



THE EMPOWERMENT OF IRANIAN WOMEN: AN IMPERATIVE ISSUE OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATION.

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ABSTRACT

"No country can ever be deserving of its presence that can't bring its ladies alongside the men. No battle can ever succeed without ladies taking an interest next to each other with men. There are two forces on the planet; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is an awesome rivalry and

contention between the two. There is a third power more grounded than both, that of the ladies."

— Muhammad Ali Jinnah

Women Empowerment with respect to educational, political, economic and religious choice is the basic parameter of judging the standard of a civilised society. The growth and development of a nation and its society mainly rely upon the growth and development of its individuals in general and the women in particular. Directly or indirectly women should enjoy the equal position along with men in all around development of a nation. No doubt men and women are equal in every aspect; moreover women play a vital role in the overall growth and wellbeing of a family, community, society and humanity at large. Women are given an honoured position in every religion.



Swami Vivekananda says:

"The great Aryans, Buddha among the rest, have always put woman in an equal position with man. For them sex in religion did not exist. In the Vedas and Upanishads, women taught the highest truths and received the same veneration as men."

In Islam much emphasis is given on the legitimate right of woman in every aspect of social life. "Islam not only endorses the freedom of women but has also been the founder of women's liberty in all dimensions of her being."¹ Further "Islam has emphasized the equality of man and woman and has given them the right to determine their destinies by themselves. In other words, both are eligible to

enjoy all freedom and liberties.”²

Thus, for making a well egalitarian society based on gender equality, women empowerment should be applicable.

The present study “the empowerment of Iranian women: An imperative issue of the socio-political development of the nation” is highlighted the condition of women in Iran time to time, mostly giving importance to their changing status from a male-dominant to the impartial society. It also reflects the necessity of the empowerment of women in Iran where the very Socio-political and religious obstacles were the main cause for this very social disregard in a male dominated society.

KEYWORDS :Empowerment, Qajar Period, twentieth century, modernity, women issues, women rights, equality, inequality, vote, veil, education, reform, movement, society.

INTRODUCTION :

Iran a nation, holding the pride as the oldest civilization, a country which is known for its culture and rich literature. Iran is known to the world ever since ancient times. what's more, it has a vast historiography with many ups and downs and a domicile of verity of the ethnic groups. In view of these pertinent factors it can be certified that Iran is a desirable nation but the description somewhere would be vague if we look at the women historiography of Iran. A nation is nothing without considering its inhabitants comprising of both men and women equally. But it can't be accept that women have ever suffered from the treatment of inequality. So Iran is not exceptional case as such. Iran passes throughout the times where women have not been given to subsist with their minimum needs; they did not have right to get education, to participate in politic, to join in a service, even to go outside from their solitary home. The most pinching point is that they were not given right to share their voice in black and white, that up to the nineteenth century Persian literature grown up without the women writers, poets and literatures on women. Bibi Khanum Astarabadi an outspoken and prominent Qajar woman gave an illustration that how the Iranian women suffered, she says:

“Behind the closed doors at home, prohibited from everything in life, education, training and social life, women are regarded as mindless, like infants; they are confined to the burdens of household work and childbearing and are considered the slaves and servants of their husbands.”³

Although the scenario started to revolutionize, in the last half of 19th century and the early of 20th century a big change has been seen in Persian history, the ‘weaker sex’ becomes more active. Due to the western influences and the modernisation a new understanding of the nation’s policy and the importance of identity and foreign relations for defining the Iran's position in the modern world upraised. Many people came forward to raise their voice for women issues and rights. Remarkably in the 20th century the upraising voice against the present country policy and reforming the right for women got its complete strength, while two types of feminist groups move up for Iranian women; the secular feminists outside of Iran and the Muslim feminists inside Iran. Beside this, a moderate group of men also came forward including writers, editors and a new westernised group. In favour of women empowerment literary works, newspapers and media have also played a vital role in projecting the women issues and bring them before the masses.

