

IN THE NAME OF GOD



*CENTER FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
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Muslim Women: Politics, Leadership and Civil Society

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Introduction

In principle, women's active participation in political arena in Muslim countries and other parts of the world represents one of the manifestations of modernity and a novel phenomenon. However, what has been observed as a rule in political scene has been women's historical seclusion and alienation from politics in a way that some have spoken of private women and public men. In other words, women were regarded as belonging to the private sphere which was the realm of household and family and men as belonging to the public sphere that was the realm of social activities, politics and state.¹ Gaston Bottelle, the French sociologist, views women's entry into political scene in the modern age as a true exception and an extraordinary and unusual phenomenon.²

Because of this historical seclusion from the political scene, political participation has consistently been one of the major demands of women over the past century and has constantly been sought as one of the main goals in every women's movements and activities. Even it may be argued that Iranian women's belief in determining their own destiny comprised the most important factor causing their extensive participation in Iran's Islamic Revolution. For the same reason, it is not possible to study the Iranian Islamic Revolution and other activities of Iranian women in other periods like the Constitutional Revolution era as well those of other Muslim women elsewhere apart from this cause and demand and to ignore its importance in driving women to play the critical roles they did.³

During the Revolution and afterwards, Iranian women understood the potential they have had regarding political activity and capability. Nikki R. Keddie writes in this regard, "the large-scale, organized, and very active participation of women in revolutionary and post-revolutionary politics and demonstrations, however, altered the consciousness of many women, and

particularly popular class women, about their political potential.”⁴ As Keddie suggested, it would be natural for Iranian women to seek ways to actualize the large political potential they possess and see the results of the services they have provided for the country during the Revolution, Iraqi imposed war and afterwards.

Iranian government’s emphasis, during the past years, on the enhancement of civil society has led to the qualitative and quantitative growth of women’s non-governmental organizations. But there still remains an apparent gap between the existing situation and the ideal one for Iranian as well Muslim women. Now, there are 307 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Iran, with a quadruple growth compared to that of 1998, and noteworthy is that 14 political parties and organizations have been established in Iran by and for women. Also, the victory of the Islamic Revolution was an essential turning point in the Iranian women’s movements. Because as a result of that, women entered public sphere from various social levels and have moved toward the political center from the margins of the society. The presence of two women in cabinet as advisor and Vice-President, 13 women in the Islamic Consultative Assembly and hundreds of women in municipal and rural councils, women’s activities as vice-ministers and advisors in various ministries, and the appointment of women as mayors and governors demonstrate women’s political participation at the elite level in today’s Iran. But, there is still a long way ahead for Iranian and other Muslim women to pave in order to gain their appropriate and deserved status within the political structure.

Political participation is defined as any behavior which affects the political system or seeks to affect it. The necessity of women’s presence and participation in the society does not arise from the mere tokenism and symbolism, but it stems from the fact that the experiences of many countries have demonstrated that every society in which women’s share in political and social activities as well as at the managerial levels has increased, it has made much more progress and

reached development more quickly. The following measures are put forward on the basis of the studies and research which have been conducted within the Iranian cultural and social context as well as those of certain other Muslim countries having similar situation. Of course, in exploring and formulating such measures, the experience of other developed countries which have made valuable achievements in gaining gender equality, has been utilized. Obviously, attempts should be made to masterfully adapt and accommodate such measures with the domestic cultural environment, using precision and sophistication.

Needless to say, true civil society will always be imperfect and improper without the women's true presence; the women who constitute half of the social body. No society will be able to underpin the foundations of a strong civilization, if it has made itself deprived from the presence, participation and activities of half of its potentially capable population in the public sphere.

Women's issues are essentially related to the whole society and apart from the women's own interests to pursue their objectives and rights, the entire society is deeply concerned here. Since the society is always obliged to make attempts to secure the utmost interests of its members, it is bound to take advantage of the capabilities and capacities of the half of its body in order to guarantee its dynamism and livelihood much more efficiently. On the other hand, understanding and pursuing women's issues matters for the whole society, because no society will witness progress when half of its members view themselves as no more than second-degree citizens and principally as enjoying less participation and share compared to those of men. For these reasons, women's questions, conducting the studies relating to women and the defense of women's rights must never be restricted to women, and the superficial lines as insiders, i.e. women, and outsiders, i.e. men should not be drawn.

