

The Financial Obstacles of Women's Political Participation in Iran

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Abstract: This article studies the financial obstacles of women's political participation in Iran. This study examines how structural factors (occupation and income) act as obstacles to women's participation in top political positions in Iran. A qualitative research method is used in the paper and the primary data are collected mainly through in-depth interview with five informants by using purposive technique. The findings of the article suggested that inadequate financial resources act as the structural obstacles of Iranian women in top political positions. [Seyedeh Nosrat Shojaei, Ku Hasnita Ku Samsu, Hossein Asayesh. The Financial Obstacles of Women's Political Participation in Iran. Report and Opinion 2010;2(10):41-49]. (ISSN: 1553-9873).

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1. Introduction

Political participation is understood as a prerequisite for political development hence, by improving women's political participation, given that they constitute over a half of the world's population may help to advance of political development and improve the quality of women's lives. In fact, without the active participation of women, and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved (FWCW, 1995: Art, 181).

On the other hand the involvement of women as a half of the world population is necessary to strengthen and sustain a democracy. Phrase of no

democracy without women is heard all over the world (Duhlerup, 2006). Consequently, scholars from diverse disciplines have clearly demonstrated that the democratic process works best when women actively participate in process and their views are represented (Chowdury, 1994; Zeleke, 2005; Panday, 2008). Therefore presence of women in top political positions such as; presidency, ministry, parliamentary, and so on also, linked to democracy.

Regarding the importance of women's presence in politics, although most of member states of the United Nation (UN) committed themselves to implement measures to ensure women's equal access to full participation, power structure, decisions making and leadership women still remain

underrepresented in political power position (Bari, 2005; Christele, 2004; Ramao, 2003).

Indeed, we still live in an unequal world. In their book on women and politics worldwide, Chowdhury and her colleagues (1994) conclude that in no country do women have political status, access, or influence equal to men's. In other words, women despite of having capabilities and merit in scientific, cultural, social and political spheres have not reached a suitable and satisfactory position in managerial and decision-making levels so far. For example, the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) asserts that by 2008 women represented only 18.3 percent of the seats in congress in the world. The Human Development Report (2007) further asserts that by 2005; out of the 177 countries just 16 countries women represented 30 per cent or more positions in government at ministerial level.

Although, Islamic Republic of Iran as a member of UN, has committed herself to take measures to ensure women's equal access to full participation in power and to increase women's capacity to participate in decision making and leadership (Shojaei, 2005) women as half of the population of Iran have remained underrepresented in parliament and political decision making.

According to the figures presented by the IPU in 2009, Iran is ranked the 131st after the Kumar Islands in terms of the number of women in the parliament. Among the neighbors of Iran, countries that precede it in this ranking include Iraq ranked as the 36th, Turkey 107th, Armenia 106th, Azerbaijan 92nd, Turkmenistan 72nd, Afghanistan 29th, Pakistan and United Arab Emirates 47th, and the countries that follow Iran are Bahrain ranked as the 133rd, and Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia all of which are the last, the 137th. A glance at the statistics of the eight terms of the Parliament in Iran illustrates a lower level of political participation of women in comparison with other countries. As table 1.1 in the end of article shows the rate of participation of Iranian females during the last 8 Parliaments did not exceed 5.6 percent.

In addition, political empowerment presence rate of women in political administration and managerial positions is lower in the developing world including East Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa compared with developed countries (Jaquette, 1997).

Besides the facts mentioned above, another proof of the disappointing condition of women should be sought in managerial and vocational divisions. From the total number of 17563 positions of governmental management, women occupy only two percent while, the number of male managers in Iran is thirty times more than female managers. In fact the percentage of working women in comparison with working men is 9.4 percent and the share of working women in major managerial positions is only 4.9 percent (Davani, 2005; Khalili, 2007; Naji-Raad, 2003).

Therefore, based on these statistics, that will indicate the unsatisfactory status of women in various aspects only partially, what should be pointed out is that women's negligible participation in various social and political divisions can have disastrous consequences, deprive women from important rights and responsibilities as citizens, discard their viewpoints in making decisions and passing and executing rules as half the population of members of the society, deprive them of their right in national budgets and resources, and most importantly, render the society deprived of their skills, knowledge and viewpoints (Molaverdi, 2005).

