

Position of Women in Iran: An Analysis of Pre and Post Islamic Revolution 1979

Sadia Rafique

Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan

Khalid Manzoor Butt

Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Socio, economic and political involvement of women as half of the total populace is important to reinforce society and state. In every sphere of life, women have been found under-represented one way or the other. The women of Iran are not exempted from this. This paper evaluates women's position in two different periods in the history of Iran, i.e., during the rule of the Pahlavi Dynasty, and during the period of the post Islamic Republic. The objective of the paper is, first, to highlight the treatment meted out to women in Iran and shed light on various spheres of social life while comparing the two periods. Secondly, to examine factors that have affected the position of women in Iran.

Key words: Women, Iran, Pahlavi Dynasty, Pareto Theory of Elite, Clergy, Veil.

Introduction

The women issue is acknowledged worldwide as a complex issue and varies from society to society. Women have been facing by and large unfair treatment in public as well as private life all over the world. However, the issue of gender inequality is more subject of discussion in Islamic countries than the West. Studies have been conducted on the issue and different measures have been suggested to bring women at par with men, indeed it has become a complicated task to break the traditional gender role patterns. Like most Islamic countries, Iran is also a signatory of International Convention on Civil and Political Rights which stipulates non-discrimination based on gender, though besides, the present Constitution of Iran includes provisions which ordain protection of women yet the actual position of women points that these safeguards are not observed.

The study is a detail account of the treatment of women in Iran and problems which they are facing in various spheres of their lives while comparing the Pahlavi dynasty with the post-Islamic revolutionary Iran and also comparison and analyses of their approaches. Secondly, changes in women's legal status and gender realities that have taken place in Iran have been evaluated. It will cover the position of women in peacock Pahlavi throne and will define the position of women during Islamic Republic. At the end a comparison of women's position before 1979 and after the Revolution of 1979 will be undertaken.

It is mentioned that literature used in the study has been taken not only from Iranian sources but also from the various western sources too. In other words, literature from varied perceptions representing different points of views has been used in the study. It is recognized that it is impossible to make generalizations about it, especially given the complexity related to social, religious and geographical differences. Rather, the objective of this study is confined to exploring the position of women, and to assess the absolute influence of clerics in Iran by assessing the changes concerning women in post-revolutionary Iran.

Before the advent of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the King, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, sought to reincarnate the state along secular and modern lines by 'White Revolution.' He thought European values represent modernity. One key aspect of the program was that he steered his internal policies on women's rights and their compulsory education. Prior to this, his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, initiated a measure in 1936 which prohibited the use of veil for women, and the policy remained unchanged till the reign of his son. The situation, however, changed with the overthrow of the Shah and the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. So the political character of the state morphed from monarchy to an Islamic regime based on an Islamic constitution and Islamic laws which was characterized by restricted role of women in different social spheres. The Islamic Revolution may be said to have cast adverse consequences for Iranian women, and the policies of the Islamic Republic had promoted gender inequalities. So the road from the Pahlavi dynasty to Islamic Revolution has been strenuous one for Iranian women. Though women in Iran had been given various promises of reforms but most of them have not been materialized previously. The Iranian society has though witnessed slight perceptible social change in family dynamics, educational attainment, cultural politics, women's social roles, attitude and values but it has come without any conscious patronization of the state.

Iranian religious and feminist scholars share divergent perceptions of the status of woman and her role in social life. In Iran's political and religious writings, most Shia scholars give different opinions on sex relations, tenets of sexual direct, ladies' social and private conduct, ladies' sexuality, and process of producing offspring, domestic, intra family relations and men's sexual cravings too. Hazrat Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet (SAW) and wife of Imam Ali, has been glorified as a role model for every Muslim woman. Her birthday is celebrated as the 'Women's Day' in Iran. She is commemorated as the paragon of motherhood and is regarded as possessing 'wifely virtues;' moreover, she is a heroine whose person is devoid of anything which is impure, and alien to Islam.

