

# “The consequences of women's empowerment in Iran”

<b>AUTHORS</b>	Aryan Gholipour Mona Zehtabi Tayyebe Amirkhani Asal Aghaz
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Aryan Gholipour (Iran), Mona Zehtabi (Iran), Tayyeb Amirkhani (Iran), Asal Aghaz (Iran)

## The consequences of women's empowerment in Iran

### Abstract

Empowerment of women is one of the critical debates of the recent years. Being aware of its consequences helps the policy makers to prevent the negative consequences and to strengthen the positive ones. This article is an attempt to discuss the negative and positive consequences of empowerment of Iranian women. The results of the research show that from women's point of view, women's empowerment has positive effects on familial, economic, and political institutions and negative effects on religious institutions. But from men's point of view, empowerment of women as a novel social phenomenon does not have any meaningful effect on religious, economic, and political institutions, while brings positive and negative consequences to familial institutions.

**Keywords:** empowerment of women, psychological empowerment.

**JEL Classification:** M13.

### Introduction

The contemporary Iran has witnessed presence of women in different fields of society. Certainly, having empowered women in a society will make the realization of the development goals and their psychological poverty is a great obstacle on this way. For this reason, empowerment of women is an important plan of policy makers in most countries. Nowadays, it has been accepted that without progression and movement towards empowerment of women, any kind of attempt towards development cannot be well fulfilled.

Empowerment means giving power to women. From the historical point of view, the absence of women in the mainstream of economy and lack of access to information because of social, cultural, and workplace limitations have led them to be far from knowledge and information. This distance becomes clearer when one compares the empowerment of women to men.

Empowerment of women can be achieved by education and work, although it has some consequences for the rest of institutions that per se can put great effects on the whole society. Given the importance of this issue nowadays, in this article firstly the effect of formal education and organizational work on empowerment of women has been considered and then the effect of this empowerment on familial, political, religious, and economic institutions is discussed.

Empowerment of women enables women to have control over financial assets, intellectual and ideological sources (Fernando, 1997), therefore not only it begins with the recognition of systematic

forces, but also is involved with the change of power relations. Gender determines the extent to which sources and power can be achieved, therefore, empowerment of women is a process that not only distinguishes the systematic forces that are the causes of oppression over them, but also acts as a modifying factor for power relations – the kind of power relation that puts women on the margin (Fernando, 1997) – which means that it includes depowering of structures, systems and institutions (Banerjee, 1995; Patel, 1998). Empowerment of women has been an important strategy for changing the position of women in society and has increased the extent of their decision-making and can uproot poverty. For example, when women can make use of opportunities such as education and employment, the extent of their choices will increase.

The psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995) of women can be seen in the following frameworks:

**Effectiveness:** it refers to the effect of individuals on the consequences in workplace and the individuals should believe that their attitudes have some effects on what happens in that environment. **Meaning:** the work or the goal that is judged in relation to the ideals or standards of an individual. The women should be willing to do their responsibilities and to feel that they are doing something worthy. **Competency or self-efficacy:** which means that they should feel worthy of involving in the conducts that the environment requires. **Self-determination:** the sense of choosing or individual independence in activities, attitudes, and working processes; it means that women should have the opportunity to choose.

### 1. Education and work as determinants of women empowerment

Many studies that have been dedicated to this subject consider the formal education and organizational work as the effective factors of women empowerment. When women have formal education and enter universities and then start doing

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part time or full time jobs in organizations, they can have a better control over their lives. Studies show that in developing countries, education and employment strengthen the situation of women in society, and increase their authority and power (Mason, 2002). Also, according to the researches done in western countries, education and working empower women and increase their effectiveness in their personal, social and organizational life (Connel, 1987).

In the contemporary world, knowledge is one of the sources of power. The contemporary world has witnessed that powers of force and money (military and economic power) have been replaced by the power of knowledge. Gaining knowledge leads to power and lack of knowledge for women leads to their poverty. When women gain the required knowledge for having skill and power, the feeling of psychological enablement strengthens in them (Spreitzer, 1996). Lots of studies have considered illiteracy of women as the main cause of their problems and literacy as the cause of their freedom (Stromquist, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary for women of each society to gain the required knowledge for being involved in decision-making. For example, in the few last decades, the involvement of Korean women in achieving high educational degrees led to meaningful changes in their positions, insights, and main expectations. But these changes in education have not led to equality in working opportunities and gender (Chong, 2002).