In the field of the defense of women's political participation at the elite level, all conscious, just and interested men should also take part so that all individuals who understand the importance of women's presence in supreme

political positions are included in this circle and make efforts to enhance women's participation and to realize women's rights. In other words, all who are concerned for the advancement of women's status should form an '*Anti-Sex Discrimination Umbrella Front*.'

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In this article, the main objectives are to find ways to respond to this Iranian and Muslim women's persistent demand and to explore how to best crystallize this salient goal which gave rise to women's extensive presence in the process of Iran's Islamic Revolution and also help women in other Muslim countries engage in active movements. The assumption on which the article is based is that women's increased political participation in any society does not take place automatically, but certain specific measures are necessary for the reinforcement of the level of such participation.

Before proceeding to suggest the measures for women's increased political participation, it should be noted that the investigations which have been carried out regarding women's political behavior since the past decades up to now, demonstrate that in spite of the prevalence of certain misperceptions among the public and even some academicians,⁶ there is not any significant difference between the proportion of women and men who vote in the elections both at the local and national levels. Indeed, the highest degree of discrepancy does not exceed 3 to 5 per cent in terms of women's lower participation in the elections.⁷ But the main problem refers to the inequality found in the proportion of their participation at the level of political elite.⁸ This problem is particularly evident in Iran and the other Muslim countries as well as in the Third World countries in general. Thus, the measures suggested in the present article have been formulated and proposed to specifically tackle the above-mentioned problem.

Reasons for Women's Participation at the Society's Leadership

The first reason that can be raised regarding women's participation in the society's leadership is that today it has almost been established that biology and

physical traits do not determine the destiny of the members of society including women. Indeed, it can be claimed that leadership is not the essential and inherent characteristic of men. But training and socialization make men and women acquire the traits of leadership. No pre-existing characteristic can be found in men and women. In fact, essentialism here is of no application and validity. Therefore, to say that political leadership of the society is a reserved trait for men represents a statement that perhaps was accepted as a self-evident reality centuries ago, but for the today's world, this statement should be either left or, if possible, be established drawing on empirical scientific evidence and investigations. The main issue here is to empower women so that their potentials for political leadership are actualized.

Second, while historically women have always been and continue to be affected by decisions made by male leaders and political elite, they should enjoy the right to play a meaningful role in determining their own destiny. So, the responsibility for decision-making is shared and if, as a result of a wrong decision-making, a cost is inflicted on the society, all members of the society including men and women will be responsible, if the decision has been made collectively with women being as participants.

Third, 50 years ago, 70 per cent of the countries of the world were in a way or another entangled in dictatorships, but presently just 27 per cent of societies are run by dictatorships. The problem is that unfortunately, the structures of decision-making within societies have not been democratized in terms of gender equality to such a degree and this is of much more visibility in the Third World countries. Thus, in order to practice democracy, that is an undeniable global trend, it is necessary to establish gender equality in making political decisions. Women's coming to power and their presence in political leadership represent ample evidence of a healthy democracy, and women's sharing in decision-making constitutes one of the preconditions for democracy.

One of the other reasons raised in this regard relates to women's perceived clean-handedness which is widely accepted by most scholars of women's studies.

Even the reason that the tendency in many countries now is that the extent of women's presence and participation would grow at the managerial levels both in political positions and in private or public sector economic positions is the conviction that women usually enjoy a cleaner precedent.⁹

Women's engagement in positions of political leadership in addition to the positive results they would bring about for those women engaging in them, will produce useful results for all women and the entire society. Because women's recruitment in these positions promote their bargaining chip within the power structure and results in a further share in the decision-making within the political system. On the other hand, women's employment, particularly in fields other than educating or nursing -i.e. fields that do not conform to women's traditional role of motherhood- results in the socialization of people and breaks stereotypes about women's roles in society and their professional qualification.¹⁰ Therefore, a number of scholars have held that even women's symbolic presence in certain careers and occupations, notably relatively crucial and specialized ones, will be useful for the entire society. Because the mere fact that the women are allowed to experience that presence, the constraints will be broken within the youngsters' and children's minds. Moreover, the image of such active women in socio-economic domains will certainly leave affirmative impact on the children who are simulating.¹¹

Furthermore, the international dimensions of such actions are of very importance as well. Undoubtedly, today women's worldwide presence at the political management levels as well as in other institutions has become a universal value and is considered as being one of the indicators in the assessment of nations' human development.¹² Thus, this is right that women's success in gaining leadership roles leads to a better image of Muslim countries at the world level.