Iranian women’s past and present: Women had been given a superior position in the ancient Iran. The archaeological evidences have revealed that in Persia the women of the 4th–3rd millennium BCE community maintained a high level of socio-economic status. A. V. Williams Jackson, the pioneer of Iranian studies in America says:

“The position of woman in ancient Persia was apparently in nowise inferior to her standing in the

*Vedic times of early India. As among other oriental nations, however, submission to her lord and master is taken for granted, and the woman who is 'obedient to her husband' comes in for a special meed of praise in the Avesta and elsewhere; but it is perfectly evident, as a rule, there was not that subjection which results in loss of personality and individuality."*⁴

But the course of time, Iranian women's destiny have been altered and there up to a long time they were hidden from the history, because of the gender inequality. This is unfortunate that women made themselves habituates to live under dictation. This tendency remained up to the *Qajar* period in Iran. The most radical change took place during the early 20th century, when the time to time women's awakening surfaced in the different activities of the Iranian social life. It initially started with the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, when a huge numbers of women gathered in the streets of Tehran and raised their voice, they took off their veils and shouted: "Long live freedom. . . .We must . . . live the way we want!"⁵ During this times "women organized street riots, participated in some fights, joined underground activities against foreign forces."⁶ They established secret societies (*Anjomans* and *dowrehs*) "in order to discuss the situation of women by sharing their personal problems, experiences, and feelings. Two of the most important such early secret societies were *Anjomane Azaadi-ye Zanaan* (the Women's Freedom Society) and *Anjoman-e Zanaan-e Neqaabpush* (the Society of Masked Women)."⁷

A massive change took place in Iranian women history during the *Pahlavi* era (1925-1979), remarkably in Mohammad Reza Shah's time (1942–1978). Women became more active than ever before. Many reforms were introduced in favour of women. "For the first time, some women entered into the modern sectors of the economy, public and non-sex segregated schools were established, family laws were modified."⁸ Several new women's organizations emerged with the support of present political parties. They joined in political activities. Laws were passed like Family Protection "that set tougher conditions for polygamy, raised the age of marriage for girls to 18, put divorce under the authority of family courts, and created more safeguards against male vagary in divorce."⁹ An attempt has been made to unveil the women over Iran. The number of women increased in the executive positions, women enhance their opportunities in the public arena and they were appointed as judges. Before the Pahlavi's Iranian women even had no right to vote. In 1963 women won the right to vote. In 1975 family laws were additionally modified for giving women custody rights, ease earlier penalties against abortion, and offer free abortion on demand. In the same year, women's affairs gained ministerial status and a woman was appointed as the Minister of Education. 333 women were in local councils and 24 in two houses of the parliament, there were 323 female political prisoners serving time in Iranian prisons! In the last 7 years of the Pahlavi reign, 42 female guerrillas lost their lives in street fighting with military forces.

At the end of *Pahlavi* period women status became comparable to the prior of Pahlavi Era. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 introduced a new episode into women's history. Ayatollah Khomeini a religious leader of 1979 Revolution and the founder of Islamic Republic of Iran established the new *Sharia* laws and gave power toward *Ulamas*. He eliminated previous Family Protection Act. He ordered to revealing the women. Separating men and women in society in numerous way like higher education and 69 different fields of study. Female were not allowed in certain disciplines in the universities: engineering, agriculture and law. They also were forbidden to participate in some sports and were not allowed to watch men in sports fields. Women were banned from some professions such as the judiciary and singing groups.

Men got absolute right to divorce their wives without giving any justification. Child custody laws were also gone in favour of men, after divorce women could keep their boys only up to the age of two

and girls until seven. After these ages, fathers have the right to full custody. Women's judgment as evidence in court was declared to be worth half a man's. Blood money for a murdered woman was set to be half that of a man. If a murdered woman's family demands retribution in kind, her relatives would be obliged to pay the killer's family the full blood money in compensation.

While secular women opposed to the veil or the Islamic Republic were fired from their jobs, active participation of religious women in supportive and "female" occupations was encouraged. The new religious laws and government policies resulted in the retirement of large segments of defiant secular women from the labour force, the arrest of women who openly challenged the regime, and the migration of a large number of women who could not adjust to the new policies out of the country. Female marriage age was reduced to 13 and professional secular women were encouraged to retire from their public occupations in order to support male employment.

In order to globalization and instant contact with the European culture, today Iranian women are more conscious and moderate, but somehow, still they have to suffer and their voices are being confined with some of the country policies.

Woman issues, movements and reforms: We see a significant change in the Iranian historiography throughout the 20th century, that, developing a new school of presenting history. Here emphasis shifted from the anecdotal story-telling genre to social, political, economic, cultural and religious history-writing. This transformation came into effect by the increasing socio-political and religious upheavals of the country. Although, this tendency started to get form from the mid 19th century AD. However, among all the raising problems, the most appealing is the women right's issues. The time must be considered as the time of women's awakening and development.