The study has been conducted in the framework of Pareto's 'The Mind and Society,' Moca's 'The Ruling Class,' Michel's 'Political Parties,' Burnham's 'The Managerial Revolution' and C. Wright Mill's 'The Power Elite'. The corpus of the 'elitist doctrine' is that there exists a minority in every society which takes major decisions in the society. Pareto, however, divides the elite into two classes on the basis of their ability to influence political decision making: the 'governing elite'

consists of all political influences, whether such influences are exercised directly or indirectly. This class comprises members of the government and of an opposition party as well as individualists, labor leaders, military personal or any other in the society, to the extent that they make an impact on political decision making. On the other hand, the non- governing elite consists of the leaders who do not affect political issues.

Women and Pre-revolutionary Period

The status of ladies got changed in Iran when Raza Shah came to control in 1925 and underlined the part and significance of ladies inside the state since they made up half of the Iranian populace. Raza Shah introduced policies that have brought change in the lives of Iranian women. They were encouraged to join both private and public sectors for employment. For the first time, family laws were amended and “unveiling was enforced in 1936” (Lauria, 2015). The initiative received mixed response: women organizations who had participated in activities of revolution opposed the initiative but a women organization inaugurated with the name of Kanun-e-Banovan (Ladies Entry) composed of privileged women of the country supported the measure.

Raza Shah wanted to create a state based on strong army and for that he found Westernism and Europeanism as a model. For him Westernism was the separation of politics from religion but with the curtailment of clerics’ power. His vision of Iranian state was based upon the union of the following elements, society with secular ideas, a powerful military, modern outlook and finally judiciary. Hence, Westernism and Repression displayed two sides of same coin in his state building endeavors. Liberation of ladies was one of his powerful weapons against the priests who used impressive open specialist over sex relations and family, particularly ladies.

In 1967, the government of his son enacted the Family Protection Act with a view to put an end to certain restrictions on women and to appear modern. The act established family courts whose sole purpose was to handle divorce and child custody cases in a civil court. Women gained the right to “divorce on the same grounds as men, and both had to go in court for divorce. For marriage, the minimum age for women was raised from 15 to 18” (Bagely, 1971). The Shah curtailed men’s right to polygamy and took a number of steps to improve women’s status; “he legalized abortion and created family planning and day care centers for women who wanted to work”(Sedghi, 2007).

Consequently, various women became professional, entered courts as judges and lawyers and teachers in universities too. In 1978 the women enrollment at the Tehran University was meager. The most striking step taken by Shah was mandatory unveiling by women. He seemed to have believed that unveiling was a prerequisite for rapid economic development of country. Initially many women

reacted against it but gradually unveiling began to be accepted all over the country. Women were encouraged to work side by side with men in most workplaces. This freedom was for both urban and rural women of Iran. But the new laws were in lines of patriarchal nature of society which were not much different from Sharia, "husband's permission was essential for women in employment matters" (Enayat 2001).

Economic changes had important implication for Iranian women. Their participation in agriculture declined whereas their work in the service sections had increased. Approximately half of all working class women in urban areas had service job which was much higher than women's corresponding participation in industry. The development in economic system or quasi capitalism with modernization explains the growth of women's employment in Iran. The expansion of service sector required both greater investment in different areas and a new labor force was needed. It also requires more schooling, girl's school and female teachers. Moreover, there was uniform and secular education system in entire country for boys and girls.

Educational reforms were the most striking progressive step by Raza Shah. During his reign many schools were established which resulted in the considerable growth of enrollment of both boys and girls. Women entered in higher education department and began teaching. They contributed to the economic infrastructure and fostered the state's new education policies. "Women were empowered to challenge the institutional or social power of religious authority on the educational system" (Woodsmall). Although a separate ministry of education was established in 1910 but it was controlled by clerics. The governments later on passed legislation to enhance the power of the ministry and set up other bodies to reform the curriculum and secularize the education system in the country. The University of Tehran "hired European professors for its faculty, and the government sent Iranians, males and not female, abroad as far as USA for higher education" (Akhavi, 1980).

