A Glance on Iranian Women Political Participation in 2001-2011

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Abstract

The quality of political participation of women is one of the main indictors of political and social development, which paves the way for sustainable development as well. One of the most important manifestations of this participation is taking part in voting to elect people's representatives in various institutions. Women's votes can be considered a basic factor that can lead to important changes in legislative capacities in order to improve women's situation in various areas. Representatives, who take charge of decision-making and executive posts through women's votes, will naturally or under women's pressure have to be more careful about decisions that pertain to women. However, promoting women's participation in practice depends on a variety of factors. If the society is to benefit from political participation of women, these factors should be identified and assessed. One of the most important factors is the general course of political developments in the country. This article's core question is: What factors affect quality of women's political participation in Iran? Our central argument is that mass political participation of the Iranian women was growing during 2001-2011 through the strong role that women played in various elections. The method applied in this paper blends descriptive and analytical approaches.

Keywords: Iran, Women, Politics, Power, Political Participation, Parties.

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Introduction

Taking advantage of all social forces, including women, is requisite to achieve every country's growth and development goals. However, both in developed and in less-developed countries, the political sphere has been almost exclusive to men. Of course, constitutions in all countries recognize women's right to political participation shoulder by shoulder to men. However, the gap between words and deeds is too deep across the globe. What factors prevent women from playing a significant role in various scenes of decision-making and social power, and bar them from achieving their political rights with no discrimination? What factors influence their political participation? And the main question that this paper attempts to answer is: How was the condition of political participation for Iranian women in various elections held during 2001-2011 period?

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Political participation is a behavior that makes it possible to influence power institutions and become a partner to their mechanisms. Political participation is also a behavior which aims to influence politics, or seeks to make changes to the government. At lower levels of the society (masses), political participation is usually realized through voting as well as taking part in demonstrations, gatherings, rallies, and so forth. At high levels of power (elites), political participation takes place by occupying power posts (mainly legislature). Women's political participation is largely a function of general conditions of political participation in the society. Their participation in decision-making process can take place at two levels:

1. Mass political participation such as voting for representatives in various institutions, taking part in street demos, or working for political parties; and

2. Elite Political participation as parliamentarians and members of city and village councils, or by occupying high- to medium-ranking executive posts.

The political participation of women is also influenced by other personal and environmental factors. In this study, we focus on the 2001-2011 period. The hypothesis constructed here is that "during the 2001-2011 period, political participation of Iranian women has not grown." This paper considers political developments in Iran as an independent variable with the political participation of women as dependent variable. Many researchers believe that in addition to gender-related and personal factors, changes in women's status in the Islamic Republic of Iran have affected their political participation. This paper proceeds from the assumption that "there is no serious legal barrier to political participation of women in Iran." Experience has shown that interpretation of law—not the text—has constituted the main obstacle to women's political participation.

This paper focuses on mass political participation of women. Lack of necessary information on this issue has proved a major problem in this research. As for mass political participation of women, there are no solid data on the degree of women's political participation as voters in various elections. The political participation of women through membership in political and nonpolitical institutions has been also assessed on the basis of available information and sources. Unavailability of basic statistics from official authorities on the political participation of women has left

its mark on the organization of this research. The main tools used to conduct this study, based on descriptive-analytical method, included primary and secondary sources, articles and researchers, as well as few available reports.

Women's suffrage continues to be the most important form of their political participation. Women's votes are considered instrumental in making major changes to laws that pertain to their situation. Advocates of suffrage for women in the UK and the US (suffragettes) considered voting right as prelude to full political participation of women (Crawford, 2001). Many studies have shown the diversity of factors affecting political participation. There are numerous theories concerning who participates and what factors affect political participation. Likewise, political participation of citizens has been also defined in various ways. This is a behavior taht includes membership in civil movements – which are formed to pursue small local objectives – as well as voting, taking part in elections, and trying to be elected by people. Some scholars argue that having official state post, active membership in political groups and parties, taking part in public gatherings, taking part in voting and even avoiding political acts are among the basic requirements of political participation (Raash, 1387, 132).