Anyway, Iranian women, in spite of their difficult situation, have greatly improved in the field of academic education. In 2008, Iran has witnessed the extensive entrance of women in higher education (67 percent). The presence of women in academic education has been rising and even from the year 2003 the number of women accepted in academic education has become more than men. This process of education has certainly saved women from mental poverty and has paved the way for their empowerment. In this article, formal education has been considered as one of the effective factors in empowerment of women and the extensive presence of women in higher education will lead to their empowerment.

Even some studies show that in some countries those women who are educated and employed have a worse situation compared to illiterate and jobless (housewives) ones (Mason, 2002); it means that cultural expectations and situation are a really determining factor in this case. There is the possibility that the educated and employed Iranian women do not gain the required freedom and power with the present institutions (Chafiq, 1991).

For so many years in Iran, women with academic education had occupations with low income and specialized in teaching and nursing. Anyway, after some decades, the number of educated women who have got high income occupations that were previously done only by men, has increased. Our analysis indicates that educated women have got the professional occupations in response to the demand for high skill; and according to the number of their entrees at university, little by little they will get more professional jobs. Therefore, based on the processes going on in the Iranian society and the reasons given above, the first hypothesis will be given as follows:

*H1: Formal education and organizational occupation will lead to psychological empowerment of women.*

Women face main challenges in making a balance between their personal and working life; their challenges are much more compared to that of men (Nelson, Burke, 2000). Most researches show a clear division of responsibilities, namely men take responsibility for doing job outside the house and women take liability for children and housework such as cooking (Sharpi, 1984; Berk, 1985; Pleck, 1985; Warde and Hetherington, 1993; Baxter, 1993; Sullivan, 1996). Also, women spend two times more time for doing housework compared to men (Berk, 1985; Baxter, 1993; Sullivan, 1996). Many studies indicate that women, in spite of their great responsibility, are satisfied with the division of work in the house (Benin and Agostinelli, 1988; Blair and Johnson, 1992; Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994; Greenstein, 1996; DeMaris and Longmore, 1996). These results raised some questions about justice and equality at home and the approach towards housework and the possibilities of changing it. To explain these paradoxical clichés some theories have been offered, for example lack of sources and power in marriage make women to have little choices in regard to these clichés; the traditional ideology of gender makes women accept house work, and finally, the fact that women work less than their husbands outside the house, strengthens the approach that house work is the responsibility of women (Baxter and Western, 1998).

Female managers report that they are under more pressure in their working places and the great amount of these pressures comes from internal sources. Also, female managers are under more pressure in the house and receive less support from their husbands.

These pressures are due to some delicate forms of unjust discrimination. Also, according to the

researches done, female managers have much more stress than men and the sources of this stress are related to the real and the expected role of women in society and in spite of the recent developments women still have a marginal position in most institutions (Nelson and Burke, 2000).

Power relation in family is one of the subjects under study in the familial institution. When the power gap in family is large, women and children are taught to obey and they are not encouraged to be independent. Women in these kinds of societies learn to accept the unequal division of power (Hofstede, 2001, ch. 2). In modern time, in western societies, the power gap between men and women has decreased. Women's education and income have given them more power in the family. But, the experiences of non-western societies may not be similar to those of western ones. Providing education and occupation for women is the required but not the sufficient condition for empowerment of women. A study undergone in China shows that having more access to education and job opportunities does not necessarily lead to change of power relations in the family (Wolf, 1992). In patriarchal societies, having access to education and having income do not necessarily bring independence and the culture is in a way that does not let women make decisions independently. For example, a research that was done in two areas in north India shows that although women had formal education and occupation, patriarchy was an obstacle on the way of their empowerment (Sharma, 1991, p. 92).

The results of some researches done indicate that as soon as the income of wives gets more than that of their husbands, women spend less time and men more time for housework. These findings show that these sources give women more power to affect the division of workhouse. Women who have less sources, have less options instead of their marriage, so if their relationship does not work well, they lose more things. Therefore, having less sources is along with having less expectations, because it is more probable that those women who have limited choices describe their situation as fair and be satisfied with the least help of their husbands at home, while those women who have access to more economic sources, have more choices rather than their marriage (Baxter and Western 1998).

