

## **Women's Education and Patriarchal System in Iran**

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### **Abstract**

It is the change in rules, rituals and customs that determines mankind's destiny. If change is to be considered regarding human development and freedom, especially for women, the intellectual collective of the society will have to steer their attitude away from economy oriented boundaries toward the dynamics of such changes and the manner they might influence ideas, whose particulars within the Iranian society are this paper's primary objective. The patriarchal order, changing of social attitude in adaptation to modernization; processes where rational approach and scientific outlook are involved, are examined through an analytic-descriptive study to elaborate on the above mentioned issues so as to answer the main questions of this discussion regarding the changes domination of men over women has been subjected to, along with the magnitude women's education has contributed to the demise of the patriarchal order. A description of past and present conditions, as well as an analysis of the research data, will indicate that women's education<sup>70</sup> and their successful presence in society instigated the deterioration of the patriarchal order and facilitated institutionalization of modernity in the Iranian society. Iranian women still have a long journey ahead toward realization of their dreams. However, a great deal is hoped to be achieved in the not very distant future.

**Keywords:** Education, Patriarchy, Modernization.

## Introduction

In the traditional societies of the past, the patriarchal system existed in its extreme form and the absolute domination of the male section over the female section was an established reality. The traditional usages and customs deprived the female section of many privileges and just rights. Social liberty was denied to them in most societies. In certain societies, women were treated as commodities and were destined to obey the dictates of the male patriarchs. Their movements were restricted; they were mostly confined to their residence and were not expected to participate in outdoor activities. Their ideal roles were to bear and rear children and to look after the male members of the family. Education was not even considered a desirability, let alone a necessity.

Describing the present position of woman in human society, in general, August Bebel writes “today things wear some different aspect. Circumstances have meanwhile undergone an enormous change and the position of women has changed at the same time. Whether married or unmarried, the existing social and political conditions concern her more closely than, at any former period” (Bebel, 1879, pp11-12).

In Iran’s traditional social order, the Islamic sanctions were also traditionalized and distorted in actual practice by traditional and customary usages and interpretations. Before the 1900s, the priestly class of the country did not mind the suppression of Islamic spirit under the heavy pressure of traditionalism (Janjua, pp. 772-773). Although this describes centuries ago, a contemporary variation is still in effect today. Women face no obstacle acquiring higher education or certain elaborate skills, yet the jobs requiring those are hard to reach and the way still passes through the same old biases. It took 31 years for an educated woman to be appointed minister or 35 years to become an ambassador. The presidential position is being seriously challenged and a good number of women are adamant participate in the election, even as far as having tried, well- aware that their being deemed illegible or under qualified by the Guardian Council is a virtual certainty,

The facilities for female education and the institution of co-education at higher levels on one hand developed self-awareness and self-confidence among Iranian woman and on the other helped them achieve economic independence, which allowed them to become elements of influence on their own destiny as well as the society. This fact of history cannot be denied that the literacy campaign and the educational program developed under the impact of westernization played a vital role in breaking the binds and weakening the constraints of tradition over the society in Iran. One may dispute the policy of unveiling Iranian woman or introducing system of co-education, but nobody can deny this fact that education proved significantly instrumental in the rationalization of attitudes and outlooks. The improvement in the condition of female education definitely helped them come out of the traditional clutches and customary bandages. Objectives such as freedom, equality and civil society are included in the ideology of very woman endeavoring to step up in social hierarchy (Bashiriye, 2004, p.41).

These transitions provided the foundation for a change in attitude that in turn instigated the change in women’s condition, while greatly contributing to the deterioration of the patriarchal order and presented new challenges in making old and new ideas compatible.

Modernity refers to a specific outlook, approach and a system of specific ideas and values of a particular type. Modernization in this context refers to the growth of rationality and secularism and a process by which men broke away from the constraints of tyrannical regimes as well as the constraints of superstition” (Weiner, 1966).

## Theories

### **Patriarchal Order**

The chief advocate of the patriarchal theory is Henry Main (Farooq, 2013). He defines it as theory of origin of society in separate families, held together by the authority and protection of the eldest male descendent. The patriarchal theory traces the origin of the state in a patriarchal family.

The theory is further supported by historical evidence and scriptural accounts such as First Father Jacob or Patria potestas. A patriarchal family is one in which descent is traced through males. Father of the patriarch occupies a dominant position in the family. All the members of the family pay him the due homage. His authority is recognized by all. A patriarchal Family according to this theory is the most ancient organization (Farooq, 2013). Elaborating on the position of Iranian women in traditional social order, Reza Arasteh (1969) explains that:

"... the male members of the family acquire a protective attitude toward the women of the household, a father or a son frequently escorts the young girl to social gatherings, for most families still consider it improper for girls to go unattended or with an outsider. A young man considers his duty to vigorously defend the honor of his sister or if she is widowed and he is the head of the family, he unquestioningly takes the responsibility for her and the children she may have." (pp. 48-49).