Political participation is directly connected to political socialization. Political socialization is a process through which people adopt clear political viewpoints. Political socialization is the process of continued learning according to which as people come to know the political system by obtaining information and gaining experiences, they also learn about their rights, obligations and roles, especially their political rights, obligations and roles in the society. In this process, values, ideas, institutions, beliefs, customs and rituals, including with regard to political issues, are handed down from one generation to the next. Some scholars believe that political socialization is a process which affects and is affected by the individual.(Powell and Cowart, 2003)

At a micro level, political socialization is a process through which people learns norms, beliefs and values of the society in which they live. At a macro level, however, political socialization focuses on the achievements and functions of agents of socialization (Powel and Coward, 2003). In macro-level political socialization, political system is considered as independent variable and it is believed that continuation or discontinuation of individual's participation is a result of the overall

process of political socialization. In theories of socialization, differences in behaviors and political convictions of women and men are also explained on the basis of their behavior and political differences. According to Joseph S. Nye and Sidney Verba, such personal factors as gender, age, ethnic origin and social sources of the voter determine the interest of an individual in political participation (Orome, 1974: 198). In certain sociological approaches such as that of David H. Smith, the level of social renovation and development is considered as a basis for the analysis of political participation (Inckles & Smith, 1974).

Having trust in officials, considering the political system as accountable, and confidence in political system's institutions are all factors that contribute to political participation among individuals (Shaigan, 2006 ،Fennema and Tillie, 2001, Bäck and Christensen, 2011). Therefore, political participation can be studied from the viewpoints of method, quantity and quality. The quality of political participation can be studied in terms of its influence on two macro-level and different approaches, influence on the status quo, or its power to reform the existing trends. Pippa Norris has combined sociological (structural) approaches with psychological (individual) ones and has come up with a model to explain political participation which has been since used by authors (Norris, 2002). His model identifies macro level, intermediate, and micro level factors. Macro level factors include such governmental structures as the constitution, party politics, as well as election laws and regulations. At intermediate levels, such factors as the impact of civil institutions including political parties, labor and guild-related unions, religious centers and social networks come into focus. At micro level, by contrast, more attention is given to individual sources such as the education, income, free time, and personal skills. This research has also taken advantage of the political socialization theory and the process through which political norms and values are transferred to individuals.

Political Participation of Iranian Women (2001-2011)

Apart from the qualitative and quantitative data on political participation of women, Iran in the 2000s saw a period in which social and political capacities of women came to the fore. During that decade, the Iranian women had behind them two decades of revolution

and war and their consequences, and were offered with more opportunities to play their active and positive social and political roles. During that period, four distinctive factors served to boost the political participation of women: higher educational opportunities for women; increased share of women in workforce; changing fertility rate of women; and changes in women's lifestyle or their attitude to life (Javaheri, Seraj Zade & Rahmani, 2010: 143-162).

However, statistics show that the realities of women's political participation during that decade do not match the expectations. According to figures, about half of all votes in any elections at that juncture were cast by women. An example was elections for the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis) in 2010, when 48,288,799 people were eligible to vote, including over 2 million men and more than 1.9 million women.[1] Gender differentiation of first-time voters taking part in presidential polls in 2013 also revealed 1,631,206 voters, including 799,562 women and 831,644 men.[2] That ratio has been maintained in many subsequent statistical reports. A study by a creditable polling center in Iran during the 2013 presidential election showed that out of 14,800 hopefuls registered to run for the election in different cities, 52 percent were men and 48 percent were women.[3]

Increased presence of women in elections as voters, however, has not been translated into their increased share of the political power or even the opening-up of the political environment for their activities. When assessing this issue, share of women in production, distribution, and consumption of power should be also evaluated as follows:
- Real and practical share of women in production of power and enjoying it; that is, their share in paving the way for making decisions;
- Real and practical share of women in distribution of powers; that is, their share in making decisions; and
- Real and practical share of women in consumption or taking advantage of power; that is, their share in executing decisions.

The presence of women as parliament deputies, therefore, cannot be taken as an indicator of women's participation in the hierarchy of the political power.