Availability of fields of education and occupation for women, not only makes them be involved in the outside world, but also forces them to have more importance in the family. The kind of job that brings income enables women to have access to economic sources and thus they will gain economic power.

This matter paves the way for their independence and authority. Achieving rare sources increases women's power. According to the theory of sources, having income and helping the family financially should increase their power of discussing. From the other point of view, those women who have control over their income are more probable to become empowered. According to the theory of sources, any one (wife or husband) who has more access to the sources, has more power of ruling in the family. In the developing countries, economic aid of women to family is great. Therefore, working and having income give women a better power of decision making, especially if their husbands need their income. According to some evidences in countries such as Egypt, women with more control over their incomes have more power of decision making in various fields. So the second hypothesis is suggested as follows:

*H2: Psychological empowerment of women has negative effects on familial institutions.*

There is no doubt that empowered people can prepare a better way for democracy. Democracy nowadays with all its shortcomings stands as the safest form of government in most societies. Studies show that empowerment of the members of society will lead to democratization of society and the division of the power of decision making will be more just. The extensive and mostly determining participation of women in general political movements is so worthy (Grossbard-Shechtman and Fu, 2002, p. 248). After revolution, the great increase in the presence of women in society and the growing process of education among them have caused their active participation in governmental and political institutions. Empowerment of women has paved the way for democratization of organizations and governmental institutions.

Most defenders of empowerment agree that it is a political process that requires an organized and great movement to challenge and manipulate the existing power structures (Fernando, 1997). For example, the NGOs founded by women in Iran, have made the field more ready for their participation. It seems that the main subjects of the contemporary women movement in education is their access to all stages of education as a tool for changing the values and insights to create a new social order (Patel, 1998, p. 170).

An evident historical reality is that politics is formed by patriarchal standards and men's ideas rule over them. In most countries high political positions are in the hands of men while women have a limited degree of participation (Enloe, 1990; Youngs,



1999). Likewise, international political institutions and organizations are controlled by men (Youngs, 2000). Therefore, the third hypothesis is formed as follows:

*H3: Psychological empowerment of women has negative effects on political and governmental institutions.*

In this article all organizations under the control of economic institutions and bazaar (business) will be analyzed. Although so many men and women deny the importance of gender in workplace, gender is a determining factor in organizations and is so effective in work experiences and developments. Beliefs, values, language and organizational institutions are all in favor of men. So many studies show that in organizations there is disintegration and glass ceiling and they work as kinds of invisible obstacles on the way of women towards achieving high management positions. One of the problems of women in organizations is improper working situation and lower salary compared to men in the same positions. Unequal salary is so annoying for so many women. In improper economic situations, female employees face structural obstacles and gender clichés that stand on the way of their promotion in public and private fields (UNECE, 2002).

In the Iranian society women face a two-sided challenge. First of all, they have to work in an economically and politically bureaucrat environment that is unstable and is characterized by lack of lawful guarantee. Secondly, they have to face and challenge the gender clichés and disintegrations in their workplaces. Women suffer from prejudiced evaluations of their qualifications as leaders, especially in patriarchal organizational fields.

There are so many cases when women that achieve high positions at work, receive less salary compared to men (England et al., 1988; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). A report shows that high educational degrees do not prepare better working chances. For example, in the year 2002, the average salary of women was 85 percent of that of men and the rate of unemployment among women was 73 percent more than that among men (UNDP, 2003). Iranian women face the same problems. In spite of all these challenges, Iranian women still insist on having more involvement in works outside the house. Even if they do not find full-time jobs, they prefer to have part-time jobs.

Leader-member exchange theory indicates that the people do not consider and evaluate the people working for them equally and, because of limited

time and sources, they divide them into two general groups that are normally called in-group and out-group. Those who are considered as in-group will benefit from more time, support and trust compared to those in out-group. Also, those in in-groups get higher scores of working evaluation and receive more organizational sources; and the people in charge, usually choose people for in-groups based on their personal characteristics that are not related to their working qualification. Therefore, moving towards higher organizational stages, the number of female managers decreases. Manly limitations are so strong and gender prejudices are highly accepted that a few female managers can break these clichés in order to achieve higher positions in organizations.