Overall freedom in women's independent activities in schooling and trading showed enormous development; especially in women's education and their implications for the state-clergy relationship. Raza Shah was of the opinion that "secular education could directly undermine the power of the clergy in the state" (Abrahamian, 1982). Women as pupils and teachers inspired next generation in the country. Despite the enhancement of education for girls, the state still paid more attention to boy's education as was evident from the number of schools for boys which were four times more than the school for girls.

Besides educational reforms, Shah introduced same measures which were concerned with women's lives such as marriage, divorce and household relations. Divorce and marriage needed to be registered in civil courts instead of religious courts. Obtaining marriage license became necessary. Marriage age was also amended: As per Sharia, the age of female puberty was 9, against the 15 for male; a 1931 law required a marriage contract to be based on "Physical Aptitude" for

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marriage instead of age, so the 1935 Act revised the age of puberty 15 for female against 18 for male. It stopped child marriages to some extent and the new Marriage law recognized agreement between bride and groom as candidates for marriage. However mostly advantages were availed through this law by urban, wealthier women than rural women. As virginity is highly valued for women, and not for man, the “laws assigned severe sanctions for assault on a virgin woman” (McGlinn 2000-2001). Overall adultery codes had substantial ramification for males because they assigned more value to a man’s life than to a woman’s.

However, new laws guaranteed few rights to women: for example, women were empowered to initiate divorce proceedings. The edict of unveiling as a reform during Pahlavi’s was an “extension of secular policies which became state policy after Raza Shah’s address in Tehran College in 1936”(Pahlavi, 1980). It needed to be implemented gradually but forcefully. Those government servants who resisted the implementation were fired from their jobs. There was a strong reaction from the clergy but the reaction of the Iranian women was mixed, few accepted and mostly did not.

Position of Women after the 1979 Revolution

Ladies issues have been a dynamic segment of the Iranian Polity specifically since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It brought a new episode in women’s position. It devalued westernized, secular and unveiled woman. So one can say that a reverse process began in 1979 when the founder of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, abolished, first, the family protection laws and, later on, women’s rights to work as judges. In the same year, “gender segregation was affected at beaches and sports, and eventually wearing of veil was made compulsory for women who would work out” (Esmat Abad 2000). Then Iranian Parliament passed a law to punish the women in violation of “Hijab” in 1983. In reaction to government’s women prejudiced policies, women organizations protested but the government responded by increasing punishment. Hiding ladies' bodies, sexual orientation isolation and disparity were the approach of the Khomeini administration.

The 1979 Revolution was the result of unity among religious forces, classes, gender and various political organizations. Women’s clothing was not anymore issue as veiled and unveiled women demonstrated solidarity. But once the government stabilized itself in the wake of the Revolution women’s choice of clothing came to end when unveiled women began to be intimidated and threatened to be attacked. Many newspaper and leaflets criticized women unveiling and women’s many rights came under attack. These Revolutionary authorities introduced edicts, religious *fatwas* and Friday ceremonies to criticize women and the climax came in 1983 when it proposed and eventually made legislation the Qesas (the bill of retribution) in 1983.

According to this law seventy four lashes for women were assigned who failed to observe veiling. It also weakened women's legal status by stipulating that a "woman's testimony would be equal to that half of a man"(Yeganeh). Other edicts and laws reconstructed or maintained the existing gender inequality. Hashmi Rafsanjani, who later elected as President legally sanctioned that "Shi't temporary marriages and Polygamy in sermon in 1990, though various religious authorities had earlier encouraged it unofficially"(Scioline, 1992). "Another law lowered the age of marriage of girls from 9 to 8 and gave father the right of child custody in case of divorce" (Ebadi). Various other laws prohibited promiscuous gatherings at public places such as beaches, swimming pools, sports and offices. Such laws also applied on educational institutions and lecture halls. Even gender segregation was affected in the public transport where fewer seats were reserved for women. Furthermore, hitched ladies were prohibited to travel abroad unless they got composed authorization from their spouses and single understudies were averted to travel alone to study abroad. It merits saying that the shah's legislature likewise required wedded ladies to get their better half's composed authorization before voyaging abroad.