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1. See: http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/200792
2. See: http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/322266
3. See: http://www.eghtesadeiranonline.com/vdcgqx9qzak9u74.rpra.html

City and Village Council Elections

Figures related to second round of elections for Islamic councils in cities and villages in 2002 show that among a total of 218,747 candidates, there were 5,867 women, down by 1,410 compared to the first council elections. However, 7,129 women registered for the third round of council elections in 2006. A gender-based approach to the quality of voters and those elected in the second round of elections for Islamic councils of cities and villages reveals decreased interest of women in realizing their political participation through presence in those councils. Of course, men were also less motivated to take part. The third round of elections for Islamic councils in cities and villages saw 7,053 women registered. Total number of people registered to take part in those elections in 2006 stood at 247,138, comprising 240,085 men and 7,053 women. The number of women increased by 1.7 percent in the fourth elections for the same councils during which, 12,096 women registered to run, accounting for over 4 percent of all those registered.

Table 1 - Number of women candidates in Islamic Consultative Assembly elections

Year	No. of women nominated	No. of women elected	Ratio of elected women to total MPs
1979	66	2	
1984	28	4	
1988	37	3	
1992	81	9	
1995	320	10	
1999	513	11	
2003	828	12	
2007	611	8	
2011	249	9	

Source: Election Office, Ministry of Interior; November 2013

The experience with the political participation of women in the 2000s proves that elections for Islamic councils of cities and villages are among the most important areas where women have shown keen interest to take part. Women's turnout in the first council elections attests to this fact. In Iran, women's participation in council elections

has been always more remarkable than elections for the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Women's political participation in council elections shows that in 2002 and during the second council elections, the number of elected women increased 80 percent. In 2006, women's participation in elections for Islamic councils of cities and villages was eye-catching, so that, in provincial capitals, women won 16 percent of council seats. In such big cities as Shiraz, Zanjan, Ardebil, Hamedan, Arak, Urumiyeh (Urmia), and Qazvin, women accounted for the highest votes. These cities were followed by Ahvaz, Bandar Abbas, Sanandaj, Khorramabad, and Qom which ranked the second in terms of women elected.

Some analysts claim that this issue reflects the trust that voters put in female candidates, especially women who run independent of political parties and groups. Since participation of women in the Islamic Consultative Assembly elections is usually done through political parties and groups, their success in those elections has been widely vacillating. A major reason for remarkable participation of women in elections for Islamic councils is that the Guardian Council does not play its vetting role here while political parties and groups have little effect, if any, on the fate of candidates. Thus, unlike parliamentary elections, some women who are not affiliated with official political groups and parties, and are not relatives of male politicians too, can take part in the council elections. A far more important reason might be the participatory skills of women in villages. This is demonstrable in field studies. In villages, women play an equal part to men in running local economy. Therefore, they believe that they have a better grasp of people's everyday problems, often discussed by Islamic councils, than the country's general issues that are typically discussed at the parliamentary debates (Sadeghi, 2007, 55).

Table 2 – Women's participation in elections for Islamic councils of cities and villages

Number of female candidates in elections for Islamic councils of cities and villages		
1998	7,276	1,375
2002	5,867	2,336
2006	7,129	1,410
2013	12,096	6,096

Sources: Election Office, Ministry of Interior; November 2013

In the seventh Majlis elections in 2003, for example, 828 women were nominated, but the figure dropped to 611 in the eighth Majlis elections. A major reason for remarkable participation of women in council elections is that the Guardian Council does not play its vetting role here while political parties and groups have little effect, if any, on the fate of candidates. Therefore, unlike parliamentary elections, some women who are not affiliated with official political groups and parties, and are not relatives of male politicians too, can take part in the elections for Islamic councils of cities and villages. A more important reason is participatory skills of women in villages. This point can be clearly observed in field studies. In Iranian villages, women play an equal part to men in running local economy. Therefore, they believe that they are better informed of people's everyday problems, which are usually discussed by Islamic councils, than general issues of the country, which are discussed at the parliament. (http://isna.ir /fa/news/92042917805) (These figures are somehow different from official statistics released by Ministry of Interior, 2013)

Table 3 – Women's participation in elections for Islamic councils of cities and villages across the country and in provincial capitals
(Sadeghi, 2007, 55)

((http://isna.ir/fa/news/92042917805) (These figures are somehow different from official statistics released by Ministry of Interior)

Year	Nationwide				Provincial capitals			
	Total nominees	Women nominated	Women elected	Ratio of women councilors	Total nominees	Women nominated	Women elected	Ratio of women councilors
1998	336,138	7,276	1,375	0.84	19,028	7,267	33	13
2002	218,747	5,867	2,326	1.47	11,380	5,867	41	11
2006	248,138	7,053	1,410	3.3	247,168	7,053	45	15
2013	245,470	12,087	6,092	-	-	-	-	-

