

The Motives and Obstacles in Iranian Women's Participation in Political Life of the Country

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Abstract

The article deals with the overview of the main obstacles in the Iranian women's participation in the country's political life originating from the national, cultural, social and economic aspects of Iranian society. Much attention is paid to the factors that motivate both Iranian women and men to participate in politics, as well as the problems that Iranian women face while struggling for their place in the parliament. The peculiarities of the political parties' activities, the financial aspect of the candidates allowing them to take part in election campaigns, distrust of women in Iranian society (in terms of their public role), the lack of electoral quotas for women are defined as the main factors of their non-participation in the elections. However, Iranian women's motivation, on the one hand, and the country's political system, on the other hand, play a significant role, because they are key internal and external factors to be taken into account. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1978, the situation with women's rights in the country improved supported by the Government's constitutional establishment of equal rights of men and women in political life of Iran. However, other spheres remained unchanged due to strong religious influence. Only in the 1990s the rights of Iranian women to participate in the country's politics were addressed by domestic and foreign scholars, though their studies do not provide an in-depth analysis of the problems of Iranian women concerned about the participation in political life of the present-day Iran and their solution.

Keywords: women, female, Iran, political life, problems, parliament, party

1. Introduction

The relevance of the study of the motives and obstacles of Iranian women in their desire to assume political power is determined by an ambiguous legal situation in the country. On the one hand, Iranian women got some rights that previously seemed impossible for religious reasons (for example, the right to drive a car, to study at a higher educational institution, to defend their interests and interests of their children in court proceedings, etc.). The life of Iranian women changed with the adoption of the "Charter of Women's Rights and Responsibilities in the Islamic Republic of Iran" in 2005. This historical event contributed not only to the consolidation of Iranian women in household duties, but also in social and political spheres as well. Thus, they got an opportunity to make a political career and participate in the political life of the country enjoying full rights as men.

On the other hand, in practice the political rights of Iranian women are still violated and rarely assured, taking into account the position of Iran in the global gender gap index. In 2021, Iran ranks 150 among 156 world countries in offering gender equal conditions: standing between the Republic of Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In other words, the current legal status of Iranian women and their level of participation in the political life prove the extremely poor state of affairs.

In order to develop the guidelines for Iranian and international women's organizations, international UN committees and other specialized associations aimed at improving the political rights of women in Iran, it is necessary to dwell on the motives of Iranian women expressing their desire to assume political power, as well as the factors reducing their political involvement.

By studying the historical aspects of the political rights of women in Iran, it is worth mentioning the 1970s marking fundamental changes at the level of state authorities. In the introduction to the 1979 Constitution, it was noted that

the exploitation of a woman by a man, as well as the possibility of a consumer relationship, is restricted. Since 1979, the woman of Iran is officially perceived as a man's companion.

The 1979 Constitution listed the rights granted to women that are equal to those of men since 1979: liberal, social, economic, cultural and political. Despite the fact that Iranian women have political rights, the practice of Islamic punishments still exists, drawing attention of the UN Commission on Human Rights engaged in an in-depth study of the rights of women in Islamic countries.

In the early 1990s, Iranian women were active not only in household duties, but also created specialized organizations aimed at helping disadvantaged women, orphans and street children. They contributed to the establishment of various charitable foundations. Thus, the social activity of Iranian women increased.

The Women's Organization of Iran is a non-profit organization founded by Iranian women in 1966 that engaged in protection of human rights in the country. The members of this organization through consultations and negotiations involving the president have contributed to the growth of the role of Iranian women in the state policy. In the political arena, they not only defended their rights and rights of children, but also stressed important issues in the social and economic spheres of the country.

In 1997, the role of Iranian women in politics increased due to significant changes in Iran associated with the election of Mohammad Khatami to the post of the president of the country. His presidency is considered to be one of the most liberal and reformist. Studying political changes of that period, women began to actively advocate for their political rights, since the highest positions in the Iranian government were held by men only. Some mass media (for example, the Zane-ruz publishing house) stressed that the Constitution does not exclude the right of women to hold senior executive positions.