### **Social Change and Modernization:**

Social change is a universal reality. There is no society that may claim to be static and stationary. The change may be rapid or slow, but change itself is inevitable. In the words of Anderson and Parker, "Social change occurs in all societies. This is true of society as it is of any phenomenon. Like all phenomena, societies are influenced by forces that inevitably cause them to change". The human compositions of societies change over time, technologies expand, material equipment changes, ideologies and values take on new components as well as institutional functions which cause structures to undergo reshaping. No society remains completely static because it exists in a universe of dynamic influences, the reaches of which become steadily greater. Of course, the tempo and extent of change vary from one society to another. Some experience rapid transformations, whereas others go through long periods of insignificant alteration. (1966, p. 384). It is evident from the above stated fact that social change exists in all societies, though the rate and the direction of change may vary. According to some, social change means change in social relationship, while some others view it as a change in social structure or the form of societal life. Anderson and parker hold that "social change involves alternation in the structure or functioning of societal forms" (1966, p. 385). They also believe that "social change shows a chain reaction sequence" (1966, p. 385). It means that all the aspects of societal life are inter-related and change in any one aspect brings about change in the others, making social change a complex.

Many thinkers and scholar like Ebne khaldon, Mottahary and weiner believes that, the process of social change has existed from the very beginning in human society. However, in the post-industrial era and particularly in the present century, the process of social change has been accelerated. Along with it, the realization of the need of education has become a feature of not only the developed nations but also of developing societies. These factors and forces have raised social awakening and social awareness in different sections and classes of human society, though definitely in varying extents. The weaker and exploited sections of traditional society have also developed a degree of consciousness and consequently change in human societies is taking place at different levels and in different forms (Weiner, 1966). It appears from the above viewpoint of Weiner that modernity involves rationality and it is in fact the core element of this modern spirit. In other words, modernity relates to the ideology, attitudes

and values of man. So, first comes intellectual modernization; in other sense, modernization at personal level. The elements of rationality and mental attributes have been emphasized in this concept of modernization, which is widely accepted among social scientists. As expressed by Weiner (1966): "Modernization involves the emergence of a new behavioral system with certain destination characteristics, such a system implies considerable value change." (p. preface).

Raghuvanshi (1984) also states, "Thanks to its omnibus nature, different social scientists delve into various aspects of this process and focus on different elements in accordance with their training and perspective" (p.30).

The revolution of modernization involves the transformation of political, social, economic, intellectual, religious and psychological; or in short all systems by which man organizes his society (Halpern, 1974, p. 174). Raghuvanshi also presents the same viewpoint, suggesting numerous dimensions for modernization. According to him, the term "modernization" refers to total transfer changes in personality, culture and society. It covers the whole variety of institutional areas such as family, politics, economy, religion, education, etc.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Iranian Women's Education:**

#### **Pre 19<sup>th</sup> Century Iranian Educational Expectations for Women**

In the traditional days of pre 1500s, the importance of education was not realized in general and female education was not considered an important issue. Before the recognition of the importance of female education, the female section in traditional Iranian society was completely dominated by the male population. An elementary religious system of education was developed mainly so male members were imparted a school called Maktab. In very few selective cases the high level Maktab or Madrasa education was given to prospering male youths. Girls were also allowed to participate, but only to learn to read and not write; presumably to prevent them from engaging in unethical conducts such as writing love letters. Lack of any evidence in religious scripts regarding such precautions and the very existence of the mentioned notion until even a few decades ago strongly suggests traditional influence. In the old days, parents were expected to pay whatever they could afford for the tuition of each of their children. Sometimes the teacher/ principle called maktab-dar gave preferential treatment to the children whose parents paid him best (Arasthe, p. 23). Stories passed on from mothers to daughters unanimously report that however affluent or influential, the girls' parents were never the ones who paid best. This speaks volumes regarding the status of Iranian women during this period. Even the Islamic sanctions in respect of women had become ideals not to be practiced. The traditional norms and values were dominant and these traditional sanctions violated even the justified fundamental rights and privileges for women.

#### **Western Influences on Education for Iranian Women and Post 20<sup>th</sup> Century Opportunities.**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, western influences became practical. The introduction of female education system in 1886 facilitated the young girls' studying in educational institutions meant for them and more importantly their leaving home, presenting them the opportunity to be exposed to a totally different socio-cultural climate where they interacted with each other as well as with their teachers. Similar to all others, the system of education was sacred and authoritarian in the beginning. But under the western system of education, secular subjects were taught and education was not considered a monopoly of a particular class. Afterwards, a secular and democratic system of education was introduced which broadened the outlook and the canvas of ambitious and aspirations. Rational outlook started replacing the traditional one and social awareness was stimulated. Thus female

education itself became a vital instrument contributing to the enhancement of the status of women in Iranian society. A great emphasis was laid on female education. The system of co-education at a higher level was also introduced. The women living in urban areas got the chance to receive western education, which was secular and democratic. These educated women did not remain confined to family life and their participation extended beyond that. They started taking up white collar jobs as school and college teachers, doctors, nurses and administrators. Some even entered politics and in this way their participation in economic and political spheres outside family developed under the impact of westernization.