Increased political activities by women led to frequent demands for the reinterpretation of the concept of "political man." This term has been used in Article 115 of the Iranian Constitution which stresses that the president should be elected out of "religious and political men" who are known by the following characteristics: "…of Iranian origin; having Iranian nationality; administrative capacity and resourcefulness; a good past record; trustworthiness and piety; firmly believing in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran

and the official religion of the country." There are some political groups which argue that the word "man" here has no gender implication. Another group has also existed since far past up to the present day which relies on jurisprudential verdicts to reject the possibility of the leadership of women and, naturally their chance to run for president. This issue is still subject to serious debates among sources of emulation. Ayatollah Saanei believes that "political man" does not denote men only, but is aimed to connote that the president should be a powerful figure (http://saanei.org/?view=01,01,03,114,0). However, scholars who make up the Guardian Council are unanimous that Article 115 of the Constitution is specific to men. Demands from Iranian women to be allowed to run for president have been always there through 11 rounds of presidential polls. During the 2000s, although women were aware of their previous failures to be nominated for presidency, they still insisted on registering for the presidential elections. They also continued to express their right using such opportunities and did not deprive themselves of the chance to, at least, register for presidential elections.

Debates on the qualification of women to run for president were first started after A'zam Taleqani – the secretary-general of the Society of the Islamic Revolution Women – registered for the first time to run in presidential elections of 1997. During the same elections, 11 women were nominated for the presidential polls. In elections that were held in 2005, 93 women were nominated for the presidency, but the figure dropped to 43 in 2009(Center of Election) However, during all presidential elections, women have been practically barred from running on the basis of the Guardian Council's interpretation of the Article 115 of the Constitution.

Table 4 – Number of female candidates in presidential elections		
7	11	0
8	-	0
9	93	0
10	43	0
11	30	0

Source: Sources: Election Office, Ministry of Interior; November 2013

Women's and Civil Institutions

Total absence or insignificance of political organization among Iranian women can be considered as one of the main factors behind high fluctuation in the political participation of women. As a result, civil institutions play a secondary and accessory role in the field of politics in parallel to political parties. So, it can be claimed that political participation of women is directly related to their civil activities. In order to broaden their social support base, such civil activists pay more attention to women's problems, directly address women and encourage them in line with their own goals to take part in political activities and elections. Therefore, being a member of civil institutions has had a great impact on strengthening social role of the Iranian women. The communication network of nongovernmental organizations of Iranian women, which is the only legal broad-based network in Iran, started its work with 76 member NGOs in 1995. At present, this network has more than 900 members and is active in national and international areas.[1]

There are no accurate figures on the activities of women within the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) during the 2000s. During the first half of that decade and in the light of rapid democratization in the country, women's institutions started to grow rapidly. During the second half of the same decade, as securitization increasingly plagued social activities, such activities fell sharply. The relative expansion of NGOs was more striking under former president, Mohammad Khatami. The past experience of color revolutions in certain former republics of the Soviet Union dealt heavy blows to activities of Iranian women who worked with NGOs (Koolaee, 2012). As a result of limitations considered for the NGOs by the ninth and tenth Iranian administrations, Majlis decided that the NGOs law should change. In practice, women's activities within such organizations were remarkably restricted.

Political Developments and Political Participation of Women

Political developments in Iran are among the most important factors influencing the political participation of women. Therefore,

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1. See: www.iranzanan.com/social/cat_11/000262.php

political developments in the country are used here as an analytical section for the assessment of the political participation of Iranian women. Since 1962 and following the reforms plan that was part of the former Iranian Shah's White Revolution, women became eligible to vote. Thereafter, women won six parliamentary seats at the National Consultative Assembly as opposed to 197 seats for men. Political participation of women has been influenced by many factors and has seen sharp fluctuations (Malekzade, 1997: 165). Before the Islamic Revolution, fluctuations in the political participation of women were mainly a result of the confrontation between tradition and modernity.