Laws of inheritance that are sharia based kept on providing larger share of wealth for men than for women. During the early years of Revolution, Hezbollah (party of God) was created which was used for the forced tactics, for example, many adulterous women and prostitutes were flogged, stoned or executed; even virgin females prisoners sentenced to death were allegedly ordered to be raped and tortured(Paidar). After Islamic Revolution of 1979, many women were fired from their jobs and were home-bound. A few ladies consolidated family unit creation and multiplication with salary producing exercises, in this way joining the developing positions of the independently employed in the casual economy. "Other women after retirement from public life committed themselves to wifeness and motherhood. And the women who remained left in public sphere adjusted themselves to new market realities, policies and cultural norms and expectations" (Moghadam, 2001).

In the early days of Islamic Republic, the nature of women's work and the gender division of labor were changed. Consequently, there was a dramatic decrease in women labor force participation. Many women had to leave their jobs, including those who either held high-level positions under the Shah because of the introduction of purification (*Paksazi*) policies. On the same hand, many other educated and professional women suffered due to modesty rules, strict gender segregation measures, and workplace harassment. It is pertinent to mention that the female members of religious minorities also suffered the same revolutionary attitudes except Christian and Jewish ladies who by and large kept their positions on the grounds that the Bible is regarded as a heavenly book. However, ladies who held their work – paying little mind to religious foundation – needed to conform to hijab runs and were allotted to sexual orientation isolated assignments. Iran fought a decade long (1979-1989) war with its neighbor Iraq. Needless to say that the war

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economy has its own dynamics to meet the exigencies of the war. "The second shift in the gender division was introduced which resulted in the increase of women's labor participation, particularly among the more devout supporters of the regime. Khomeini slowly modifying his previous stance, also welcomed women to participate in economic, political, and social affairs within the Islamic laws and regulation and further, to join the war efforts as Mobilized Sisters" (Khaharan-eBasiji). After that, a few women entered "teaching, medicine, and nursing professions and other services that resembled women's nurturing roles at home"(Moghadam,2002). The third shift in the gender division of labor and women's work followed the post-war reconstruction.

Without precedent for Iranian history, a lady showed up on stamp, costing 0.03\$. The stamp had an outline of round confronted lady that had no body just a face shrouded in a dark, a face without wrinkles, shut mouth and genuine eyes. It regarded as the woman of revolutionary Iran. Mobilization of women for political support appears to be most prominent in the post-revolutionary periods, when it was needed for political legitimacy. At the start of the Iran-Iraq war, one way for mobilizing the women was through Ayatollah Khomeini's call for the formation of the Basij (mobilized) force in 1980. "During the war, Iranian women were motivated by a call of Basij to defend Islam by marrying with wounded soldiers" (Women's, 1995). That bond between man and woman and state gave birth to other groups:

- Women were inducted for the purpose of participating in wars;
- *Harasat Guards* or security officers at government offices, to ensure proper veiling, and
- Thirdly, few different state, social and political projects e.g. for demonstration etc.

The mobilization of women is a strange phenomenon under the Islamic regime. From one viewpoint, sexual orientation isolation approaches require authorization of those arrangements by ladies specialists, accordingly expanding their reliance on the state and then again, it might bless a few ladies with a feeling of self that was curbed or non-existent under the common state. Amid the early times of the post-progressive state, accordingly, less favored ladies accomplished acknowledgment, and the state, consequently, got legitimation and combination from them. The bond between the state and the poor started to melt away toward the finish of the Iran-Iraq War. "It was not until Mahmood Ahmadinejad's campaign for presidency in June 2005 that the alliance appeared to be reviving." (Hamideh, 2005).

