Women Empowerment in a Muslim Society: A Practical Observation

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Abstract
Women Empowerment becomes an important concern in the contemporary age of globalization. Now either there is a western society (First World) or a Muslim World, women status is considered the same. Evaluation of awareness among women is one of the most prominent features. Therefore, at all the forums including United Nation Organization, women rights and issues regarding women empowerment are being discussed. All the countries have been forced to draw out their women from parochial culture and trying to utilize as a skilled human resource. It is a potent description in which roles assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystic and aesthetic, and excluded from the practical and political realms. Mostly the world considers the Iranian society as a traditional one. But our practical observation about the Iranian women is different. The basic objective of this article is to highlight women empowerment in Muslim Society with focusing upon international standards mentioned by United Nations Women (UNIFEM) but its practical implementation was observed in all the socio-economic and political fields in Iran. Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 has converted Iran into a Muslim welfare state from a parochial monarchist state, first time, women empower socially, economically and politically within the religion that enhanced their trust and responsibilities upon the political system. And, such sense is becoming a reason of national cohesion and solidarity in all over the Iran as well as it is also becoming an example for other Muslim societies regarding women empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment ; Muslim Society; Practical Observation

Introduction
This article emphasizes on women empowerment issues in Iran. For understanding women empowerment and its practices in regional contexts we briefly discuss the western leader United States of America, immediate neighbor Arab World, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the word largest democracy India. It also makes a learned discussion of the vital role played by women as mother. Islam gives a profound regard and immense importance for women. Although, several critics are existed here to pert the women situation in Iran but in general, it has sympathetic relationship with Iranian community as a reverence reconciling women empowerment in all the Muslim as well as other societies.

As empowerment means increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender, or economic strength of individuals and communities to deliver an authority or permission (Floyd, 2005, P02), women empowerment means to break up the so-
called limitation on freedom of expression, education, mobility, financial independence, rights and duties, etc., imposed by the society (Panigrahy, 2006, P24). According to UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), the basic principle of women empowerment is equality. Equality in a business, workplace and market place or in a community is a pre-requisite for any society regarding empowering women (Wom13). United Nations Global Compact’s report on women empowerment’s principles describes some basic and luminous points of empowering women. These are given below:

- Establishment for high level cooperate leadership for gender equality.
- Treat all women and men fairly at work; respect and support human rights and non-discrimination.
- Ensure the health, safety and well being of all women and men workers.
- Promote education, training, and professional development for women.
- Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
- Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality and foresee the consequences of an alienating experience. (Wom13).

In this contemporary age of globalization, the slogan of women empowerment is getting its peak, while United States of America and its closing states have also a claim of delivering women empowerment within their folds. In September 2012, United States and 12 other countries took joint step regarding announcing “Equal Futures” for women and girls. It was the background of last year’s speech of President Barak Obama in UN General Assembly, in which he challenged member countries to “break down economic and political barriers that stand in the way of women and girls” (UNW13).

During announcing “Equal Futures”, United States and each country among 12 presented its own recommendation, through which, a final commitments were drafted, that are following:

- Expand opportunity for women and girls in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.
- Expand economic security for domestic violence victims.
- Support women entrepreneurs.
- Promote civic and public leadership for girls (UNW13).

History of women empowerment in United States has so much old roots. Till 19th century, women have no rights regarding vote, hold elective office, attend college or join workplace. Even women cannot get their children or demand legal rights in case of divorce (Becke, 2005, P.17).

In July 1848, first women’s right convention held in Seneca Falls, New York under the leadership of Mott, Stanton and other like-minded women. Its declaration was based on U.S declaration of independence, is called “Declaration of sentiments”.
The basic objective of this declaration was to get equal rights for women including voting right. This document was signed by 68 women and 32 men while this convention was attended by almost 300 people. At last, in 1920, through 19th amendment, women got their voting rights which affected economically the most than the politically. This amendment totally changed the women role in the United States (Becke, 2005, PP.77-103).