During and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the political participation of women was mostly concentrated at the lower levels of the society, including cooperation with new revolutionary institutions. Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the political participation of women was mostly in the form of mass activities. Women's presence in street demos was the most common form of the political participation of women in that period. Of course, due to the role played and influence swayed by religious beliefs, and as a result of the permission issued by the religious scholars and ulema for women to take part in the voting, the political participation of women through taking part in various elections gradually started to rise. At the end of the eight-year war with Iraq, women had widespread presence in many social, cultural and economic areas (Koolaee & Abedi, 2011). As the political atmosphere in the country opened up, women had more breathing room to give voice to their political demands. As shown by statistics and historical experiences, political participation is less of a priority for Iranian women than Iranian men. In addition to political and social developments, cultural and educational structures as well as personal factors also play a remarkable role in determining the political participation of women.

Political Participation of Men and Women

According to some estimates, women account for almost half of the eligible voters. Therefore, a general overview will reveal that in view of their role in elections, the share of women from political power has been meager compared to men. Experience shows that granting suffrage to women has not, per se, led to meaningful increase in the

political participation of women at the elite level. Political participation is intertwined with political behavior. Different factors are at work to shape political behavior of women and encourage their political participation. A major change in the political participation of women can be brought about by, for example, easing their access to education, paving their way into the labor market, encouraging their social and cultural activities, as well as supporting their financial and intellectual independence from both male members of their families, and religious institutions. (Bari, 2005)

Low education, unavailability of equal jobs, limitations on women's social and cultural activities, as well as absence of a democratic system and free elections are major obstacles to the political participation of women. In a country like Iran, where women account for about 60 percent of new admissions to universities, the political participation of people, especially women, is closely related to public culture in the society. Efforts aimed at restricting the political participation of women and blocking their endeavors to achieve high executive posts, have been always under way in traditional societies as well as a religious society like Iran. This situation has been caused by many factors, which include:

1. Formalistic interpretations of religious jurisprudential norms, as well as quoting, interpreting and taking advantage of unreliable religious traditions (*hadith*);
2. Exigencies of time and sufficiency of political participation of men;
3. Wrong traditions dominating social environment and patriarchy. (Tabatabaee and Others, 2008, 152).

In the meantime, a major factor which has restricted informed and active political participation of women has been the degree to which the gender-based attitudes in any society allow for recruitment or release of the effective force of women. To any extent that gender segregation is lower in any society; women in that society will have more latitude to engage in political activities. On the contrary, high degree of gender segregation in the society will make its women more passive and put them under more control. Of course, when it comes to assigning women to key governmental posts, other criteria are also taken into account. A review of political developments in various countries will reveal that even in societies that are more developed in

political and economic terms, there are conflicts about the social role and the status of women. There exists a complicated relationship between the issue of women's role and status in all societies and the level of political development in those societies (Shojaei, 2010: 45).

Political participation is actually intimately linked to education level and political awareness. The level of education, alone, is enough to motivate people to take part in political activities (Shakoor and Others, 2012: 26). During the 2000s, obtaining a university degree became very important to women. This was in turn a result of two major developments in the area of higher education: firstly, emergence of equal opportunities in higher education for all people and, secondly, increased status of women in higher education system, which has been described as a major strength for that system (Aleghafoor, 2009, 175). Of course, education does not always amount to higher political participation. Although the number of educated women has greatly increased compared to their male peers, the rate of the political participation of women has just risen slightly. Other factors, such as skills and interest in political participation are also at work. During the second half of the 2000s, policies were gradually introduced to reduce women's admission to universities, which included a plan for gender segregation and localizing admission of female students to universities.

Women in Political Parties

In order to win the women's votes, many political parties have focused on considering special gender-based quotas for women in various areas. However, there are still unwritten laws, which one way or another, restrict more presence of women within the ranks of political parties. Many of such parties fail to provide suitable conditions for women's activities despite their proclaimed plans. In many cases, political parties pay lip service to women's role and effective political participation, but even then, they seem to be motivated not by a gender-oriented approach, but rather by an instrumentalist one. Even in political parties, women are rarely, if ever, allowed to managerial posts. However, working with political parties usually changes the order of women's priorities. Low number of women in these parties usually renders their efforts for the elimination of discrimination and inequalities futile. Many parties have been mulling establishment of women's commissions in

order to provide better conditions for the promotion of women to higher party ranks.