### **Structural change**

It is important to point out that the relative positions of men and women in a society reflect the organization and structure of the society concerned. Hence, change in social organization, social structure and social institution means a change in the relative positions of men and women of that society.

Two main institutions whose change greatly influenced women's condition in Iran were family and education. Family moved from extended ones where there were many rules and customs to be observed, many of which suppressing women confining them to the sanctity of home and encouraging a life in the service of the family to nuclear ones where the few members exercised greater compassion and actual concern for each other. Schools also transformed from their rudimentary form into an educational system mostly imported from Europe and hence known as Western Education which not only facilitated women's education but also enabled them to learn new social and vocational skills.

This view point is substantiated by the following remark by Herskovits (1974): "social organization designates the institutions that determine the position of men and women in society and thus channel their personal relation" (p.166). It is evident from this remark that the institutions determining the relative position of men and women and their social relationships is basically defined by the organization or order of the society.

Cultural factors play a defining role in women's behavior. Women's marginal attendance in social political scene stems mostly from gender oriented clichés and the chauvinistic theme of culture which has always inspired conventional, in other word patriarchal, attitude (Shaditalab, 2005).

There is a discipline in the relevance of these social relations to social organization and social structure. These relationships may be characterized both in terms of the individuals or groups represented and by the type of relations involved. These social relations between individuals and groups form a network, which can be called social structure, the organizational or configurationally aspect of society (Eggan, 1950). Institutions partake of both aspects: they are composed of individuals organized in a social structure, with a set of attributes and behavior patterns through which the structure is exemplified and the institutional ends are achieved.

In light of the above stated views, it transpires that institutional and structural changes in a society are bound to transform the relationship between the two sex groups and the relative positions of men and women. On the other hand, if the relative positions of men and women change, the corresponding changes in social institutions, social structure and social organization will occur.

Supported by the family values and ambiance, the new generation of women who were educated, job qualified and more self-aware rose against the traditional patriarchal system and endeavored to find their footing in social of life and assume more socially critical roles than being homemakers.

### **Women's condition in the past**

In traditional Iranian society girls and women were dependent upon men not only for their economic needs but also for their protection. In such a situation the status of women was much inferior to men who were their guards and masters. Within the family, husbands and wives frequently exhibit a close and affectionate relationship which is not displayed to outsiders. Women take most of the responsibility for household affairs. It is, however, not unusual for a husband to consult his wife about personal or business matters, nevertheless, he reserves the right to make the final decisions (Arasteh, 1970, p. 49).

Describing the position and status of women in traditional Iranian society, Reza Arasteh observes; in the traditional setting authority, respect and affection closely bind family members together. As the undisputed head of the house-hold, the father, yields considerable authority over his wife, children and grandchildren. He generally remains aloof and makes decisions which are arbitrary and cannot be questioned. Even middle aged children are reluctant to initiate any activity of which their father might disapprove. In such family, the mother never openly contradicts her husband, although she may ask relatives to intervene on her behalf. She is compelled to recognize her husband's power over her and her children and must unquestionably accept whatever decisions are handed down.

In a society where women are kept uneducated they will always be dominated and exploited by men and would be deprived of their just rights and privileges.

### **Social Activities**

The proportion of illiterate women is one of the main obstacles for their social presence (Mosaffa, 1994, p.71)

Increase literacy and education among women has advanced their activities outside home. Hailed as one of the most outstanding modern literary figures in Iran, the poetess Parvin Etesami wrote on social issues and championed women's rights in the 1930s. Presenting Iran (1965) holds that:

“In more recent years urban women have increasingly sought outside employment, either to satisfy their desire for a career or to supplement the family income. In 1958 there were about 150 women physicians, surgeons and dentists in Iran, about 600 professional nurses and about 400 midwives and practical nurses. For the same year over 5,000 women were employed as teachers or administrative personnel in elementary and secondary schools throughout the country and some taught in colleges and universities. A few even held administrative positions in various governmental agencies or business firms.” (p.146).

Education has been of vital significance in changing the role and status of Iranian women. However, these changes haven't been spread all over the country. In suburban and rural areas these changes are of much lower degree and not very significant and obvious. In addition to it, even in urban areas these changes do not suggest that traditional values have lost their significance. In spite of these rational developments, the importance of traditional values continued to persist.