In a study done on female managers in the cooperative society, there was found no systematic sign to indicate the ineffectiveness of women as managers. But still women cannot have high managerial positions. The reasons for this should be looked for in gender clichés (Khandelwal and Buddhapriya, 1995). The end result of gender clichés can be the production of this belief in women that they have less managing power than men. The same criteria that are considered as positive and desired in men may be considered as negative in women. For example, a kind of behavior that may indicate courage and confidence in men may be considered as a quarrelsome behavior and unwillingness to cooperate or to follow the orders in women (Lyer et al., 1996).

In a research done, female managers have mentioned some points that they face during their work as experts: They have to continuously prove themselves as being good so that they will be considered as worthy as their male colleagues. Sometimes it is difficult for them to have the satisfaction of both their bosses and their workers. Most of the time, women are judged wrongly if they arrive home late from their work. In some cases if they come home late, their husbands will be annoyed while the same thing is accepted for men. If female managers get promotion or bonus for good working, their colleagues do not show a happy face to them and they get annoyed. They think they have been deprived of what belonged to them. They are usually criticized that they do their jobs by using the sentiments of people and not by professional skills. They are proper for positions such as public relations or the part of humanitarian sources.

The theory of glass ceiling indicates that in workplaces there are invisible obstacles that won't let women and religious minorities go to higher positions (Morrison et al., 1987; Reskin and Roos, 1990). The studies show that about 3/23 percent of

workforce in big organizations of Japan are women. But only 3 percent of them are in decision-making positions. In 5/89 percent of these organizations there is no woman in decision-making position and only in 8/7 percent of them there may be found one or two women in such positions. In less than one percent of organizations, which means 7/0 percent, ten or more are in decision-making positions. Therefore, it is clear that the number of female managers is low in big companies and they are rarely seen in governmental positions (Fernandez and Patricia, 1983, p. 30).

Despite the existing problems and defects, the results of researches show that employed women are healthier both physically and mentally and are more flexible when facing stresses due to their family role. Women with several roles are less probable to suffer from cordial diseases especially those who have high positions in workplaces. Therefore, it seems that the quality of occupation is more important than just being employed.

Women with higher education are more probable to enjoy working and are more interested in cooperating as a workforce (Grossbard-Shechtman and Fu, 2002, p. 249). Nowadays, women share things with men almost in all fields. The extent of development of countries is more and more measured with regard to the extent of cooperation of women in economy. Employed women are not rare anymore and they have been accepted as workforce. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is formed as follows:

*H4: Psychological empowerment of women has negative effects on economic organizations and institutions.*

The results of a research done by World Bank, considering the activity of women in different religious groups indicate that to which religion and ethnicity women belong is usually an important factor for their empowerment (Mason et al., 2002). Considering patriarchal acts and institutions, the cultural approach towards women and gender is that they are tempting and are the potential sources of social and ethical disorder. These common cultural acts that are justified by the conservative religious understanding lead to the very low economic cooperation of women.

One of the cultural problems that women face is that cultural values are unchangeably patriarchal (to the benefit of men). So, even when women are empowered and it seems that they are cultural factors, this power and ability are not given to them and they also play role as transformers of patriarchal culture at home and in family (Beloti, 1973;

Dworkin, 1974). It means that the main determined role of women is to be cultural tools and signs, which may not be to their own benefit at the end (Kandiyoti, 1989; Winter, 2000; Winter, 2006, p. 383). Given that the humanitarian concepts and laws are mostly defined by men, women rights are ignored to the extent that they are given right to have their needs and attitudes like men and to the benefit of men (Mackinnon, 1987; Peterson and Parisi, 1998; Winter, 20009). If women's rights are problematic for some modern Muslim men, it is not due to the tradition of Islam, but is due to non-accordance of those rights to the benefit of men (Memissi, 1991).

Men have defined two areas for themselves, one is economically profitable area (public and masculine) and the second is interior area (private and feminine) and these two areas cannot overlap (Sidani, 2005, p. 506). Women's work outside the house and their role both public and private, give them more social respect at home and more psychological satisfaction, so that they can be better mothers and wives. Women should have roles both in public and private areas. Each woman should have the right to choose among different roles in various stages of her life.