Although Iranian women have been granted the right to vote in 1962, the analysis of political culture and structure of Iran indicates that large scale political participation of women occurred after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. It must, however, be declared in spite of all of the attempts made to protect women's rights, this great human force still is faced with various obstacles and challenges.

Therefore, the present study focuses on the political participation of women after the Iranian Revolution and attempts to study financial obstacles of women's political participation of women in Iran.

The findings of this article will benefit women's studies development and will draw much attention of governments and civic institutions to rethinking women who play important role in political development of societies. This study also will contribute to future research on similar topics.

Our argument is developed in five sections. First, we explain the method that is applied in this study. In our second section, we describe the financial obstacles, after that we define the concept of political participation. In forth section, we discuss our findings. Last, we state the conclusion and recommendation to future research.

2. Methodology

The researchers elected qualitative research as the suitable research method for this study. This method made it possible for the researchers to utilize a flexible approach in her attempt to explore the experiences of informants about obstacles of political participation of Iranian women in high level of decision making.

Purposive technique also enabled the researchers to include participants in the context to which the study was related, answering the research question through *key informant* in the field of political participation of women in Iran. The five key informants of this study are selected among politician women who had more eighteen years political experiences. One of the informants was presidential advisor and others were members of political organizations such as; parliament, political party, city council and Non-government organization (NGO). The data collection processes in this research involved a variety of techniques. They mainly obtained through face to face and in- depth interview, and secondary data. The primary and major data collection is based on interview. Walliman (2001) reveals that interviewing, as a method of data collection, is particularly suitable for qualitative research, as it is flexible and descriptive so five individual, face to face and in-depth interviews were carried out by the researchers during one month; from 3 September 2009 to 3 October 2009.

The data of this study is also gathered through secondary data. Secondary data is research based on secondary resources that already exist (Jennings, 2001). Data from secondary sources allowed the researchers to decide what needs to be included in the literature review and also became a source for preparing the interview questions. Furthermore, Holloway and Wheeler (1997) are of the opinion that the literature should be used as an aid to compare and contrast with the themes that emerge from the study. The literature was therefore used as a verification tool, and enabled the researchers to verify the major themes with the relevant literature. The secondary data method in current research included, journal articles, books and the internet. Part of the data and information needed was gathered through reviewing the documents and government reports.

As the informants were assured that no personal identification would be revealed and no specific organization would be named or connected to a specific theme or individual hence the authors

used of code to identify them. In fact the informants are recognized by English alphabet letters according to date of interview. Table 2.1 in the end of paper shows the informant code.

The interviews were tape-recorded, then transcribed, and field notes were added to the transcripts. Following this, descriptive data analysis method was employed to transform the data into a workable form. Trustworthiness and ethical practice received attention during the whole process.

3. Definition of Financial Obstacle

Financial obstacles refer to low status of employment, occupation, income and fund (O'Kelly, K., & Corr, C., 2009). In this article, financial obstacles of women linked to their participation in politics. In fact "...the economic status of women in society has a direct influence on their participation in political institutions and elected bodies" (Shvedova, 2002, p.6). In other word inadequate economic resources is one of the biggest obstacles that prevent women from participating in politics in greater numbers (Tovar, 2007).

4. What is political participation?

Political participation is an interesting topic that has drawn much attention of sociologists and political scientists. Orum (1983) says that "One of the foremost concerns of contemporary political sociology is the manner and the degree of citizen participation in politics" (p. 131). In other hand, Daniel Lerner (1958) distinguishes "Traditional societies from modern societies on the basis of participation" (p. 51).

Dowes and Hughes (1972) appear that "participation has been as civic duty, as a sign of political health as the best method of ensuring that one's private interests are not neglected as the inseparable part of democracy"(p. 289).

Besides, Huntington and Nelson (1976) regard political participation as "any activities by private citizens designed to influence government decision making" (p. 3). Moreover, according to Weiner(1971) political participation refers to "any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized ... methods intends to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs or the choice of political leaders at any level of government, local or national"(p. 164). Verba and Nie (1972) also, define political participation as activities by private citizens

that are directly aimed at influencing the election of government personnel and/or the actions they take.