The first woman who decided to run for president of Iran was the Azam Taleghani (1997). Despite the fact that her candidacy did not get the necessary number of votes, it marked the transformation of the public opinion – a woman in politics is the norm. For example, the same year, another woman M. Ebtekar was appointed to the post of Vice president for Economic Affairs.

This period of growing women's role in politics coincided with the enhanced involvement of Iranian women in higher education. Since 1993, women have got an opportunity to enter higher education institutions marking the change of their status in the country's economy and society, affecting the labor market and the right to participate in political life of Iran. For example, in 1997, the share of male and female students in higher education institutions in Iran almost equaled, and by 2006, women dominated the total number of students, reaching 60 percent.

The next period of the development of Iranian women's political rights began in 2005 with the adoption of the "Charter of Women's Rights and Responsibilities in the Islamic Republic of Iran". Thus, Iran officially joined the international treaties regulating the protection of women's rights. As a result, Iranian women created the Council and got an opportunity to submit reports to the international organizations on the state of their rights in the country, current problems and obstacles both in politics and in other spheres.

According to official reports and studies conducted by the international organizations, the current development of women's rights in Iran shows that they constantly face infringement in all branches of law. Not only their rights as family members are violated, but also their rights as citizens of Iran. To a greater extent, this is due to religious issues and Islamic traditions, leading to the situations in which contemporary women remain illiterate, physically punished, unresponsive and defenseless due to the lack or insufficient protection of women's rights in certain regions of Iran.

Nevertheless, some positive changes in political rights of women in Iran have been marked in recent decades. For example, the number of women in the Iranian parliament has grown, though very slowly. Considering the statistics of Iranian women's participation in the country's political life, it is evident that they began to join the Islamic Advisory Council as follows:

- the first and second parliamentary terms – the number of female candidates did not exceed 90 people, of whom 4 were elected to the parliament;
- the third parliamentary term – the number of female candidates equaled 25 people, of whom 4 were elected to the parliament. Their contribution to the political life of Iran was 34 bills;
- the fourth parliamentary term – the number of female candidates equaled 82 people, of whom 9 were elected to the parliament;
- the fifth parliamentary term – the number of female candidates – 326 people, of whom 14 were elected to the parliament. Their contribution to the political life of Iran was 51 bills;

- the sixth parliamentary term – the number of female candidates – 504 people, of whom 13 were elected to the parliament;
- the seventh parliamentary term – the number of female candidates – 827 people, of whom 13 were elected to the parliament;
- the eighth parliamentary term – the number of female candidates – 580 people, of whom 8 were elected to the parliament.
- the ninth parliamentary term – the number of female candidates – 390 people, of whom 9 were elected to the parliament;
- the tenth parliamentary term – the number of female candidates – 586 people, of whom 17 were elected to the parliament.

Thus, we can witness the rise of the level of Iranian women’s activity, but the number of those who entered the parliament is still low and does not exceed 17 people. The increase in the number of female deputies has influenced the political life of the country significantly resulting in the improvement of the position of women in Iran predominantly. As a result, the levels of women’s participation in the political life of the country are as follows:

- mass level – promotion of the interests both of Iranian citizens in general and of women in particular;
- average level – full participation of women in the activities of political parties;
- the highest level – membership in the Iranian Parliament (the Iranian Majles).

It is worth mentioning that there are many factors influencing the choice of a candidate, whether male or female, to participate in the elections and to be elected to the Iranian Majles.

Many scholars have studied the activity of Iranian women in politics. For example, in the book “Women and Political Participation – An Analysis of the Politics of Women’s Presence in the Islamic Consultative Council” Hajipur Sardui S. conducts a thorough investigation of the position of women in the parliament and presents the results of the survey of parliamentarians on their ways of coming into power (Fig. 1).

