societies for quite some time. The term empowerment connotes control over material assets as well as intellectual resources. The process of empowerment of women therefore seeks to interpret existing power relations as being prejudiced against women and thus it seeks to help women in gaining greater control over the sources of power. It is also defined as an active, multidimensional approach, which enables women to realise their full potential in all spheres of life. Moreover, it can also be said that empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater share in decision making and control in society. The term 'empowerment' has gained currency during the last few decades particularly in the context of unprivileged sections of the society and particularly women.

While the term 'empowerment' is now in widespread use, it is still a relatively recent and new concept and remains relatively under-defined. A review of the literature suggests that while there is much debate at the theoretical level as to what empowerment comprises and how it best can be achieved, there has been little primary research at the grassroots level to contribute to our understanding of what empowerment means in everyday life.

The concept of 'empowerment' which acquired prominence in the closing years of the UN's third Development Decade represents powers and abilities of people: an ability to handle their responsibilities, an ability to envision a better future, and an ability to work to overcome the obstacles that confronted them. In other words empowerment is about people taking over their own lives; gaining the ability to do things, to set their own agenda and to change events.

It implies that empowerment is an active and multidimensional process which should enable individuals or a group of individuals to realise their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access of people to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by customs, belief or practice. Generally, development with social justice and equity is expected to make the congenial atmosphere that leads to empowerment of various sections of society including women in any country.

But it is also contended that 'empowerment' does not mean that power can be given away as alms. Power has to be acquired and once acquired, it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved.

All this is only possible, when women are educated so as to understand their rights and duties and should know how to fight for their rights. Education can indeed sensitise women to become conscious of their oppression and also provides many avenues and opportunities to improve their status. However, the fact remains that they have to take initiatives and work towards their own empowerment and developmental policies aimed at women empowerment can only create the context for their efforts. And education can play a big role in this process.

Islam and Women

Before coming to positions of women in case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is pertinent to dwell briefly on the status of women in of Islam and in Islamic societies. An unbiased study of history would reveal that with the advent of Islam, the status of women drastically changed for many abhorrent practices were abolished and the rights of women were duly recognised. For example, Islam abolished the unjust practice of female infanticide and held men and women equal as the holy Quran says "Allah created you from a single soul and from the same soul created his mate. Allah (God) makes no distinction between man and woman. They are to be equally rewarded or punished for their deeds". The holy Quran further says that Allah "will deny no man or women among you the reward of their labours. You are the offspring of one another".

Women are thus equally empowered like men in all essential rights and duties. Islam also helped develop a new relationship between them based on respect and mutual understanding. Women were empowered in Islam to enter into contracts, to run business, and to possess property independent from her husband or any kinsmen. Islam also granted women broad social, political and economic rights, education and training rights. Women are, thus, according to the Islamic principle, entitled to have the rights of independent ownership of property. This involves the right to manage their own money and property independently. A woman is free to buy, sell, mortgage, lease, borrow, or lend and sign contracts and legal documents. From the very beginning Islam stressed that women should be offered all opportunities which would enable them to develop their natural abilities so that they might participate effectively in the development process of society. It is also emphasized that women should be allowed to the highest positions or ranks so that society can progress materially, intellectually and spiritually.

Islam also empowers women to marry whomsoever she likes. It regards marriage as a sacred institution and attaches great importance to it. Marriage in Islam is a union between two consenting adults. Its objective is to perpetuate human life and achieve spiritual and emotional harmony. Here both the partners are equally important. Hence the consent of both are essential to start a happy and stable family. Islam is thus against the very Idea of forcing women to marry against their wishes. As a matter of fact it encourages women to choose their spouses.

Regarding educational rights, both the holy Quran and the Sunna advocate the rights of women and men equally to seek knowledge. The holy Quran commands all Muslims to exert efforts in the pursuit of knowledge irrespective of their gender. It constantly encourages Muslim to read, think, contemplate and learn from signs of Allah in nature. The Prophet also encouraged

education for both male and female. He made it clear that seeking knowledge was a matter of religious duty binding upon every Muslim man and woman.

Concerning the right to inheritance, the holy Quran has allotted a share for the women in the inheritance of her parents and kinsmen. Her share is guaranteed by law and it is completely hers. No one can have a claim on it. As far as the political matters of women are concerned, it is noted that Islam encourages women to be active politically and to be involved in decision making. In fact, Islam is the only religion, which acknowledges a political role for women. In early Islam women are given every opportunity to express themselves to argue and to speak their mind in public. They led delegations, mediated and granted refuge and protection. Their judgement on political matters was highly valued and respected and they exercised great influence in shaping their own societies. Aisha and Umm Salama are the glaring examples and can be referred as the ideals and role models in Muslim society.

It is unfortunate nonetheless that over centuries the rights granted by Islam to women were tampered with by Islamic scholars and women were forced to play a secondary role in society. Through wrong interpretation of Islamic principle, women were rendered powerless and made to believe that they had to remain subservient to men in the true spirit of Islam. The extremist rule by Mullah Umar and Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan is an example of such deliberate un-Islamic attempt to push women forcibly behind the veil and into the abyss of illiteracy and underdevelopment. But this has not been the case with all societies. Islamic republic of Iran stands out as a glorious example in this context where women empowerment has gradually become an important principle guiding social-development.

