

Social Status of Women in Iran: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Gender in Islamic countries has always been a subject of intense debates and discussion for both western and non-western scholars and media. Iran is a prominent Islamic country with a majority Shi'a Muslim population under the rule of a Shi'a government which has gained much lime light at an international level due to its much celebrated and debated Islamic Revolution and anti-western approach. The status of Women in Iran has always been defined and decided by the government at the centre which has many implications in the Iranian society. There are various conflicting views on the social status of women in Iran among the scholars and academic and which obscure the position of women in the Iranian society. This paper is an attempt to analyst the existing complexities and paradoxical propositions on the status of women in the Iranian society.

Key words: Society, Women, Status, Iran.

Introduction

Status of women in a society has been understood in relation to various socio-economic, cultural and political factors. Mason is of the opinion that the status of women is essentially a relative concept and should be understood in terms of comparison to men in a society (Mason 1986). In most of the societies, gender is defined according to the roles and functions assigned to them in a family structure. The gender categorization thus becomes a culmination of certain conditions of functions and responsibilities assigned to each individual that is reinforced and supervised by certain structures and institutions that exist within the society. Some customs, rules and tradition embolden the gender categorization which leads to a tight compartmentalization of two genders by which one category becomes dominant over the other. Some of the social

institutions are established to maintain the gender stratification with an ultimate aim to ensure male superiority in communities and societies (Aghajanian 1992:362). Dyson and Mick argue that it is appropriate to understand the position of women in society in comparison to males through the prism of relative autonomy of females within and outside the family structures (Dyson & Mick 1983). The status of Iranian women and its analysis have mostly been done in line with the Islamic customary laws and principles. The rights of women in Iran have been formulated according to the principles of Islam. This has impacted the social status of women in the society of Iran. There are many ebbs and flows in the social status of Iranian women predominantly due to the changing ruling regimes which range from western influenced ruling system to conservative and reformist governments in

Iran. However, the most striking feature of the social status of Iranian women is that there no point of consensus over the portrayal of their position in the Iranian society.

Touba is of the opinion that women in Iran had enjoyed equal rights with those of their male counterparts during the time of Zoroastrianism around 2500 years back. Touba argues that the principles of Islam which respected women and their rights were highly appreciated in Iran which was not the case with even those western societies. Touba further attributed the changes that have been brought into the status women to the Mongol invasion in the 13 century (Touba 1972:26).Tauba further argues that the changing position of women in Iranian society is also dependent on the factors such as illiteracy and traditions practices (Touba 1972: 27).While examining the relationship between the urbanization and the changing status of women in Iran, Touba argued that the status of women in Iran has been improved as they began joining schools and universities in great number and they could join whichever profession they want to be a part of (Touba 1972: 28). In his argument, Tauba portrayed a rosy picture of Iranian women and imposed the cause of the changing status of women on those factors which remain outside the purview of Islamic principles.

Ramazani is of the opinion that the theocratic state in Iran has been introducing progressive reforms for women in areas related to marriage, divorce etc. (Ramazani 1993: 409). There has been a consistent growth of pragmatist ideas in Iran ever since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989.

Many extremist policies were overturned after the coming of new government which improved the status of women in Iranian society (Ramazani 1992). Ardalaan portrayed comparatively a better image of women in Iranian society. Ardalaan argues that the status of women in the urban areas has been affected by the changes occurred during the 20th century in Iran. He is of the opinion that the women are accepted as a companion and a colleague of man in Iran (Ardalaan 1978).