In this study we used of political participation concept that was provided by Milbrath in 1965. He classifies political participation in three kinds of activities; 1) *Gladiatorial* activities relating to those most active in politics and set at the pinnacle of various kinds of political participation. Being a candidate for office and holding public and party office are embraced in gladiatorial activities; 2) *Transitional* activities, in this type of political participation; people are less active in politics. Some activities such as attending a political meeting, wearing a button or putting a sticker on the car and making a monetary contribution to a party or candidate include in transitional activities and, 3) *Spectator* activities involve those who don't interfere in politics, except in voting and exposing oneself to political stimuli.

Since the focus of this article will be political participation of women who occupy top political positions in Iran, therefore for the purpose of this study the term political participation will be limited to persons held positions of leadership in Iranian politics.

5. Background Information of the Informants

From the data it was observed that all of the women we interviewed were married. This finding was opposite to literature for example; according to Nijhoff (1992. P 37), "...many high-level political women simply choose to remain unmarried". According to research objective, economic and scientific background of the informants was also very important so the researchers asked them about that. All of them were high- educated. Four of the informants had PhD's and one of them was Master. Furthermore, the informants' economic background showed they were in full-time employment and independent in terms of financial resource, for example, their salaries were over \$1000 per month. From the education and economic background of the informants it can be said that women's participation in political life depends largely on their access to educational and financial resources.

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6. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that most of Informants agreed with the influence of financial resources on women's presence in politics. They believed that role of financial resources could not ignore in increased political participation of women. In fact, inadequate financial resources mentioned as a reason for the low presence of women in top political positions in Iran.

This statement was observed in the experience of informant E; "We cannot ignore role of economic ...and financial issues ... in more ability of women to reach managerial posts because financial independence ... cause women will have more power of decision-making and choice".

Moreover, informant M mentioned that "Financial independence is one of the most important components for social and political participation in decision-making levels, especially for women, financial independence can pave their activity easily". Same this ideology is reflected in the following informants' statements;

Not only women but men cannot reach top management positions without financial support and higher education. If women are not financially independent and economically they cannot do their work. For example, I had enough financial resources in the Eight Parliamentary Elections I won. (Interview with informant C)

At that time when I was a governor consultant, we held a conference for women who wanted to be candidates for Tehran City Council elections, women that participated in the conference were expressed; without financial independence and adequate funding cannot be entered to campaign... so, I think this (financial independence) is a major problem of women who like to do political, economical and social activities. (Interview with informant A)

One of the informants also pointed to dependent of women to their family and husbands. According to informant B "while women do not have a good jobs and independent financial resources they

cannot obtain self-confidence and political independence". She expressed that

Most of women are financially dependent on their husbands or relatives so they may not be possible to them that enter in political campaign. (In fact) women's participation in political life depends largely on their access to employment which gives them not only material independence, but also certain professional skills and grater self-confidence.

Besides, there was an interesting statement in in-depth interview with another high level woman. She argued that "if current discriminatory laws against women are modified, without financial independence they would still not be able to benefit from such law changes" (Interview with informant D).

Statements from informants about the influence of financial resources in women's participation in politics in Iran are reflected in literature. For example Guynan (2004) suggested that "Those [women] with lower incomes have an interest in what goes on in the political world, but those [women] with higher incomes also have the advantage of resources and skills that lower income individuals most likely do not have". In addition, according to Sekhokoane (2004) "lack of income or lower income also reduces women's decision-making power in the household and their ability to participate in social and political activities. (p. 44). Nijoff's (1992) study also addressed role of income and occupational status as political resources to women's participation in politics. She argued that "women's participation in political life depends largely on their access to employment which gives them not only material independence, but also certain professional skills and grater self-confidence" (p. 34)

To sum up this section, economic status of women in society has a significant influence on their participation in political institutions and elected bodies. Furthermore, a lack of power or disempowerment of women is reflected in their lower income, less control over their own income, less participation in the decision-making position in the household and society, less access to production inputs, and fewer employment opportunities than men. In addition, it was highlighted how low rates of female representation are due to their inability to raise sufficient funds for their campaign. Indeed,

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based on evidence from the informants, it seems occupation and income have a significant influence on women's decision-making power in politics and these factors are positively linked with women's candidacy and electoral support.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

7.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the financial obstacles of women's political participation in Iran. In this article was applied the resources theory by analyzing the prevailing conditions in Iran.

