

Politics and Education: A case study of political participation of women in Iran

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Abstract: This article studies the structural obstacles of women's political participation in Iran. The objective of the study has been achieved by answering the question; how structural factors (Education and knowledge) act as obstacles to women's participation in top political positions in Iran? A qualitative case study method is used in the paper and the primary data are collected mainly through in-depth interviews with five informants by using purposive technique. The analysis of the study is supported by resources theory. The findings of the article suggested that inadequate intellectual resources act as the structural obstacles of Iranian women in politics.

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1. Introduction

Political participation is understood as a prerequisite for political development. Accordingly, considering the political participation of women, who constitute half of the world population, can help to advance political development. It has been accepted that real development would not be possible if women were kept away from the policy-making process (Panday, 2008). 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).

The involvement of women in the political process is also necessary to strengthen and sustain democracy. According to Sun (2004) "...the legitimacy of democratic governance highly depends on the equality of gender representation in the political decision-making process" (p.148). Zeleke (2005) asserts that "...it cannot be denied that a democracy that lacks equal involvement of both men and women is, in effect, a nominal democracy" (p. 8). Furthermore, the European Network of Experts (1997) observed how "a balanced representation of women and men at all levels of decision-making guarantee better government. Because increased participation of women in decision-making will create a new culture and shed new light on how power should be exercised" (p. 8).

Regarding the importance of the presence of women in politics, from inception of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, it has concentrated its efforts in securing, promoting and ensuring women's political participation (Bello, 2003; Jahan, 2006; Khan, 2000). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1966, the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1967, the

International Women's Year in 1975, Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace in 1981, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 in China and the Millennium Declaration in 2000 are among mechanisms the UN has employed to enhance women's political participation throughout the world (Bello, 2003; UNFPA, 2003; Zeleke, 2005). Although most of member states of the UN signed and committed to perform its goals, regarding the improvement of women's positions in politics, women still remain underrepresented in political power positions in many parts of the world (Uphoff, 2003; Vissandjee, Abdol, Apale, & Dupere, 2006). For instance, the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) asserts that in 2003 only twelve women were heads of the states. Accordingly; as a worldwide average, in 2010 women represented 19.2 percent of the seats in congress and 11.3 percent of national cabinet and senior management positions (IPU, 2010).

In most third world countries there has also been great disparity between males and females with respect to their representation in politics (UN, 1989; UNDP, 1995). Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception. Although women constitute half of Iran's total population, their importance and potential role in the country's political and socio-economic development has been overlooked. The constitution of the Islamic Republic guarantees women the right to social and political equality yet a great gap still exists between what the constitution guarantees and actual representation of women on different decision making bodies. 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 in note 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 above-mentioned facts, 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 (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). Consequently, the present paper focuses on the political participation of women after the Iranian Revolution and attempts to study structural factors that inhibit the participation of women in political decision-making. Our analysis is supported by resources theory that provided by Blood & Wolf (1960).

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. Also this study will contribute to future research on similar topics. Our argument is developed in four sections. First, we explain the method that is applied in this study. In our second section, we describe concept of political participation. In third section, we study resources theory and how we can approach its using critical frame analysis. In the forth, we discuss our findings. Last, we state the conclusion the study.

2. Methodology

The researcher elected qualitative case study method as the suitable research method to answer the research questions, which flowed from the research problem. This method made it possible for the researcher 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 researcher to include participants in the context to which the study was related, answering

the research question through informant in the field of political participation of women in Iran. The informants of the study are selected from presidential advisors and political organizations such as; political party, city council, and Parliament.

In addition, data collection took place by means of in-depth interviews. Five individual interviews were carried out by the researcher during one month; from 3 October 2009 to 3 November 2009. 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. Furthermore, the data of this study is gathered through printed and unprinted media, published and unpublished articles, journals, books, and reports. 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 researcher to verify the major themes with the relevant literature.