However, there are many opinions which are contrary to the above stated images of women in Iranian society. There is an established connection between low social status and fertility rate among the women in Iran. Iran has a fastest population growth in the entire Middle Eastern region. This was very evident especially during the period between 1976 and 1986. The population had increased from 19 million in 1956 to 33 million in 1976. This has again been increased from 33 million to 50 million in 1986. Aghajanian sought to connect this increase in population with the low social status of women in Iran. He argues that the high fertility rate is majorly due to the family formation at an early age and the continuing child bearing throughout the reproductive period (Aghajanian 1992: 361). Ardalaan and Jacqueline portrayed a negative picture of the status of Iranian women in their society.Ardalaan and Jacqueline state that women had always less leisure time than their male counterparts in the Iranian society. Women in Iran play multiple roles of a mother, housewife and a worker like any other societies in the world (Ardalaan and Jacqueline 1991: 68). Ardalaan quotes Henri Rene de who says

that the historical sources of Iran indicate that the Iranian women in the earlier period had no value. Many of the households in Iran didn't prefer to have a girl child in their families. There would be no legal action even if a father kills his daughter and the father had all the right to do so if the daughter bothers him (Ardalaan and Jacquiline 1991: 68).

It is important to note that the status of women in Iranian society varies from class to class. In Iran all women were illiterate and uneducated except those women in the elite families. However, they are just able to read and write. The positions of women in the elite classes were not better despite the factor of being in the upper strata of the society. They had no right to complain and they were remained as slaves to their husbands. The urban upper class women had no say in the decision making process. Most of the elite women were engaged in the activities such as embroidery, baking and canning which is typical traditional role assigned to the women in a society (Ardalaan and Jacquiline 1991: 68).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a major watershed in the socio-political history of Iran. There were some symbolic and legal changes after 1979 as far as the status of women were concerned. The new government issued strong instructions to make *hejab* compulsory for women in public (Aghajanian et al. 1996: 61). Aghajanian also describes the Islamic Revolution "as a major turning point in the social history of Iran". The new regime under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini changed the policy of fertility control of the previous regime and denounced the Family

Protection Law of the Shah's regime. The new regime also endorsed early marriage (Aghajanian 1991: 704-705). Nashat is of the opinion that after the Islamic Revolution women are once again fallen within their early traditional role (Nashat 1983). Thus, the authors strongly argued that the status of women after the Islamic revolution was so weak and pathetic as they were tried to put into the tight compartment of Islamic religious principles.

The hard line and the pragmatist factions within Iran's clerical elite have different stands on the rights of women in Iran. Even though both factions consider women as a significant social force within Iran, hard liners took more stringent approach towards women where they argue for essentially repressive measures on women in the name of Islamic purity (Ramazani 1993). Kelly says that women constitute the majority of seasonal agricultural workers in Iran. However they get only half of the total wages. Women in Iran marry at young ages and nineteen percent of them marry under the age of fourteen and bear the kids throughout the next thirty years. Even women in urban areas are offered with few opportunities. Fifty percent of urban women in Iran are illiterate. Husbands have the legal right to stop their wives from working if they feel that it hurts the dignity of their families. It is not considered a grave criminal case if a husband kill his wife in the name of protecting his dignity. There is a general perception in Iran that women are not equal in ability. Thus there is no pretension about legal equality and democratic rights of women in Iran (Kelly 1980: 390-391).

Conclusion

The narrations and portrayals of the social position of Iranian women in the media and academic circles are quite obscure. The complexities of the status of women in Iranian society lie in the changing attitude and approach of various ruling regimes in Iran over the period of time. On the one hand, many of the scholars sought to narrate the status by analyzing the egalitarian nature of Islam. Some portray their 'better' position as compared to those females in their neighboring Middle Eastern countries. On the other hand, some scholars narrate the low status of women in Iran which is typical and similar to the experiences of those women in any other societies. However the low status of women in Iranian society, unlike any other western societies, is aggravated by the application of fundamentalist Islamic principles on their day-to-day affairs. The growing women's movement to assert their rights and the increasing voice of liberal, leftists and the pragmatist section within the clergy is a testimony to the low position of Iranian women in their societies which is yet to be improved a lot. Thus an objective analysis on the status and rights of Iranian women bereft of any religious inclinations and political agendas is sine qua non to ensure a more equal and egalitarian society in which the rights and freedom of the women are guaranteed and protected.

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