According to Civil Rights Acts 1964, equal opportunity was offered to women in United States which prohibited sex discrimination at workplace. This act was actually a success of a movement, started by National Organization for Women (NOW) which is now a largest feminist organization in the United States (Becke, 2005, P.105).

Women participation in both the chambers of U.S Congress started in 1970s that helped in passing some significant laws regarding women empowerment (L.Amer, 2003, P.05). These laws are as follows;

- Greater freedom in reproductive choice (1973)
- Minimum wage for domestic workers (1974)
- Prohibited against discriminating in employment against pregnant women (1978)
- Tougher child support laws and protection of pension rights for widowed and divorced women (1984)
- Provision of federal funds for child care (1990)
- Employment protection for workers needing extended time off to care for family members (1993)

Despite facing different issues still, American women are now very happy regarding getting almost basic rights from their governments (L.Amer, 2003, P.21).

But, during analyzing women empowerment in Arab world, we observe that women, historically have faced and experienced huge discrimination here regarding their rights and freedoms. Some of such experiences were due to so-called religious believes, and several were due to societal limitations and cultural barriers. Such restrictions affected women’s life in Arab world regarding judicial, economic, educational or healthcare discrimination. Before Islam, guardians were sold women for the sake of money, and women had no legal rights. Even a husband can terminate his union but women cannot say something at all. But there is a contradiction among several historians. Some argue that before Islam, women in Arab world were more liberal. They put an example of Hazrat Khadija R.A who successfully ran her trading business, and the Prophet Muhammad PBUH was worked under her supervision. They also argue that the proposal for the marriage was also sent by the Hazrat Khadija, not by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, that shows the freedom of expression and liberalization of women before Islam (Manea, 2011, P26).

But generally, every historian has accepted this view point that Islam has

He also describes the situation after the Islam that, “It is correct that Islam is still, in many ways, a man's religion. But I think I have found proof in some of the early sources that seems to illustrate that Muhammad made things better for women. It appears that in some parts of Arabia, notably in Mecca, a matrilineal system was in the process of being replaced by a matrilineal one at the time of Muhammad. Growing prosperity caused by a shifting of trade routes was accompanied by a growth in individualism. Men were amassing considerable personal wealth and wanted to be sure that this would be inherited by their own actual sons, and not simply by an extended family of their sisters’ sons. This led to deterioration in the rights of women. At the time Islam began, the conditions of women were horrible. They had no right to own property, were supposed to be the property of the man, and if the man died everything went to his sons. Muhammad improved things quite a lot. By instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education and divorce, he gave women certain basic safeguards. Set in such historical context the Prophet can be seen as a figure who testified on behalf of women's rights” (Yazbeck, 1998, PP.12-13).

There has been so much respected women leadership in Muslim society, such as Shajar-ul-Durr in Egypt (13th century), Queen Orpha in Yemen (1090) and Razia Sultana in Delhi (13th century). Similarly in contemporary age, women leadership is highlighted in Pakistan Bangladesh and Turkey. The first female member of parliament in the Arab world was Rawya Ateya, who was elected in Egypt in 1957. Voting rights have been delivered to women in several Arab countries on universal and equal basis, like in Lebanon in 1952, Syria in 1949, Egypt in 1956, Tunisia in 1959, Mauritania in 1961, Algeria in 1962, Morocco in 1963, Libya and Sudan in 1964, Yemen in 1967, Bahrain in 1973, Jordan in 1974, Iraq in 1980, Oman in 1994 and Kuwait in 2005. In 2011, Saudi Arabia has announced that it will deliver the voting rights to women in next elections (Kassam, 2010, P131).

Although voting rights becomes the reason of economic rights while the traditional Arab dress is still an obstacle in female economic empowerment. According to several thinkers that role of religious police in Saudi Arabia regarding imposing traditional Arab Abaya is actually an effort to keep far away the women from business or financial activities, while several other countries like Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, the veil is not compulsory. In Tunisia, veil has been banned by the secular government and stress on the importance on local Tunisian dress as a symbol of national unity (Kassam, 2010, PP.132-133).