*"My sister (s), take your rights
from the individuals who keep you powerless,
from the individuals who through a thousand ploys
keep you situated in a house.
Your angry complaining
Your furious whining
must get to be yelling, shouting.
You should break this substantial chain.
to free your life. Rise, remove mistreatment,
resuscitate the heart splashed in blood.
Battle, battle to change laws 10
for the purpose of your own opportunity."*¹⁰

Women right's issues particularly on education, marriage, divorce, clothing and *Hijab* (veil), the right to vote, health related issues (like abortion), and etc compelled women to protest. Once they had no right to get education. The social activist raised the awareness for women education, they determined that giving education to women was the best policy for Iran, in that, the mothers would raise better sons for their country.¹¹ Here the foreign missionaries had a very important role that they founded the first school for girls in Iran. As Iranian, Bibi Khatoon Astarabadi, a great Iranian women rights activists founded the first school for Persian girls in 1907. Many prominent male activists also contributed their ideas as much for women education, the remarkable are Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, Shaykh Ahmad Ruhi, Mirza Malkum Khan and Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh.¹² Today women in Iran enjoy the best educational opportunity, more than 60% students of the university are from women.

Other hand the issues like marriage, divorce and family planning, women were also suffered. Even today, all the legal statements about marriage, divorce and the states of family planning set out in favour of men and the subjection for women. For the very evils of polygamy and seclusion, Iranian women raised their voice in several times and in several ways. Other hand child marriage is also a issue that the minimum age of marriage is 13 for girls and 15 for boys. Permission to marry below this age can be obtained from a court by the girl's or boy's father.

Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Laureate in Peace disclosed that "it is not easy to be a woman in Iran," because some laws "make it tough for women to be active."¹³ Here one of the unfair laws was the 'vote', that they were not allowed to take part in vote. This circumstance move them to dispute against the system. And they gained the right to vote in 1963. At present women can occupy only 8 of the 290 seats (3 per cent of the seats) and there are no legislated quotas to increase women's representation in parliament. As of 2010 there is only one female minister. Women are not allowed to hold leadership positions in the main organs of power, such as the Presidency and Supreme Leadership of the country. The Hijab or veil became a big issue in Iranian women movement. The Hijab is a highly modest, usually black or dark coloured outfit that covers the top of a woman's head and loosely covers her body and to her feet. The dress needs to be appropriate according to the Islamic custom of hijab. Seyyed Jamalzadeh, a noted novelist of Iran, commented that:

*"No women can be seen in this country of men, but strangely, half of the walking population in the streets is wrapped in black bags from head to the toe without even an opening to breathe."*¹⁴

The code of conduct for dressing of Iranian women let them to suffer in daily life, that "a fifty-five-year-old woman is walking home, her arms full of groceries. It is hot, and the woman is clearly struggling to hold the groceries and maintain her veil, or chador, at the same time. Before she can put it back into place, the chador slips back and a single lock of hair appears on the woman's forehead. Immediately, she is arrested and imprisoned. For her "crime" she receives eighty lashes with a whip."¹⁵ Qurrat al-Ain, an influential poet and theologian of Iran is referred as the first woman who unveiled her face, and who first introduced the movement against the veil. Azar Nafisi, a notable Iranian academic and author, has referred to her influence, saying that "the first woman to unveil and to question both political and religious orthodoxy was a woman named Tahirih who lived in [the] early 1800s... And we carry this tradition."¹⁶

CONCLUSION:

The present status of Iranian women is truly different from its past. Since more than a century's struggles, their status has partly improved, Specially, they are now enjoying the same value in terms of social and economic development of the country. Iranian women now are free to work outside their home and they also reached to the pick of education that women are now more active than men in the country educational outline.

But, however the ignorance and an atmosphere of intolerance have not yet changes their political status, which is not improved considerably. They have right to vote but no power to use it. At the same it may not be ignored that the role of political system, which worked to reform the women rights.

Among the all activists who fought for women's reforms, where men and women both hold an unique place. On the other hand Iranian media, newspaper, magazine and literature also played a vital role in the perspective of women right's issues and movements.

In view of these trail of significant changes that took place over a period of time, the betterment of woman's empowerment will be more meaningful in coming days.

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1. Qajar was a dynasty established by Aga Mohammed. The dynasty was continued to rule Iran from 1785 to 1925. Qajars were the Persianized royal family of Turkic origin.
 2. Sharia or sharia law is the basic Islamic legal system for the human. Sharia means a body of moral and religious law derived from religious prophecy, as opposed to human legislation.
 3. Ulama is defined as the guardian of legal and religious tradition in Islam. Also Ulamas are recognized as the scholars or the authorities in the religious hierarchy of the Islamic religious science.