

The Position of Women in Islamic Revolution of Iran

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Iranian Revolution of 1979, a socio-political upheaval in the Iranian history, drew worldwide attention and has significant effects on the citizens of Iran, especially women. As a major turning point of the contemporary era, "it shattered the myths of modernization and development theory, which presupposed the Westernization and secularization of society, and signaled the resurgence of Islam in Muslim politics and society."¹ Scholars have varying opinion on the role of revolution, and some described it as a "revolutionary success and social failure."

Tracing the background of the revolution, it is stated that autocracy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown and replaced by an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, as 80 year old exiled *shia* cleric, based on "guardianship of Islamic jurists i.e. *velayat-e-faqih*" as a result of the Islamic revolution of 1979. The slogan of the revolution was "Independence, Liberty and Islamic Republic."

A series of incidents led to the revolution such as Shah's programme of reforms, known as White Revolution which consists of granting of voting rights to women, breaking up land holdings owned by some *Shia* clergy, allowing religious minorities to hold office, and grant women legal equality in marital issues, which created anguish among the clergies and the traditional popular class. The replacement of the first year of Iranian calendar, from the Islamic *hijri* to the ascension to the throne by Cyrus the great in 1976, by the Shah's government, angered majority of the Iranians. An alarming increase in inflation, accelerating gap between the rich and poor, and Shah's close affiliation to the west added fuel to the prevailing climate of anger.

¹ John L. Esposito and R.K. Ramazani ed., *Iran at the Crossroads*, Palgrave, New York, 2001, p.1.

When we analyze the position of women during Shah's regime, we find that Shah's Family Protection Law of 1967 made positive changes in the existing Islamic code. It restricted polygyny, raised the age of marriage for girls from 9 to 15 years of age, restricted the unilateral right of men to divorce, allowed right to custody of children to women. It is curious to observe that despite the positive efforts taken up by Shah to improve the status of women under his Modernization programme, women were major participants in the revolution against the Shah. Now the question arises what made women participate in such a great numbers? Iranian women consisted of a heterogeneous group as women in any other society, and their reasons for opposing the Shah were also varied: such as economic deprivation, political repression, identification with Islamism. As this was the time when various Islamic political trends became popular among opponents of the Shah propounded by the scholars such as Ali Shariati, Murtaza Motahhari, Taleghani. Shariati and Motahhari wrote treatises on women that interpreted Islamic teachings in a gender egalitarian way. Shariati's "*Fateme is Fateme*" embodied the aspirations of many young women at that time. It presented Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Mohammad as a woman of strong will and as a role model for the young Iranians in order to achieve social justice. Islamists, Leftists and liberals were the three forces simultaneously existing in 1970's Iran and made the core of the revolution.

But when the revolution ended successfully in February 1979, the power was monopolized by the clerical forces. And a reversal of trends towards gender relations was central to the new government. Women were defined in constitution in terms of their familial status and domestic duties. Family Protection Law was annulled. Women could no longer be judges and were dismissed or hounded from many governmental and professional positions and "Compulsory *hejab*" i.e. veiling was enforced.

It is interesting to note that these post revolutionary measures created alterations in women's consciousness. Women began to realize the significance of rights when they were annulled. They created the ways to exhibit their resistance, and as their access to work in public sector got curtailed, in response their participation in employment in private sector got increased in great numbers. With the beginning of Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), government called on women to become effective on home front and their participation in public sphere increased significantly.

One can easily find the ways how women resisted their subjugation. Though there was a ban on the use of cosmetics, yet there were women who applied lipsticks and nail paints;

and showed off a little of hair or few streaks to oppose the proper *hejab*. Women also did this through their paintings, sculptures, films etc.

So, it can be said that though Islamic Revolution of Iran caused severe alterations in the position of women as women were considered as "major losers of the revolution" by few scholars, but this does not complete the picture. As it were only the after effects of revolution which transformed the consciousness of women at large. An increasing number of women in public sphere, educational institutions and in political arena reflect it clearly.

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