But, when we look at South Asian women, we find a miserable environment over here regarding miserable situation of women in most of the South Asian countries. Usually, women are misconducting here with depriving their basic rights as well. The most suffered country regarding women’s deprivation is Afghanistan which has rank of 141 out 145 according to Human Development Report 2011 (Khan). Even Afghanistan has a tribal culture, consisted off usually an orthodox behavior about women empowerment but there was a rule of King Amanullah Khan from 1919 to 1929, in which he promoted women education and encouraged families regarding sending their daughters to schools. He also discouraged unveiling and persuaded regarding opting westernization in dressing. He enforced the laws regarding banned forced marriages, bride prices, child marriages and banned polygamy also that is most common in Afghan society among households. But, as time passed, these restrictions
had been proved nearly impossible regarding imposing. Similarly, during 1970s and 1980s, when Afghanistan had been declared as republic, a communist party of Afghanistan called, “people’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan” (PDR) had been tried once again regarding reforming marriage and health laws for women including courage regarding getting education. In 1977, Meena Kishwar Kamal was established “Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan” (RAWA) in Kabul but after some time, she moved her office to Quetta (Pakistan) where she has been assassinated in 1987 but RAWA is still operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. During Mujahidin and Taliban period, Afghan women had been restricted more than the previous. Similarly, after 9/11 during Karzai government, a code of conduct has been enforced which designed by the Umala Council of Afghanistan. The basic aim of this law is to stop women’s movement with strange men in markets, offices, schools or any other public place (Khan).

On the other hand, Pakistan has somewhat same situation in its tribal as well as in feudal influenced areas like Afghanistan. Even Pakistan is a divided society among classes, culture and rural and urban areas; therefore women status is different in various places within Pakistan. According to Gender Inequality Index, Pakistan has 115th ranked out of 145. 23.5 percent have gotten secondary education and 21.7 percent are the part of labor force (Weiss). Human Development Report, published by United Nations, mentioned Pakistan as a better state than the neighboring India regarding women situation. But, on the other hand, Pakistan has been putted with Chad and Yemen due to worst gender gap by the World Economic Forum report of 2012 (Weiss).

Fatma Jinnah, the sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah was the first educated and women rights supporter in Pakistan (Pak13). The regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1970-1977) had reserved 10 percent seats in National Assembly and 5 percent in provincial assembly for women. His tenure was considered as a liberal period for women. On the other hand, the period of General Zia-ul-haq was somewhat more facilitated for women regarding establishment of Women Division in Cabinet Secretariat and reserved 20 percent seats in National Assembly for the non-party based elections of 1985. But, on the other hand, this period was criticized due to process of Islamization along with Hudood Ordinance, Qanoon-e-Shahadat Order (Law of Evidence Order) and promotion of Parda with banned women sports. Benazir Bhutto (1989-91 and 1993-96) was the first women elected as a head of any Muslim country (Pak13). She announced a plan regarding establishment of separate women police stations, women courts and women development banks. Even she promised but could not abolish any law, legislated by Zia-ul-Haq including Hudood Ordinance. First Women Bank was established in 1989 just for dealing with financial needs of women. Similarly, Women studies centers established in five major universities in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar and Quetta under the supervision of Ministry of Women’s Development. The first women university in Pakistan was inaugurated in 1998, is called Fatima Jinnah University, established under the tenure of Nawaz Sharif (1991-93 and 1997-99). During regime of General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008), Women Protection Bill was replaced with controversial Hudood Ordinance. Women quota was increased up to 10 percent in Central Superior Services and 5 percent in all government departments. Similarly, President Asif Ali Zardari signed “Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill 2009” after approval of parliament on January 29, 2010 (Naz).