Generally speaking, the increase in women's participation at the elite level will bring about two considerable results: first, the increase in the degree of

women's participation at the elite level will encourage other women and give them the impetus to reinforce their attempts and present further visible achievements; because the belief that the way to women's entry into higher ranks of management is not closed to them, in itself will be a strong motivation for making further efforts. Second is the impact of women's management on the whole society's perceptions and attitudes at the macro level. Importantly, women's participation in higher ranks and top positions of decision-making has turned into a global value and is one of the indicators for evaluating the degree of a country's human development. Various figures for women's participation in decision-making institutions, presidency and prime ministry, in legislatures and in cabinet are constantly given. There is no escape from it and it is said one way or another that the 21st century belongs to women and fundamental changes will be seen in this regard.¹³

Now, certain measures are presented, that if taken, can promote women's position in political skeleton drastically. Here, it should be noted that the following measures would be useful only in cases in which the political decision-makers have come to the realization that women's political participation at the elite level is not only useful but also entirely necessary and thus certain measures should be taken to increase it.

Measures for the Advancement of Women's Leadership Roles

The first and foremost measure that can be suggested refers to increasing the proportion of women's presence in the country's political institutions, particularly in the parliaments through a Quota System. Indeed in the countries in which this method has been applied, salient results have been achieved and the level of women's participation in the positions of political management has immediately multiplied. What is meant by a quota system is a system in which a specific percentage of all positions in the parliament, cabinet, or ministries is necessarily allocated to women. Such a quota system applied essentially at the high-level political management of different countries as well as at the level of

local government, varies in terms of the percentage of quotas allocated to women. But it usually ranges from 20 to 30 per cent.¹⁴

Due to the lack of this system in Iran, despite the fact that the number of women representatives of the Parliament (Majles) has steadily increased from 4 in the first term to 13 in the sixth one, this number is not still satisfactory, considering Iranian women's large participation in elections. The percentage of women representatives in Iran is around 4.5 per cent which is not high in comparison to the roughly equal participation of women in the parliamentary elections. Of course, this is a problem which is faced by the entire Middle East. Indeed, "A quick look at the statistics proves that women's participation in politics and decision-making at the elite level within the Middle East is lower compared to what is happening in the other parts of the world. The extent of women's presence in legislatures, political administrations, and managerial positions is far from satisfactory and even lower than the extent in the developing world including East Asia, Latin America, and also Sub-Sahra Africa."¹⁵

As it was noted earlier, the adoption of a quota system has created a major breakthrough in relation to the increased presence of women in decision-making bodies. The important and profound impact of this system may be evidently found when the attention is paid to the fact that the only region in the world in which the number of women present in the decision-making bodies has decreased, is certain countries belonging to the former East Bloc. This is due to the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the communist regimes in those countries, the quota system which existed in such countries under the communist rule, was entirely removed or diluted and this led to the decline in women's presence in those countries' political institutions.¹⁶

The emphasis placed here on women's acquirement of macro managerial posts and political careers does not result from the belief that just the presence of a few women in the legislature or administration will resolve the problem of women's lack of sufficient representation. But the belief is that women's gradual

entry into managerial levels, initially at least at the same level of 20 to 30 per cent as mandatory, causes that the politically active women comprehend essential managerial experience and also the public become acquainted with the women's managerial skills, consequently this will unfold as a sustainable process, not just as an exceptional and accidental event.

Also, it should be taken into consideration that if this is not realized, the women may gradually come to believe that they are merely used as subservient voters who are intended to be forced to appear at the ballot boxes in the election days and vote for the male candidates; the candidates who may not have much concern for women's demands and aspirations. This problem will give rise to women's frustration in the long run.

In sum, it can be said on this proposed measure that if the quota system is adopted, a major step is taken for facilitating women's entry into the true trend of participation; for real participation takes effect with power sharing and with taking part in decision-making. At the initial stages, allocation of 20 to 30 per cent of managerial posts, parliamentary seats, and at the local level, in municipal and rural councils looks appropriate so that this degree increases and reaches a point where just qualification becomes the criteria for giving positions to individuals, rather than belonging to a certain gender.