During the 2000s, the meager share of women from the political power was closely related to their presence in political parties and groups. Women with clear party affiliations or interest in certain political factions played an active role both in giving and collecting votes. This situation has applied to almost all political parties. Studies conducted on the amount of women's participation in political groups and parties in Iran show that among traditional rightist parties, there have been no women anywhere in the ranks of the Society of Combatant Clerics of Tehran. In the Islamic Coalition Party, women's participation in lower levels is almost double that of higher levels. Women have no place in topmost ranks of this party. Within the Islamic Society of Teachers, participation of women has been on the rise in lower ranks, but in decline when it comes to high managerial levels, including in the general assembly, central council, and executive board. In the Islamic Society of Engineers, women are widely present in specialistic ranks of this group, but with regard to leadership, they have no place. Given the political developments in the 2000s and efforts made by radical conservative figures to restrict political activities, the number of women working with political parties dwindled as a result of rising cost of political action.

Among leftist parties, the Assembly of Combatant Clergy of Tehran has had no woman among its ranks. The Executives of Reconstruction Party shows more presence of women at lower and less specialized levels than higher ranks. Women's activities within Islamic Revolution Mojahedeen Organization have been very limited. The Islamic Iran Participation Front was supposed to have women as 30 percent of its members, but that proportion has been never met due to low political participation of women. Women's presence at the central council of Islamic Iran Participation Front has stood at about 16.6 percent. Women's participation has been also low in Islamic Solidarity Party with women being absent from certain ranks. In the Islamic Labor Party, women's activities have been also limited, but proportion of women at the central council has been higher than other parties at the end of the study period (Pishgahi Fard, Dasturi and Ebrahimi, 2009: 23- 27). As the reformist government [of President Mohammad Khatami] came to its end, these conditions further

deteriorated. Following the Islamic Consultative Assembly elections in 2003 and during protests to presidential election result in 2009, these conditions continued to worsen. Just in the same way that women took an active part in 2009 presidential elections, they were also actively present in post-election protests and adamantly defended their political rights. Widespread participation of women in post-election protests in 2009 depicted a remarkable picture of Iranian women's participation in political fields which has had no parallel in similar situations in other West Asian countries.

In addition to the above factors, political participation of women is closely related to their role in the society and/or their role as housewives (Arab Moghaddam, 2007: 119). The maternal role is one of those instances, which makes a lot of difference between political participation of men and women. Therefore, married women with children usually start political and social activities after their children grow up. On the other hand, in all traditional societies, including Iran, general attitude toward political participation by single women is not very positive. There are concerns that political and social participation of women will change their approach to life and change fertility rate in the society. Some researchers put more emphasis on political trust when analyzing political participation, especially following an election (Panahi, 2007. 39). Political trust includes trust in political system and political actors (Shaigan, 2008). Out of all influential factors, the state of welfare, people's satisfaction with their living conditions, and their opinion about government's efforts to boost social and economic welfare have played the highest part in attracting political trust among respondents to opinion polls. In addition to trust in the political system, the result of past elections has a direct impact on people's political trust and their interest in political participation.

The lower participation of women in elections does not mean that they have been deprived of the right to vote, or their political awareness is inferior to men. It is the result of the fact that women are not very interested in politics and political participation. According to a study conducted in 2002 in five universities of Tehran by Dr. Ommol Banin Chaboki, who teaches at Al-Zahra University, girls do not generally see themselves as being effective in political process (Chaboki, 2002: 107- 128). Therefore, they usually don't get involved in political issues and, compared to boys, start paying attention to

political issues in later stages. The study results revealed that women were less interested in political jobs. This behavior proves that political participation of women is not much different from men when it comes to the masses, but at the level of the elite, there is a meaningful difference. Some studies conducted in the past decade have indicated that the amount of interest in political matters, the sense of political efficiency, interest in political information, or willingness to enter any kind of political debate is much lower among women compared to men. Another remarkable finding of Dr. Chaboki's research at Al-Zahra University was that boys are usually attracted to political issues at a lower age than girls and many of them persistently follow political issues. They publish and criticize more political materials in student periodicals than girls and are more actively present in election campaigns.