Level of education affects level of religiousness. So many educated women consider the religious benefits that are given to men by Islam, unreasonable and believe that these benefits are mainly interpretation of religion. In the logic of traditional families in many societies, motherhood is the main definition of being a woman (Ovadia, 1987). Many Muslim female scholars also believe that the main responsibility of a woman is giving birth to children and being a mother (Aktas, 1996). So if women are permitted to work outside, the balance of the family will be distorted. It should be also considered that the lack of women's cooperation in working fields couldn't be only related to the religious role of traditional men. Sometimes, the common customs are not related to religion but to ethnicity and they put too much pressure on the empowerment of women for cooperation in economic development of their societies. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis will be presented as follows:

*H5: Psychological empowerment of women has positive effects on religious institutions.*

### 3. Methodology

Sample of the research includes employed men and women in health care organizations in Tehran. The reason for choosing these institutions is the vast presence of women compared to other institutions.

Sample taking has been done by applying the method of simple random sampling. The size of the sample is about 850 people. Based on the researches done, it is 25 percent more than the questionnaire's size of the sample and at the end 810 completed questionnaires have been gathered. Among these 810 people, 67% (569 people) have bachelor degrees, 18% (152 people) have master degrees, 9/9% (81 people) have Ph.D. and higher degrees, and 8 persons have not mentioned their level of education. 59/3% (480 people) are women, 38/5 (310 people) are men and 19 persons have not mentioned their gender. 6/66% (540 people) are married, 8/29% (242) are single and 28 persons have not mentioned their marital status.

The main tool of data collection is questionnaire. Therefore, using exploratory factor analysis and the version 16 of SPSS software, a scale for women empowerment variable, a scale for positive consequences of women empowerment and a scale for negative consequences of women empowerment were designed. Questions are written with great care to be simple and clear. The first questionnaire of empowerment included 34 questions that 4 of them were omitted because of reduction of the factor and 30 of them were proposed for women empowerment variable. Positive and negative consequences of empowerment of women each had 25 questions that, after the introductory test, were reduced to 12 questions. It means that in general 54 questions based on five-option spectrum of Likert are organized from 1 which means strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.

In order to determine the reliability of questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha multiple-item of the empowerment of women is 0/89. Cronbach's Alpha multiple-item of the positive consequences of empowerment of women is 0/82. Cronbach's Alpha multiple-item of the negative consequences of empowerment of women is 0/73.

Also, to determine the validity of the questions, both content validity and factor validity are used. For evaluating the content validity of the questionnaire the opinions of university teachers and experts are asked. In this stage by doing several interviews and asking the opinion of the mentioned people, corrections are done and in this way the required reliance that it is a questionnaire questions what the researches follow, is gained. The questionnaire on factor validity is also done by applying confirmatory factor analysis and LISREL software 8/50. To test hypotheses Spearman's correlation with the software SPSS 16 has been used to measure correlation between variables. Then the causal relation between the dependent and independent

variables of research using the model making method of structural exchanges with the use of LISREL 8.53 has been tested.

In order to discuss the existence of relation and its extent between two variables, correlation test has been used. When the variables are quantitative, Pearson's correlation is used and when they are qualitative, Spearman's correlation is employed. From women's point of view the correlation multiples between empowerment of women and positive results for the family (0/56), empowerment of women and positive results for economic institutions (0/162), empowerment of women and religious institutions (0/137), and empowerment of women and political institutions (0/393) have achieved, except the effects of empowerment of women and religious institutions, other multiples are meaningful.

There is a meaningful and positive relation between men's empowerment and positive consequences of women's empowerment in family's institution, and a meaningful relation between men's empowerment and positive and negative consequences of women's empowerment in other institutions cannot be seen. It means that more and more men are empowered, more and more positive results are brought to women for their empowerment in family but not in other institutions.

In order to measure causal relation that was in the hypotheses, structural equation modelling has been used. It is not only the last stage of confirmatory factor analysis that had been previously used for the measuring scales of the research, but also it shows the validity of the suggested conceptual model through model fitting indicators.