Second measure involves encouraging the political parties and groups to adopt quotas (at least 20 to 30 per cent) for the presence of women at the managerial bodies of these organizations. Attempts at bringing equality in the field of women's political participation at the elite level are not restricted to the formal and governmental sectors, but they should be extended to political parties and groups as well. There can be no doubt that due to the women's historical alienation from politics and the fact that their entry into political scene and political participation is a novel and exceptional phenomenon, the degree of women's sensitivity and interest in politics is somewhat less than those of men and on the same token, their partnership in political groupings is less than that of

men.¹⁷ Even it is said that there is a set of historical obstacles to women's political participation at the international level. Also, a sentence has been prevalent that 'the political' has a connotation in which women's being left out is inherent. This notion has always been referred to by certain scholars.¹⁸

Obviously, it should be kept in mind that part of the problem refers to the fact that even if women have qualification, they will not find the chance to enter the high ranks of these groupings. So, they lose their motivations for working actively in such groupings to some extent. This might lead to a decline in women's participation in the future even at the mass level. Therefore, political parties should pay attention to the fact that if they wish to continue to enjoy women's votes, they have to avoid instrumental use of women's votes and by allocating part of their electoral list to women as well as making women's presence at the high ranks of the parties possible, they should encourage women to look optimistically at such political parties and not to regard themselves as the mere voting agents for the parties.

Even the government is able to play a more active role in this respect by setting the adoption of a quota system within the parties as the condition for the formation and activities of political parties and groups. Thus, the government has complied with its commitments to promote women's status with respect to their managerial presence at the elite level. This action cannot be considered as a non-democratic one at all. Because, no political system is allowed to call itself democratic as long as half of the members of the society are excluded from complete presence at the various stages of political participation.

The third measure includes changing the contents of the school textbooks to remove the negative stereotypes of women's roles. One of the important reasons widely mentioned by many researchers for women's lower participation in social affairs including political participation at the elite level, is that female children are principally reared in the families as well as in the schools in a way that they perceive themselves as being left out of the serious social and political roles. In

other words, the male children are taught from the beginning that they should assume active social and political roles and these roles are not prohibited to them. Whereas the girls are indoctrinated that ultimately they should take up domestic labor and rearing children within households and they should delegate important affairs such as social and political activities to men. The importance and permanence of such gender training can be also found in the universities too where even the most intelligent female students prefer to remain good listeners and not to take part in active debates in classrooms. Indeed, these particular gender norms force the female students to adopt excessive silence and modesty rather than reasonable participation and activity.

The existence of such stereotypes which are abundantly found in the school books causes the girls in adulthood not to show much interest in and make efforts to enter the macro level political management due to the same perceptions they have gained during their school years. Changing the contents of the school books and making them compatible with the perceptions based on gender equality can eradicate the problems arising from the improper socialization in the long-run to some extent and may leave long-term effects on the advancement of women's social and political participation. The importance of such training is so high that the Western countries have begun since some decades ago to cleanse the language from gender stereotyping and have pursued such an end seriously. For instance, the term of 'chairman' has been transformed and amended into 'chairperson' so that it does not indicate a gender bias against women. Because the belief is that there is no necessity that just men act as chief in various institutions.

By learning from the other countries which have had successful experience in this area, amending the school books, educational system and at a higher level, amending the language used by the general public and academic circles should be followed so that they become devoid of any adverse gender bias against women.

The fourth measure relates to influencing the country's media in order to remove negative stereotyping regarding women's lack of managerial capacity. Women of the Muslim countries should, through all possible means, intrude media and any other propagation institutions of the country such as Radio and TV, newspapers, journals and other mass media and affect their orientation toward women. This is to be done in order to influence that part of their programs and publications which would be allocated to women so that the true image of women in particular their efforts and achievements in scientific and academic fields are introduced to the society and kind of public training is carried out.

Undoubtedly, these programs would result in the public's better and positive perceptions of women's roles and their participation in the society. When the general public understands that women have been successful at the low-level management to perform many seemingly impossible tasks, they become aware of women's salient managerial experience. Therefore, the recurrence of this experience in other fields of the country's macro-level management would not appear as unusual and exceptional to them. If this does not take place, what the women have gained at the managerial levels, will remain restricted to the same sphere and will not bring about general results for the entire society.

It is better that these efforts are made completely peacefully and with attempts to convince and encourage the officials of the mass media institutions. But, if any unreasonable resistance is shown against such legitimate and logical suggestions, it would be necessary for the country's politically active women to stage well-orchestrated actions, make public their protest in peaceful manners and demand their legal rights.

Even with the enhancement of such women's organizational strength, this demand can be gradually put forward that in order to further coordinate policy-making on the country's public mass media, it is better that one of these

conscious women acts on behalf of the entire women of the country as the advisor and observer on the production of such programs. In this case, most of the current inconsistencies found in the production and broadcasting of the programs which are contrary to the cause of women's increased participation in the society especially at the elite level will be avoided. In this way a national struggle may begin for the correction in the mass media of the images of women as weak and incapable individuals.