The study is based mainly on primary data collection. It used in-depth interviews regarding the financial obstacles of high level women's participation in the politics of Iran. The study population was purposively selected from the two political zones and limited to presidential advisor and political organizations such as; parliament, political party, city council and NGOs. Participant interviews were recorded, and after the tapes had been transcribed, important themes were identified and interpreted.

The data claimed that lack of adequate financial resources act as the structural obstacles of Iranian women in top political positions. From the data it was observed that income and occupational status is positively correlated with the political participation. The data revealed that Iranian women's participation in politics depends largely on their access to employment which gives them not only material independence, but also certain professional skills and greater self-confidence that are very useful for political leadership. Indeed, those women who are dependent in terms of economic have more political decision-making power and to addition, have more chance to take a top political position in government. Under these circumstances, it can be said that occupation and income have a significant influence on women's decision-making power in the politics of Iran.

This study also found agreement among the informants that Iranian women faced by financial obstacles in their entrance into the top political position. The most important contributions of this study were the highlight that the level of occupation of women was significantly associated with their roles in political power decisions-making. This finding provides strong support to the recourse theory, as the findings indicated that when women are employed they are more involved in power

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decision making. Therefore, financial resources together appear to contribute more effectively to increase women's self-reliance and enhance their role in decision making within political power. Subsequently, this also contributes to women's political empowerment. This study promoted a better theoretical understanding and knowledge in the area of women's problem and limitation in politics; therefore this study also contributed to the gender development studies.

7.2 Recommendation

It should be acknowledged that in order to make changes in the wrong views towards women and tackle the barriers obstructing their social and political participation, there should first a transformation in women's own views. In fact women should be conscious of their capabilities and potentialities and with self-confidence and by relying on themselves they should take firm steps in their self-actualization so, women should be empowered with knowledge and equipped with information so that they can prove that they deserve to cooperate in all managerial positions.

The government also should be encouraged to offer more opportunities for women to participate

in professional courses, workshops, and conferences to help them to improve their technical knowledge and practical experience. Political parties can also apply to improve women's position in politics. Political parties that have an internal organization of women that is well coordinated, and which are able to mobilize resources, tend to respond better to women's demands. Useful initiatives for supporting the election of women would include efficient public financing of campaigns, better regulation of campaign funding, the creation of alternative resources to support women's elections, and the allocation of a percentage of the funds provided to political parties for spending on female candidatures.

The impact that strong organizations of women have on enhancing women's participation is also, significant. They may influence all political actors. There need to be more women's NGOs that work hard to sensitize women on the need to participate in politics, to train women in campaign skills, public speaking and communication skills as well as to set up a campaign support fund for women candidates.

Appendices

Table 1.1 Female and male members of the Iranian Parliament during its 8 terms

Period	Year	Total Seats	Female		Male	
			No.	%	No.	%
First	1980	270	4	1.4	266	98.6
Second	1984	270	4	1.4	266	98.6
Third	1988	270	4	1.4	266	98.6
Fourth	1992	270	9	3.3	261	96.7
Fifth	1996	270	14	5.2	256	94.8
Sixth	2000	270	12	4.4	258	95.6
Seventh	2004	290	14	4.8	276	95.2
Eighth	2008	290	8	2.7	282	97.3

(Statistics Center of Iran, 2009)

Table 2.1 Informants Code

Interview Date	Informant Code
3 SEP 2009	A
6 SEP 2009	B
8 SEP 2009	C
12 SEP 2009	D
20 OCT 2009	E
3 OCT 2009	F

Table 3.1 Significant difference (per thousand) among employee men and women in Iran (Statistical Center of Iran, 2002)

Important Public Institutions	Male	Female
President	14854	3307
Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance	177246	19381
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	3286	235
Ministry of Department of Commerce	14583	1216
Ministry of Communications and Information Technology	59270	4509
Cooperatives Ministry	1529	276
Ministry of Agriculture	110770	5607
Ministry of Science, Research and Technology	33040	8709
Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance	8833	2216
Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	7824	1302
Ministry of Interior	19596	1852
Parliament	1949	96
Judiciary power	38977	6882
Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting	10795	1911

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