3. Concept of Political Participation

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

Besides, Huntington and Nelson (1976) regard political participation as "Any activities by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making. They may be individual/collective, organized/spontaneous, sustained/sporadic, peaceful/violent, legal/illegal and effective or ineffective" (p. 3). In addition, according to Weiner (1971) political participation refers to "Any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, employing legitimate or illegitimate 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.

Lastly, Milbrath (1965) classifies political participation in three kind 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 political top positions in Iran, therefore for the purpose of this study the term political participation will be limited to persons held positions of leadership at upper levels of the political decision making.

4. Theoretical Framework

Decision making power of women in politics is influenced by resources including intellectual (education, knowledge, information, and ideas) resources. Resources theory is developed by Blood and Wolf (1960) to explain the relationship between resources (intellectual and information) and decision making power. The main argument of this theory is that in society if a person has more resources he or she will have more power to exercise in decision making within the politics. This theory is supported by various authors as well (Buric & Andjelka, 1960; Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Lamouse, 1969; Michel, 1967). In fact, discussed theory is employed to examine the structural factors (education and information) that act as obstacles of women's participation in high political positions in Iran.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are constructed using the researcher's interpretation of the experiences of five women who hold high-level positions in the politics of Iran. In fact the findings of the study present the main theme, which has been obtained from the participants, their follow-up comments, and the researcher's notes.

There is a main theme that is identified by this study: educational obstacles. This main theme came from the informants, who were asked to describe their experiences of working in high political positions in government, their best and worst experiences of working as a politician woman, the lessons they have learned from work, and their suggestions to improve the conditions of women in political arenas in Iran.

According to Nijhoff (1992) structural barriers refer to educational and also financial levels. From the in-depth interviews with high level women in the politics of Iran it was found that most of them believed that Iranian women to achieve high levels of political decision-making are facing with structural barriers. Therefore in this article, was reviewed insights and experiences of informants regarding to structural

barriers of political participation of women in one main theme; educational obstacles.

5.1 Educational Obstacles

It needless to say that educated individuals have more information and knowledge on government and politics and because of it develop an ability to enter politics. Therefore it is important to study the role of education on the entry of women into politics from informants' point of views. It is need to say that in this study purpose of training is educational level, awareness and knowledge of women in politics that named intellectual resources of women.

When the researcher asked informants about the role of education on women's political participation in high level of decision-making, most of them knew that so effective and emphasized women without education, awareness and capabilities cannot achieve to political posts. One of the informants said;

With training and awareness to women, their performance will be increased because if women do not be training, strong and no interning to management field, women cannot obtain experiences, as a result they ignore of taking a political post. (Political party member).

Another informant asserted that "Education as one of the greatest factors enhances influences women's chances of obtaining her exercise of legal and political rights and her chance of acquiring political power". (City council member) Hence she concludes that "when women's educational level is lower on average than men it reduces women's chances of holding office because it leads to a smaller pool of potential activities". Another informant also mentioned that "Education provides skills that are necessary to comprehend and participate in the political world. Individuals with higher education have more complex cognitive capabilities and thus are able to learn more easily about the political world than less educated individuals". (Advisor to President).

Above statements were supported by literature. From the literature it seems evident that formal education should be strongly associated with political participation for women and for men. For example, the American sociologists Burns, Schlozman and Verba (2001) assert that education is an "especially powerful predictor of political participation" (p. 286). Besides, they identify a range of direct and indirect effects that formal education has upon political participation. According to them, its direct effects of education include an increase the communication skills that is useful to political analysis and its indirect effects are

include the benefits of voluntary engagement that provide people for politics

In addition, the data suggested less experience and lack of confidence as reasons for the negligible presence of women in high level decision-making positions. The study showed these elements are related to a lack of education and awareness of women in politics. As an example, A member of political party explained how in a managerial section a woman without any educational and management experience becomes a colleague with a man with 20 years experience in management. As a result, the community's trust in women's success in management will be negative, while interest in women's employment in managerial levels will be low. As a consequence, women should engage gradually and continuously with management issues and take such managerial experiences with them, and then with their increasing confidence and experience, women can get themselves into the higher level posts.