Women Empowerment in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The status of women in pre-revolution Iran was relatively low. They were not allowed to participate in many social and economic activities. During the rule of the Shah, it appeared that everything was going well. But as a matter of fact, it was not true. The system was getting hollow day by day. Corruption was at its peak. The society was completely criminalised. Women were not feeling safe and secure. There was an utter chaos and disorder in the society. There was an anger and resentment against Shah of Iran amongst people, which ultimately led to Islamic Revolution in Iran.

After the revolution, things changed radically and the Islamic government realised the important role women could play in the development of Iran. Thus women were gradually given due weightage. The education for women was emphasised in official policies so that they can contribute to the development of Iran as men. Hence government launched several programmes and policies for the benefit of women. Many 'acts' were passed by the Parliament, which secured political, economic and educational rights for women.

Moreover, in post-revolutionary Iran, participation of women in different kinds of activities increased over the years. The constitution of Iran gives full right to women for acquiring education so that they can be educated and opt for their career themselves. It is also emphasised that Islam never prohibits women from learning and acquiring knowledge. It is in fact made obligatory on their parts to acquire education. It was found that women in Iran were doing very

well in the teaching profession especially at primary level because they influence the young mind in a better way. So they are encouraged to take up teaching job on a very large scale. The women participation in legal profession has also gone up primarily due to the reformist pressure in recent years. In fact, the women of Iran have been very assertive about their rights and women lawyers refused to accept the ban on legal practices and continued practices in the name of male family members and have taken up jobs of legal advisors in companies. Moreover for the protection of women's rights, about 200 legal advisors have been appointed by the Ministry of Justice. It will not be surprising if the women are appointed judges in the Iranian courts in the near future.

Women participation in the service sector has also increased in the post revolutionary period. It was found the labour force participation rate was 30 percent in 1980 which rose slightly to 30.1 percent in 1997 (*World Employment Report 1980-99*). However, male participation declined during this period, from 47 percent in 1980 to 44.2 percent in 1997. But in case of female participation it was noted that it increased from 12.4 percent in 1980 to 15.6 percent in 1997. There were 85.5 percent of the employed women in education and health sector in 1979 which rose to 90.6 percent in 1996. According to 1986 census, 28 percent of the government employees were female which rose to 30 percent in 1991. So far as their contribution to labour is concerned the percentage of rural and tribal women is higher than men in the rural areas and this trend has remained unaffected even after the revolution.

Women participation in politics has also increased over the years. Their share was 1.5 percent in the first, second and third *Majlis* (parliament convened respectively in 1979, 1983 and 1987.) The majority of women parliamentarians were from the ruling Islamic Republic Party (IRP). Despite their full identity with the state and its ideology, they defended women's Islamic needs and rights. In fourth *Majlis* (1992) the number of women representatives increased to 3.3 percent. These representatives were more educated than the earlier women parliamentarians and were even more assertive about their rights. They tried to amend some articles relating to the personal status but could not succeed due to the uncooperative attitude of the male deputies.

In the fifth *Majlis* election of 1996 gender conscious Islamist women participated more actively as candidates, campaigners and voters. Women got 4 percent of the total seats in that election. These elected women were more vocal, assertive and more experienced in issues relating to women. Their views on gender were non-conventional. In the sixth *Majlis* election, which was held in 2000, women got one less seats than the previous election but the reformists won the majority over the hard-liners for the first time in the *Majlis*. More than 100 male deputies who are sympathetic to women's causes were elected and improving the status of women in Iran was at the top of their agenda. The government has since established some institutions to improve the economic and social conditions of women. The social and cultural council of women in 1988 and the office of women's affairs 1992 were established to detect problems and shortcomings and to propose solutions to ameliorate women's status and their economic, social cultural and political roles. The special Commission for women Affairs were created to reform laws to protect the women's rights. The Divorce Act was passed in 1989 to curb men's unchecked divorce right. Another law passed in 1999 extends women's right to request divorce on the valid grounds.

The victory of Khatami in 2001 election opened the way for more reforms, notably greater press freedom and appointment of a female as Vice President of the republic. President Khatami is of

the view that women can play a crucial role both at the family life and social arena. He outrightly rejects the notion of superiority of male over female and advocates the leadership of the competent and meritorious irrespective of gender.

Conclusion

There is a positive change in the status of women in post revolution Iran. Despite all this, the status of women in Iran is far from satisfactory. They are still lagging behind in many spheres of life. The issue of women empowerment still needs more attention. There are still conservative elements within the system of administration which are opposed to the reformist position on women development.

But these forces have to understand that for the overall development of Iran in every field and to catch up with the pace of development taking place in other parts of the world, Iran has to think seriously in terms of empowering its women in all sectors of socio-economic and political activity. The women can play a very important role in the nation building activities. It is important for Muslim countries to remove the misconceptions from the mind of critics of Islam through positive and progressive interpretations of Islamic principles guiding the state action in relation to women. All unjust practices and unhealthy traditions must be broken to advance the conditions of women. Iran can no doubt take lead in this direction and can show the way to other Muslim countries.

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