On the other hand, India which is the eastern neighboring country with having almost 210 million Muslim population, has been declared as “fourth most dangerous
country” by the Thomas Reuters Corporation which is Canadian firm, based in New York, worked for media and financial data collection. But, in recent decades, India got major achievement regarding women empowerment. Mother Teresa was a first Indian citizen who got Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. In 1989, Fatima Beevi became first female judge of Indian Supreme Court. Pratibha Patil was the first Indian female President, became in 2007 and Meira Kumar, in 2009, became first female speaker of Lok Sabha (Lower House) in Indian Parliament (Parida, 2009, PP.182-220).

India has 129th ranked out of 145 in Gender Inequality Index (Parida, 2009, P.224). Even constitution of India ensures women rights, as like article 14 describes an equality for all Indian women, article 15(1) emphasizes on no discrimination by the state, article 16 presents equality in professional opportunities, article 39(d) focuses on same pay for male and female regarding same work, article 15(3) describes some special provisions for women and children, article (42) delivers maternity relief, and, article 51(A)(e) evaluates the dignity of women. Similarly, Indian laws have been changed in 1970s after the Mathura Rape Case. Even courts had taken decision regarding consent intercourse of sixteen years old girl into police station from two police men. But the protest in all over the India forced Indian government regarding reforming section 376 of Indian Penal Code about punishment of rape, with addition to sections 376 (A), 376 (B), 376 (C) and 376 (D) (The13).

The government of India has celebrated 2001 as a year for women empowerment. In same year, The National Policy for Empowerment of Women was also passed. Women Reservation Bill was passed by Rajyasabha on March 9, 2010, regarding allocation of 33 percent reserve seats in Parliament and the state legislatures. Similarly, even there are several crimes against women in India like acid throwing, sexual harassment, child marriages, female infanticides and sex selective abortion, and several other domestic violences, but, India has also generated a skill female human resource in all the fields like education, arts and entertainment, sports, politics and literature. Asha Bhosle, Lata Mangeshkar and Sania Mirza are some of them (Upadhyay).

As we know that, Persian civilization has left huge impacts on Indo-Pak and Afghan societies. During Mughal Period, Persian was an official language of Indo-Pak Subcontinent and still it is understood and spoken in both the countries. Similarly, Persian is a second official language of Afghanistan after Pashto language. It has great impact on fine arts, music, literature and Urdu poetry like Nazms (نظم), Marsia (مرثیہ), Qasida (قصیدہ) and Ghazal (غزل). Even National anthem of Pakistan is also written in Persian language. Amir Khosro and Umar Khayam of Iran and Allama Iqbal of Pakistan are considered as a bridge between cultural and literature exchange for these four countries Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and India (Ind13). Now we have to analyze women empowerment in Iran which is a rich civilization and a major Middle Eastern Country.

Pre-revolution women situation was very worse in Iran. It was looked like European girl in very first sight but during mutual conversation, actual situation was cleared that it is usually illiterate. Muslim women cannot get an education in the schools and universities with protecting Islamic norms and values. If a woman was wanted to get a higher post in any public office, it was general principle to lose her pious status. Women were far from education and politics and this was pre-planned in the Pehlvi dynasty (Nashat, 2004, PP.85-106).

But, Iranian Revolution of 1979 cleared all the wrong assumptions about
women’s approaches and ideas, and women played their role as a vanguard in this regard. Even mothers were usually un-educated but they socialized their children and motivated their husbands in a true sense, otherwise this revolution cannot be occurred. Imam Khumaini called that if this movement was not supported by women, then it cannot be succeeded. After revolution, women have been acquired an open opportunity regarding participation in educational, political, economic and social activities along with following Islamic norms and values (Esfandiari, 1997, PP.105-132). In initial days of an Islamic Revolution, Imam Khumaini highlighted the role of women in an Islamic society with saying that: “Islam wants men and women, both have to progress. Islam has protected women from the societal ills. As men perform their daily important tasks, women must also perform. Islam has wanted that a female keep safe her dignity and value. In fact, there is no another example of women empowerment as Islam empowers” (Esfandiari, 1997, P.32)