On the other hand, some of the informants stressed on education role in the family, where school and university increase a women's role for taking key responsibilities in high levels in the public sphere. This is reflected in the statement of advisor to president when she said mainstream education is essential to improving a women's knowledge, but has less relevance to this fundamental factor, namely, developing forms of political sociability through education. Iranian people do not instruct their children, especially their daughters in how to become a capable, competent and responsible manager. This Informant also mentioned the role of educational institutions in enhancing women's experiences for politics;

...there are not any comprehensive and targeted programs in (Iranian) universities for enabling girls and even is not provided suitable areas for management practice and experience... if the research has been done in this field in universities it is not practical and applied school and university to increase women's role for taking important responsibilities in high levels in public spheres.

The literature also approved the role of educational centres in increasing women's presence in politics. The Study of Enayat (2001) carried out in Iran showed educational institutions are important agents of political socialization of women for participation in politics. Data in this research collected through structured questionnaires and interviews revealed more than half the informants (58.0 percent) were interested in politics when they were high school students or had obtained a high school degree. According to this study

another 42.0 percent have written a treatise in politics, either when they were university students or had acquired the B.A or B.S level of education.

The data also showed education is an important variable in overcoming traditional gender ideology. Some informants noted education can change the traditional view of society which considers different roles for men and women, and overlooks any places for women in the category of political decision-making and power. Most researchers (Choudry, 1995; Khanam, 2003; Salfilios, 1969) also argued education is key when it comes to tackling traditional ideas on gender. Informant I confirmed this idea with an experience:

Education and awareness are the most important tools for changing traditional attitudes and patriarchal culture about political participation of women. For example, in elections publicity I explained to people that candidate should be expert and capable so the gender is not important. I remember this statement caused many women could participate in the campaign publicity.

From the data that was also found that education is an important variable in overcoming traditional gender ideology. Some of informants noted that education can be change the traditional view of society which considers different roles for men and women, and no consider any places for women in the category of political decision-making power. Most of researchers (Choudry, 1995; Khanam, 2003; Salfilios, 1969) also argued that education is an important variable in overcoming traditional gender ideology.

This theme indicated intellectual resources have an important role in the process of political participation of women. Education at different levels, from family to school and then university, can help raise awareness, enabling women to gain experience and self-confidence for entering the political decision-making area. It also will gradually change gender stereotypes, the patriarchal culture and traditional attitudes about the political participation of women. The data also shows how education is one of the greatest forces for change in women's political life. Indeed, a higher level of formal education facilitates involvement in political activities. Higher educated women have more political decision making power and also have a greater chance to enter the higher political circles such as parliament, the ministry and so on. For that reason, when a woman's educational level is lower on average than a man's, it reduces women's chances of holding office.

Appendix

Table 1: Female and male members of the Iranian Parliament during 8 terms (Statistics Center of Iran, 2009)

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

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the obstacles of high level women's participation in the politics of 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 structural 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 political party and parliament. Informant interviews were recorded, and after the tapes had been transcribed, important themes were identified and interpreted. The objective of the article was to identify the structural obstacles of political participation of women in high decision-making power in Iran. The data claimed that lack of adequate intellectual resources act as the structural obstacles of Iranian women in top political positions.

From the data it was observed that education is one of the greatest forces for change in women's political life. Indeed, a higher level of formal education facilitates involvement in political activities. The higher educated women have more political decision making power and also have more chance to enter in high political spheres such as parliament, ministry and so on. For that reason, when women's educational level lower on average than men's it reduces women's chances of holding office. This study also found agreement among the informants that women faced by structural obstacles in their entrance into the top political position. The most important contributions of this study were the highlight that the level of education of women was significantly associated with their roles in political power decisions-making. This finding provides strong support to the resources theory, as the findings indicated that when women are educated they are more involved in power decision making. Therefore, educational resources together appear to contribute

more effectively to increase women's self-reliance and enhance their role in decision making within political power. And this study promoted a better theoretical understanding and knowledge of the area of political participation of women; therefore, this study also contributed in broader terms to women's studies.

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