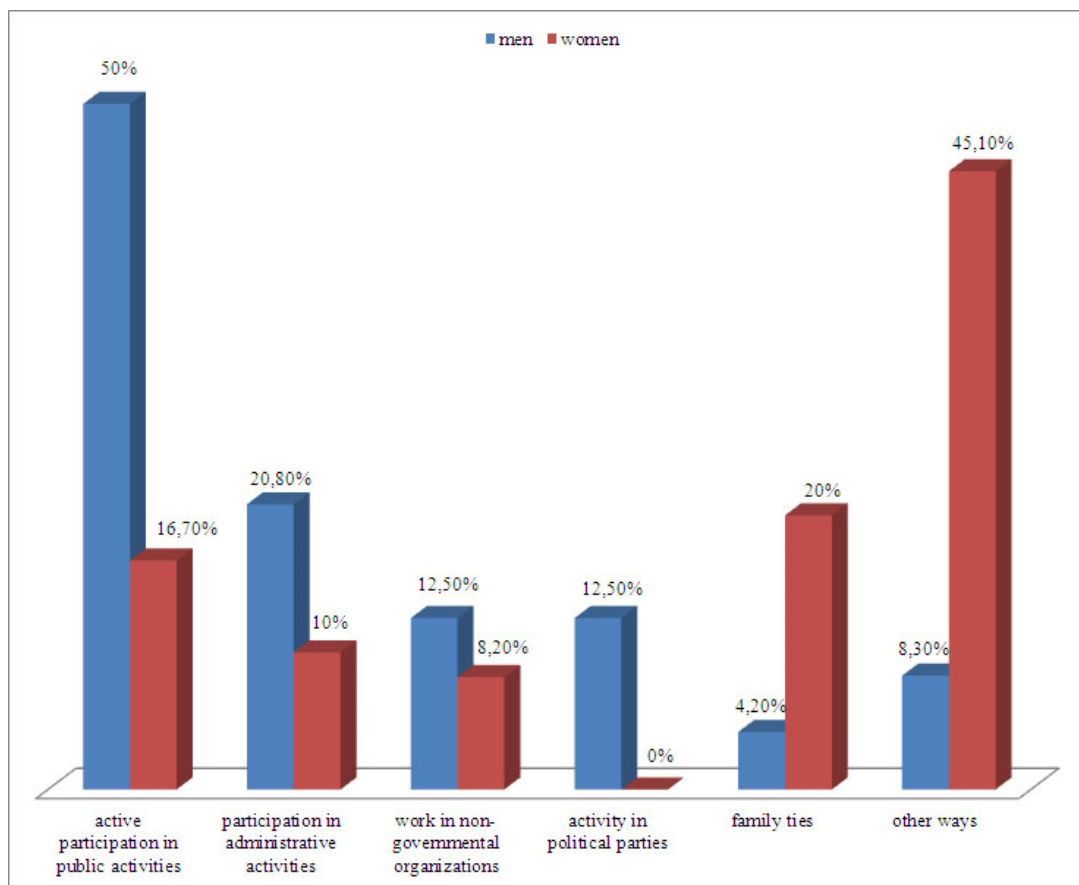


Figure 1. The ways of Iranian parliamentarians to get to the parliament

Based on the research findings, Iranian men get to the parliament mainly due to their active participation in public activities, while Iranian women do not consider this method as a key one. For them, the main way of assuming political power is to enter parliament by means of family ties and promotion from women's clubs, associations, higher educational institutions, trade unions, etc.

Hajipur Sardui S. also studies the social spheres in which female deputies are involved, including women and children's rights, health and education issues. The members of the Iranian parliament agree that working on women's issues in civil society and leading non-governmental organizations is an important way for women to enter the parliament. In other words, the enhanced activity of specialized women's associations in Iran will lead to a higher number of female deputies in the parliament.

Another aspect addressed by Hajipur Sardui S. is the motivation of candidates to run in the parliamentary elections. The answers of the men and women differ greatly. Men are primarily focused on solving specific social problems, while women are concerned about "serving to the state", which does not imply clear goals and objectives. Another motivating factor for women's participation in the parliamentary elections is their desire to improve women's position in Iranian society. In their turn, men do not mention their gender rights as a reason for participation in elections.

The next point under analysis is the obstacles preventing Iranian women from participating in the parliamentary elections. Both women and men indicate different obstacles. Men define the following reasons for losing parliamentary elections: the lack of voters' support, the lack of funding and the lack of support on the part of political parties, inexperience.