Despite all, the post-war reforms and introduction of liberal economic policies reduced women number in labor. The number of women in private and public occupation grew but the share of women in the labor force declined in comparison of the 1970's. Generally, the revolutionary era is significant as it sharply enhanced

the power of state and created an environment for the increasing politicization of women.

Conclusion

From beginning to the present, the position of women in state also, veiling rehearses has been the two sides of a similar coin in Iranian legislative issues. Both Pahlavi and Islamic regimes fabricated the issues of genders by uncovering or veiling for their vested political interest. Revisiting the theme of unveiling-veiling and thereby seeking to control women's position in society appears to constitute one of the persisting themes: In 1936, the first Pahlavi Monarch using the state power coerced women to unveil; and later on the Islamic Iran forced women to reveil. The Shah used gender policies to lay the foundation of secularism and westernization in the country to weaken clergy; whereas, Revolutionaries went on to promote their version of Islamization and anti-westernization by restricting the space for women. The two periods of history in Iran were identical in the sense that the style of governance seems similar in essence since both the regimes devised a similar plan to achieve their goals but the motives behind the strategies were entirely opposite.

The Shah's regime used mobilization of women along the modern lines to weaken the influence of its rival-the clergy to fasten its grip gain on power in the country. His successor, Imam Khomeini, employed the same gender issue to weaken his opponents and, on the other hand, to gain legitimacy to rule. Shah, however, announced to unveil women officially and the objective was, inter alia, to modernize the country in order to get a better position in the international arena. The succeeding government decided to re-veil the women in the country in order to revive the religion in letter and spirit in the country yet kept the country in isolation.

In both the policies unveiling and revealing women had not taken in account and decisions were made by the males. Which reflects that Iranian society was and is a male oriented society and women did not or have not any say in decision making. Despite the fact that Shah also had political motives to unveil the women but at least gave a step forward to women of Iran and they go certain rights which were very much required to liberate women from the religious and social clutches and to give them a better position and enhanced their social and economic participation.

This entire situation has been analyzed in this study while keeping in view the Pareto's theory of elite cycle, which shows that both the regimes most of the times acted as the "lions" which is characterized by using coercion and bringing the supporting alliances in order to gain power and authority over the rivals while weakening the latter at the same time. For the attainment of above mentioned objectives in both regimes, women issues remain the most instrumental. Out of all the state policies during the regimes, mostly were dealt with women.

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The game of power was restricted not only to the issue of women's veil but it was expansive enough to include policy formulation regarding women's ordinary to higher education, family laws, labor force participation and other gender policies. Both phases were characterized by enhancement in women education and labor force participation. However, both these governments despite promising to end women's miseries in the country enforced family laws and other gender policies that further discriminated and alienated the women and consequently deprived them of their due and just rights. It was a double standard that Reza Shah forbade his daughter to pursue foreign education but allowed his son. It is a fact that Shah institutionalized and legitimized women education for the first time in the history of Iran. Allowed admissions of students and to get university education, women were also allowed to teach. So a generation emerged during the Pahlavi regime who paved way for the future feminists and women activists. Women also entered the educational system in huge numbers after the Revolution, and by 2002, they comprised about 71 percent of university enrollments. Some officials, alarmed by this rising trend; started, although unsuccessfully in 2004, the debate on a quota system to discourage women from pursuing higher education.

Though Islamic regime put a reverse for women participation which seems incompatible with the current age yet such restrictions would not work for longer period of time and time would come when women would make their own position. In future no society can have sustainable growth unless women have their due position and participation.

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Sadia Rafique & Khalid Manzoor Butt

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Biographical Note

Sadia Rafique is Assistant Professor at Department of Political Science, Government College University (GCU), Lahore, Pakistan.

Prof. Dr. Khalid Manzoor Butt is Chairperson at Department of Political Science, Government College University (GCU), Lahore, Pakistan.