Today, Iranian women do not idealize western society but the life Hazrat Fatima Zahra (R.A). This time, half of Iranian population is consisted of women. In last 33 years, Iranian government concentrated on more and more legislation for women empowerment than the history. There is a committee regarding looking after the problems of women in public offices, is called “Basej Khuahraan”. Similarly, there are committees in each province regarding solving women’s problems. A sub-office for women in office of president, an international office in foreign ministry, a special unit for solving women’s issues in the courts, a central unit for legislation in the National Assembly for the women, religious centers for women, establishment of “Jamiat-e-Zanaan” for studying philosophy of Imam Khumaini, exhibiting women’s art, organizing seminars regarding women’s house life, supervising voting process of women, and for increasing women candidates in the elections (Honarbin, 2013, PP.90-127).

Islamic Revolution and 8 years long Iran-Iraq war showed the braveness of Iranian women that how they defend and fought for their country. As a doctor and nurse, they were remained present on the front line. There are thousands of women who are the mother of one or more than one martyr’s sons. Several women’s lost their husbands in this war but, they socialized their children in such a way that they reached high level in the different fields. There were 351 women candidates in the 6th election of National Assembly which number was increased up to 504 in the 7th election. This shows 43 percent increment in women’s political participation. The women’s literacy rate is 95 percent in Iran. The women’s ratio in getting a admission in the universities is being increased day by day. Recently, there are 63 percent women in all over the university enrolled students. More than 70 percent women are associated with the field of teaching (Honarbin, 2013, P128).

Today, Iranian women participated in the sports and athletics and win several awards. They are just avoided from those kinds of sports activities which become a source of unveiling (Honarbin, 2013, P129).

An important source of transportation of people in Iran is Taxi. This department is worked under the governmental supervision. Women are not behind than the men in this regard. They earn through taxi driving in Tehran, Qom and several other big cities (Honarbin, 2013, PP.129-131).

For observing and analyzing women empowerment in Iran, We visited the Iran for our study. Our 22 days visit of Iran was sponsored by Al-Mustafa International University in Qom city of Iran. Qom is a holy city for Shia Muslims due to holy
shrine of Hazrat Fatima Masooma who was the sister of 8th Imam Ali Bin Musa Al-Raza. She lived here just for 17 days. People were come towards her regarding asking religious questions from several places due to her association with the holy family of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. And, this circle is continue till today in the shape of more than 500 educational institutions in Qom city where students come from all over the world for getting religious as well as modern education. Imam Khumaini (founder of Islamic Republic of Iran) and Hassan Nasrullah (Supreme leader of Hizbullah in Lebanon) got their education from this city. Shia Muslims start their holy journey of visiting shrines from their first visit to the holy shrine of Hazrat Fatma Masooma due to some quotes of 7th Imam Jafar Sadiq and Imam Ali bin Musa Al-Raza. When Hazrat Fatima Masooma was not born, Imam Jafar Sadiq predicted that she will born. Similarly, Imam Ali bin Musa Al-Raza advised all the visitor Shia Muslims firstly to visit Hazrat Fatima Masooma and then come towards him.

Our visit started from April 25, 2012 when there was an official holiday on the day of Hazrat Fatima Zehra’s Testimony. At Imam Khumaini International Airport (AKIA) in Tehran, there were several women, who are appointed as an immigration officer and on other posts at airport. Women were working all type of jobs with wearing scarf that is compulsory in dressing for women after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. From airport to Qom city, in all the way of almost 90 kilometer, we observed Iranian families getting together on both sides the road. They had parked their cars, laid down carpet and sat along with food stuff to take it.

In all over the Iran, this is usually a general practice of Families regarding celebrating their free time. For this purpose, they choose any park or a place where they feel comfort. Due to harmonize society and strict law and order situation, Iranian families have no fear of any threat. Indirect, we can say that Iranian people find happiness within their own folds.