According to Doulat Abadi A.B. and M. Shafihi Seif Abadi, the main obstacles include household duties and domination of family interests due to strong family ties. For this reason, the majority of members of the Iranian parliament are men, while women make up at best 5,9 percent of the parliament, and most of them are over 45 years old. The women with fewer family responsibilities are more motivated, and, therefore, they are more likely to get into parliament.

Hajipur Sardui S. also examined the priorities of male and female deputies in power. It was identified that the women have diverse views on the problems and offer a greater number of options for solving social issues. However, they focus on economy, environment, culture, education, health, and food security. The men, on the other hand, are more concerned about solution of economic, military, and strategic tasks, as well as the issues of foreign and domestic social policy.

The 2007 survey of the Interparliamentary union identified the following issues being of greater interest to female parliamentarians in Iran:

- social issues: children, equal pay, maternity leave and pensions;
- physical issues: physical health and gender-based violence;
- development: human development, poverty and social services.

The above-mentioned list shows that most of the problems being solved are integral for women. Thus, it proves that the women in the parliament of Iran are engaged in solving the problems of their compatriots up to 90 percent.

Female deputies in Iran exert influence in such areas, as social services, labor, education, health, and children's rights. They raise these issues in the parliament more often than the male deputies. In addition, the women play an important role in the adoption of family laws. Moreover, most of Iranian female politicians vote against projects and decisions that are aimed at polluting environment, unleashing military conflicts, and increasing military spending.

The increase in the number of Iranian women in the parliament has not only changed the composition of the Iranian Majles, but the state policy as well. The presence of a large number of Iranian female deputies has attracted much attention to them and their needs in modern society.

It is worth noting that foreign and domestic researchers prove a connection between the increased presence of women in the parliament and political reforms in terms of gender equality. This means that women are more likely to formulate laws that address women's and family issues. As a result, the increase in the number of women in the Iranian parliament contributes to the expression of women's demands, growth in the number of bills and implemented reforms for the benefit of Iranian society.

The study of the obstacles limiting the presence of women in the Iranian parliament shows not only the prevalence of family interests for a woman, but also a range of other factors shown in Fig.2.

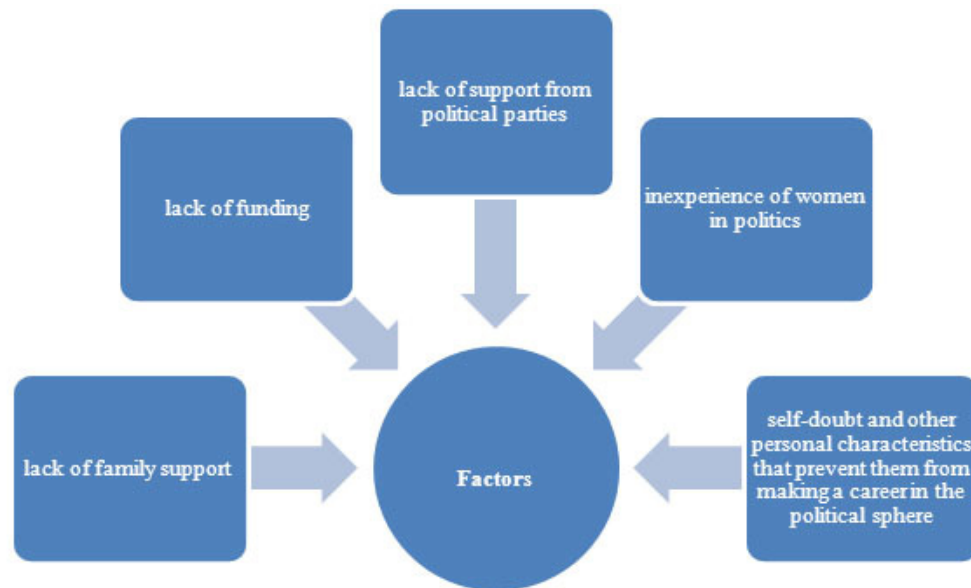


Figure 2. The factors influencing Iranian women entrance to the parliament

These factors have been already addressed by Iranian female deputies. As a result, they have developed a clear plan of actions for women who want to assume power in the parliament.