It should be mentioned that in order that measuring model or confirming factor analysis will be confirmed, first of all, its indicators should have good fitting and secondly, the amount of t-value and standard scores should be significant. If the amount of  $X^2$  and the ratio  $X^2/df$  is lower than 3, RMSE less than 0.05 and also GFI and AGFA more than 90 %, it can be concluded that it has a proper model fitting. T-values more than 2 or less than -2 are significant at the confidence level of 99%.

The amount of RMSEA and the ratio of  $x^2/DF$  is low and the amount of GFI and AGFA is more than 90. All of the t-values in 99 percent of certainty level are significant. These results express that the questionnaires used in this study enjoy high levels of validity and reliability. As it is seen, validity and suitability of models are confirmed, because the amount of RMSEA and the ratio of  $x^2/DF$  is lower



than 3 in all models and the amount of GFI and AGFA is more than 90.

The effect of empowerment is meaningful and is confirmed. The amount of income is considered as meaningful. Also, the causal relation of positive consequence of empowerment of women for family, religion, government and negative consequences of empowerment of women for family are meaningful and confirmed.

### Discussion and conclusion

The hypothesis of the research that believes that formal education leads to empowerment of women has been confirmed; therefore, formal education can be considered as a factor for growth of knowledge and awareness about cultural obstacles and legal structures that have stood on the way of women's social and individual improvement gradually and even in many cases have taken their self-awareness. The hypothesis that organizational work and income lead to empowerment of women is rejected. It should be find out why income does not lead to their empowerment. Empowerment finds its meaning in the framework of institutions. It seems that the women under research did not have the required independence for making decision about their income and had not experienced real financial independence. This result is in contrast with the findings of western research, but is in accordance with a research in India (Sharma, 1991).

Most people of the society believe that empowerment of women leads to their improper behavior in the family and their power of decision-making distorts the balance of power in the family. Even the men under research believe that empowerment of women leads to their better attitude in the family and improper deeds are decreased. Also, there is a positive and meaningful relation between the amount of empowerment of men and the positive consequences of empowerment of women; therefore, it can be said that with the empowerment of men and women, the society will benefit from more stable families.

The third hypothesis that indicates the positive effect of women's empowerment on political and governmental institutions has been confirmed. It shows that empowered women can cooperate in political arenas with more awareness and competency and get involved in determining the fate of their society and pave the way for the improvement of society to achieve the goals expected.

The rejection of the fourth hypothesis, that is the effect of empowerment of women on economy

should be considered seriously. The data of the research show that economic institutions and organizations do not benefit much from empowered women and generally they do not believe in making use of them. This result is in contrast with the concepts of glass ceiling.

Although the fifth hypothesis has been confirmed, its correlation score is the lowest. Part of it comes from the feminist teachings that challenge the concepts of Islam about women's rights. Although it should be mentioned that a great deal of teachings that have the name of religion, are really some patriarchal interpretations of religion and empowerment of women that make them see the real religion that is only after equality and do not make any difference between genders, this matter per se is enough to question the patriarchal interpretations of religion.

The results of research include some concepts for policy makers about women. The basis of education has changed and many women have entered universities and in the future they will enter organizations; therefore, in order to avoid imbalance among institutions, its reasons should be studied and the required preparation should be created in the religious, familial, economic and governmental institutions. As the present research has focused on the consequences of this issue and has not discussed its reasons, there is a focus on short-term policy making about this challenging issue. The results show that although these clichés are true to some extent, the decision-making based on the real and scientific results will lead to the betterment of women's situation; therefore, the policy makers should not act based on the old existing clichés.

Religious institutions should think of ways of empowering religious aspects of empowered women; otherwise empowered women will be freed from patriarchy and will be absorbed in western feminism common at universities. Also, religious background for employed women should be different from western teachings. The bill of interior service that is going to be approved should approach genders neutrally and should not put women in margin, as the experimental results of the research do not support that women can not work like men. At the end it should be mentioned that activity in one social system would lead to imbalance in other systems. Although the results of this research do not show any negative meaningful consequence from men's point of view, still researches should be done to consider this important issue to make clear its dark aspects and to make use of empowerment of women while avoiding its defect.



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