On April 27, 2012, administration of Al-Mustafa International University made a plan for giving us an introductive tour of Qom city. During visiting Qom city (قم گردی) we found Iranian women at public places without any threat or fearing. They were doing their jobs, walking along the roads, shopping in the markets, reading in the libraries, running their businesses, studying in the universities and enjoying in the parks. Even Qom city has its development history just 15 to 20 years old. Before revolution, this city was being ignored with planning because the government had understood that its skilled talent can create a threat against Pehlvi Dynasty. And this threat became reality, because Imam Khumaini who got his education from this city, became a reason of ending this 2500 years old dynasty.

Agha Ali Nemati, who is living in Qom city since 14 years, delivered us some lectures on the topic of “Administrative Behavior” in Al-Mustafa International University. He is also a head of council in Tehran for solving family disputes. He told us that such councils have been established in all the cities of Iran on advice of Rehber-Muazzim (Supreme leader) Khamnai. He, at the same time, criticized as well as admires Iranian social system for women. As male and female have participated in the financial affairs for earning in all over the Iran, he finds several cases due to the lack of love among both, the husband and wife. Some wives are argued that their husbands do not show their love for them. And the reason is, both have been tiered at the end of the day due to participating in earning affairs, when they return back to their home, both want to take rest. In such situation, married affiliations as well as family institutions are going to be disturbed. The situation becomes more serious in
case of child birth. Both, the husband and wife cannot deliver their proper love to their child. In result, child’s look after is disturbed very badly.

He finds the reason among conflicts and disputes among husband and wife is involving in the financial affairs. He quotes the life of Hazrat Ali and Hazrat Fatima Zahra that:

“When Prophet Muhammad PBUH gave the hand of his daughter in the hand of Ali for marriage, he allocated all the house works to Fatima Zahra and allotted all other works to Ali, because a woman has no such capability to perform the tasks outside the home. She is just an able to perform house works beautifully.”

He says that whenever a couple come in the council office for their internal problems, council analyzes that usually problems are generated in such couples where female do a job. He quotes a hadith here:

“If a husband helps in the house works with his wife, this is in fact a forgiveness of his sins”

He is, here criticizing the trend among women regarding doing job in the modern age. He argues that if a baby cry for 10 minutes continuously, father becomes anger while a mother can awake even in a half night. Although, there are several women in Iran who drive big vehicles. He knows personally a woman who says that she usually leaves her home for 6 months during drive on long routs. So, we can say that women’s job has become now a standard of getting success in the world.

During our visit to Isfahan (the cultural capital of Iran) and Mashad we observed by-elections 2012 and political activities.

On May 03, 2012, we visited polling stations at Khaju Bridge and Medan-e-Imam where in large number; women were standing in lines for casting their votes. These elections were broadcasting live on televisions. Women anchors were hosting live television programs. Such participation of women in Iranian political system as well as in socio-economic affairs shows their trust over their system. And, veil is not a hurdle in their success.

Similarly, on May 11, 2012, we visited Mashad where there was a political rally of Iranian President Ahmadi Nijad. During president’s addressing with a big crowd, there were thousands of women who were shouting slogans in his favor. Such environment clarifies all the controversial statements against Iranian women regarding their socio-political and economic rights and freedom.

During analyzing Iranian Constitution, we read article 3 that is describing state goals. Its clause 14 a state goal that:

“Securing the multifarious rights of all citizens, both women and men, and providing legal protection for all, as well as the equality of all before the law” (The131)

It is now come to the end of the journey that Iranian society is securing women rights fully as written in its constitution. Although, we have been studied and observed several essential elements of countries regarding women empowerment but Iranian society has fully paragon to its women reflecting socio-economic and political liberalization, freedom of earning and expression and living style up to the present time has been rapidly traced. To observe personally, critics have been flown away in a smoke because there is no hurdle including veil concerning getting success and any
social status for Iranian women. The pendulum has gone to the one side to represent the women status and it has swung to the other side how critics precede them. The Common sense marks over the mind of the reader to vacate the obscure construction of critics. So, we can say Iranian feminism is a profound role model regarding women empowerment for all the Muslim countries as well as for all those countries which are called their selves democratic and liberal.
References