Firstly, a female candidate for participation in the country's political life should decide on the financial aspects of her election campaign. As a rule, parties are not eager to support women, because they do not take them seriously.

Campaign spending was the most significant obstacle during elections in previous periods. That is why it is necessary to do the following:

- 1) to develop mechanisms for governmental financial support of female candidates in the form of loans;
- 2) to oblige political parties to allocate part of their budget to support women's electoral programs.

Secondly, Iranian electoral system is also the factor influencing women's presence in the parliament. International studies show that Iranian women have more chances to get to parliament in case of a proportional electoral system. Most countries with 30 percent or more female deputies used proportional electoral systems or quotas. This proves that the usage of these mechanisms increases the number of female members of the parliament in 3-4 times.

Iran has a majority electoral system, according to which most of the candidates get to the parliament by party lists, but still the parties do not take female candidates seriously and try not to include them at all. Since political parties determine the procedure of inclusion of candidates in the electoral lists, there is a strong perception of subjectivity serving as a significant factor influencing Iranian women entrance to the parliament.

There is always a fierce competition between the party's candidates for the first place on the list. Senior party members often prevent new people from taking the front rows in the electoral registers. The problem becomes more complicated when parties prepare electoral lists: male candidates are often enlisted before female ones. In 2015, there was a record number of Iranian female candidates participating in the elections – 30 percent. The solution of this problem is possible in case of providing quotas. The proposed gender quota strategy emphasizes the transition from formal equality in the political area (equality of opportunity) to real equality (equality of results). By taking such measures and applying them correctly, Iranian women can increase their chances to take leading positions in the country's politics in the future.

The gender quota strategy has already proved its effectiveness when studying the world experience. In 2016, 30 world countries used various forms of gender quotas for women candidates resulting in their occupation of 25,6 percent seats in the corresponding parliaments. Those countries that ignored the implementation of the gender quota strategy (23 countries) showed a lower percentage of women's presence in the parliament – 16,1 percent.

Modern Iranian political specialists still question the implementation of the quota system. Some of them believe that quotas should be legalized, while others say that they should be used by political parties voluntarily. There

are also specialists who argue that the quota system should be used temporarily and abolished when the number of women in the parliament reaches the desired level.

It should be noted that quota systems for Iranian women can be used both in the regions and provinces in order to ensure their presence in the given communities and public organizations, since they have not been introduced there yet.

2. Conclusion

The research findings show that the motives of Iranian women who express their desire to participate in the political life of the country are associated with "service to the state". The history of Iran proves that female deputies are highly interested in such issues, as social protection, health, education, culture and economy. These are the areas in which active female politicians of Iran dominate. It is also worth noting that almost every Iranian woman, unlike her European and Western colleagues, is focused on women's rights promotion in the parliament, presenting corresponding bills and decisions. This is much due to the fact that Iranian women's rights exist only in theory and are greatly influenced by the Muslim religion.

The statistics of the presence of women in the Iranian parliament shows that almost every year the number of women candidates engaged in power struggle increases, but the number of women elected to the parliament is still extremely low due to the lack of support from the party, the lack of funding, insufficient experience and other issues dealing with the politician's traits. External factors have to do with the electoral system, political parties and political culture preventing Iranian women from entering the parliament. With this regard, in order to change this situation, it is necessary to increase their role in the political life of the country, provide quotas to enhance their motivation and show government support of female candidates. In addition, state funding of women's election campaigns in Iran is needed. These measures should be accompanied by the qualitative changes in Iranian society in terms of men's attitude towards women and their role in the country. Both traditions, the hierarchical patriarchal system that governs society and the family have a negative influence on Iranian women entrance to the parliament.

Thus, it can be concluded that an effective way to increase the number of women in the Iranian parliament requires relaxation of cultural prejudice, provision of financial support to female candidates, provision of quotas and state funding of women's election campaigns, transformation of political parties' positions, and improvement of women's political competence.

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