### **Women's condition at present**

Under the impact of modernization, not only the women of upper and middle classes are receiving education, but are also working outside. Moreover, extended families are less favorable and nuclear families have become a preference. This change in family type and structure brought about considerable changes in the role and status of women in family as well as in society. A greater degree of liberty is enjoyed by women in nuclear families than in extended families. They are more effective in influencing the decisions of their husbands and

have a greater say in respect of education, careers and marriage negotiation of their children, particularly when they are educated and employed. Consequently, the impact of education and modern culture gave a poet to the tradition bound Iranian society and trend of break away from traditional bondage appeared at least in that section of urban community which remained exposed to modernization and in which women received western education and took up white collar jobs either to supplement family income or to utilize their education or to have a greater degree of economic independence for raising their status in family as well as in society (Arasteh, p. 140-150)

With the end of centuries old monarchy and setting up of the theocratic state of Islamic republic, a new phase of life has appeared in Iran. This new phase is reflected not only in the political order, but also in the economic sphere, socio-cultural life of the community as well as in the family. The behavior and life-style of individuals and groups are changing in accordance with Islamic sanctions and Islamic teachings, upon which the constitution of the Islamic republic of Iran is based, firmly advocating social justice.

. In some ways women have enjoyed significant gains under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nowhere is this truer than in education. In 1976, on the eve of the revolution, the female literacy rate was a mere 35 percent. Despite the turmoil of the revolution and the war with Iraq, by 1986, this rate had risen to 52 percent (Samanian, 2013).

The following table is according to the latest census, which happens every 10 years in Iran, showing female and male share of total enrollment by fields of study in a number of public and private universities in the academic year 2006/07:

Fields of Study	Female Students			Male Students		
	Public Universities and Higher Education Institutes (1)	Islamic Azad University	Total University Female Students	Public Universities and Higher Education Institutes (1)	Islamic Azad University	Total University Male Students
Medical Sciences	7.30	6.54	6.99	5.08	0.75	2.84
Humanities	56.87	53.61	55.57	43.51	33.73	38.45
Basic Sciences	14.70	13.36	14.16	10.23	3.85	6.93
Technical and Engineering	12.11	16.93	14.04	31.39	52.22	42.16
Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences	4.60	5.45	4.94	5.21	7.36	6.32
Arts	4.42	4.10	4.29	4.60	2.09	3.30
<b>Total</b>	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

*Includes Payam-Noor University students (distance learning university)*  
*Source: Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and Islamic Azad University*

These statistics indicate that women constitute about 70% of university students in medical sciences and basic sciences, about 60% of students in humanities and arts and 47% of students in agricultural and veterinary sciences. The proportion of women in universities is low only in technical and engineering fields. The table suggests that Iranian policy-makers should focus their attention on increasing male enrollment at universities and improving female labor market opportunities lest the human capital gathered at universities not be wasted (MilaElmi, 2009, p.1).

Ansary writes: “The inconvenient truth is that, owing to the rules that many western women and men may consider archaic and sexist, girl in Iran became educated and liberated” the educated Iranian women to question their ruler and the patriarchy under which they lives. She rightly observes that, this is very important message that as women we have to do our due diligence and just accept the face of someone’s rhetoric. (Ansari, 2015)

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, analyzing the collected bibliographical material on observations and viewpoints of different scholars, this article has come to the concludes that the patriarchal order deprived women of their very basic rights, kept them illiterate, confined them to quarters, treated them unjustly and merely as means to serve men and raise children.

Everything is subject to change except the law of change itself. The oppressive traditions against women which was arrived to the inevitable point, also changed. It is important to point out that, with the rise in literacy and education, courtesy of the western educational system, social awareness and political consciousness developed among women. Those who received decent education and obtained practical abilities regarding jobs other than home making started experiencing change in their attitude and outlook and developed a sense of dignity and self-reliance. They actively participated in various fields and undertook outdoor responsibilities with a sense of confidence. These were further enhanced by their ability to earn a living, hence at least the prospect of financial independence. Contributing to the already in progress trend, the change in family structure and the preference of nuclear families over traditionally extended one stimulated stronger sense of concern and support among family members rather than a large number of opinions expressed by plenty of observers.

It is noteworthy that, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, craze for education of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran took a new direction and purpose. It stressed on raising awareness among the uneducated women of their just rights and privileges granted to them by God Almighty.

The last census in academic year 2006-07 shows that educational attainment has improved considerably, especially for women, in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the literacy gap between women and men has narrowed. Before 1978, over 60% of the Iranian female population was illiterate. In the post-revolutionary years, women have shown an increasing willingness and effort to become literate and highly educated. Currently, more than 55% percent of first-year university students are women. It means rational outlook developed and women in Iran are preparing to have more crucial roles.

There is little doubt that women will face more obstacles going forward, but there is even less doubt that they will yet again prevail.

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