Conclusion

Obviously, the measures proposed in this writing are not the only ways that can be adopted for achieving the goal of the furtherance of women's political participation. But, these measures represent part of the measures that, if taken, the way becomes open to subsequent developments and progress and a growing and positive process starts.

In the case of women, also the allocation of 20 or 30 per cent of quotas to them just serves the objective of making the terms of contest more equitable for women and compensating women's historical lagging behind from the scene of social and political activities. Today, what is called affirmative action, is seen as the single and most effective way to adjust social system at the world level in order to eliminate discrimination against women.

If we really wish women's political participation within the entire society to be enhanced, we cannot do that except through changing the conditions for women's partnership in social activities. Otherwise, no problem would be resolved by merely voicing slogans to the effect that women's political participation is necessary and by claiming that the conditions for women's competition with men are entirely equal. For the inequality in the conditions for women and men's political competition is not a phenomenon created recently and be susceptible to easy solutions to eradicate it. But this inequality is a long-term historical product which would not be eliminated with the superficial

equality in the terms of competition. Indeed, the glass ceiling of politics still dominates women's political activities.

In order to compensate women's backwardness from political activities, there is no option for Iran and other Muslim countries but to come to the belief, like certain other pioneer countries in the field of women's participation at the elite level, that certain specific, useful and effective measures should be taken and the governments should not act as just impartial observers. These countries should actively struggle to practically and actually make the conditions equal for women's competition in the realm of political activities by adopting suitable quota systems.

If the current generation becomes unable to provide a fertile ground for the empowerment and self-empowerment of women, the next generations will not forgive us. Although NGOs are capable of playing a major part in this direction, given the dual underdevelopment suffered by Muslim women, Islamic states, at the first stage, have to create a suitable environment for the empowerment of women so that grounds are provided for their growth. In fact, state empowering actions should pave the way for the integration of Muslim women into a process which they are going to begin.

It should be noted that civil society, development, and social justice would never find their true meanings without women's presence, role and sharing and will constantly remain volatile and improper. All that is proposed under the title of measures, is just intended to show the ways to reach a true civil society and a better, more equal, and more humane future for Muslim countries.

Footnotes:

¹- Andrew Haywood, "Four Essential Discussions of Feminism: Public Man, Private Woman, Patriarchy, Sex and Gender, Sex and Politics," trans. Roza Eftekhari, *Zanan Monthly*, No. 32, February 1997, pp. 30-33.

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- 2- Gaston Bottelle, *Overpopulation*, trans. Hassan Pouyan, Tehran: Chapakhsh, 1991, p. 246.
- ³- Mohammad Hossein Hafezian, *Women and the Revolution: The Untold Story*, Tehran: Andisheh Bartar Publications, 2001, pp. 188-195.
- ⁴- Nikki R. Keddie, "Women in Iran since 1979," *Journal of Social Research*, Summer 2000, p. 112.
- ⁵- Mohammad Hossein Hafezian, "Political Participation of Women in Iran," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Summer 2002, p. 126.
- ⁶- For more information on certain claims regarding women's less participation in elections, see: Hossein Bashiriyeh, *Political Sociology: The Role of Social Forces in Political Life*, Tehran: Nay Publications, 1995, pp. 215-216.
- ⁷- Murray Goot, *Women and Voting Studies*, London: Sage Publications, 1975, p. 32.
- ⁸- Nasrin Mosaffa, *Political Participation of Women in Iran*, Tehran: Institute of Political and International Studies, 1996, p. 123.
- ⁹- Jane S. Jacket, "Women in Power: From Tokenism to Critical Mass," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1997, p. 33.
- ¹⁰- "Roundtable of the Middle Eastern Women: The Experience of Iranian Woman," *Middle East Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 32-33.
- ¹¹- Ibid., pp. 40-41.
- ¹²- Ibid., p. 28.
- ¹³- "Roundtable on Women in the Middle East: The Experience of Iranian Women," op. cit., p. 19.
- ¹⁴- Jacket, op. cit., p. 33.
- ¹⁵- "Roundtable on Women in the Middle East: The Experience of Iranian Women," op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁶- Jacket, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁷- Pamela Abbot and Claire Wallace, *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, trans. Hamid Ahmadi and Maryam Khorassani, Tehran: Donyaye Madar, 1997, p. 86.

¹⁸- "Roundtable on Women in the Middle East: The Experience of Iranian Women," op. cit., p. 2.