In order to facilitate their political activities, Iranian women have been trying to establish political institutions of their own. According to a report by Ministry of Interior, such institutions include the Association of Women Journalists of Iran, the Society of Zeinab (AS), the Society of Islamic Revolution Women, the Islamic Society of Women of Isfahan, the Society of Fatemiyoun, the Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran Women, the Islamic Society of Women, the Society for the Protection of Women's Human Rights, the Islamic Society of Women Following the Path of Hazrat Zahra (AS), the Society of Muslim Women, the Society of Followers of Zeinab (AS), the Society of Messenger Women, the Society of Reformist Muslim Women, the Society of Women Supporting Islamic Revolution, the Women's Party of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Society of Women in Khorasan, the Society for the Exchange of Information on Women, and the Islamic Assembly of Women (Interior Ministry, 2013).

Conclusion

The fact that no woman has ever been appointed as member of the Guardian Council or member of the Expediency Council, or even at the Islamic Consultative Assembly no woman has been so far elected as deputy speaker or speaker of the Majlis, and no woman has been so far appointed as the Islamic Republic of Iran's ambassador to another country, does not mean that there is any written legal obstacle that

would prevent women from occupying such posts. However, women's political participation at the level of the elites faces many particularly sticky cultural, social, and economic challenges in practice, which leave their negative mark on mass political participation of women, especially among educated women. As some theoreticians have pointed out, political leaders or political structures can set limits and control political participation by certain groups of people even when no legal prohibition or restrictive general policy exists against such activities. This behavior will have a more powerful influence on women.

Dealing with the recognized right of women for political participation in this way will increase their pessimism about existence of necessary conditions for their political participation. The Iranian Constitution, as is often the case with its counterparts in other countries, has specified general principles that govern all-out participation by all people, including women, in social and political affairs. Article 8 of the Iranian Constitution has ruled out all kinds of discrimination between men and women for taking part in determining their political, economic, social and cultural fate. Also, Article 20 of the same Constitution says women can enjoy all human, political, economic, social and cultural rights within the bounds of the Islamic norms.

A qualitative and quantitative study of the political participation of women in the 2000s will show that the political participation of women in that decade was characterized with many ups and downs. Although the political participation of women is an important factor in the development of all human societies, its actual reach goes far beyond the issue of development alone. This means that in addition to being related to political and social development, it is also linked to a set of other factors. As such, both the public culture and the political culture have direct effects on the political participation of women.

Although there is no legal ban on the Iranian women to run for president, the patriarchal interpretation of the law has actually barred them from being nominated for presidency. For this reason, when it comes to representing people, the political participation of women has been limited to membership in the Islamic councils of the cities and villages. Through their political participation, Iranian women have always played a role in forming the power structure, but have been never able to get a fair share of that power. They are still facing multiple obstacles for achieving their true status in the power hierarchy. Many

factors from personal views of women to social expectations, as well as women's viewpoints on their biological requirements, have been effective in determining their share of power. On the other hand, institutionalization of a gender-based form of division of labor in the society and incorrect interpretations of religious principles, have been very effective in shaping women's ideas about their capacities. Many of them have accepted this presumption that special conditions that arise from masculinity or femininity are part of the human nature, just like other factors that biologically differentiate men from women.

In a transitional society like Iran, concerns about the political participation of women are more serious. Iranian women have been able to fulfill their traditional duties and roles appropriately, while remaining reactive to political developments around them and playing their political and social roles any time they have been required to do so. It seems that a not-so-long way is ahead of us before gender-based expectations of women and viewpoints about their rights, obligations and political participation change in the Iranian society.

Another factor, which has greatly reduced efficiency of women, is their negligible experience in various professional and specialistic fields. Absence or inadequacy of necessary funds is also one of the most important obstacles on the way of effective political participation of women at high levels of power. Due to being economically dependent on men – since in Iran men are often the main breadwinners in families – women have no access to adequate and independent financial resources to carry out political activities. Long working hours that characterize political activities, which are particularly suited to social roles played by men, pose a serious challenge to women who want to simultaneously fulfill their obligations as wives and mothers as well.

Frequent experiences have shown that women's presence at top levels of power, especially with regard to decision-making sphere, has been unremarkable. There is also a great deal of evidence to back this general concept in Iran that "where there is power, women are absent." Working environments that are suitable to men are not helpful for providing grounds for women to get engaged in political activities. Lack of trust in politics and historical distrust toward politicians are other barriers that discourage participation of Iranian women in political activities. Like many other countries in the world, the number of Iranian women in top executive posts is quite low and the sphere of politics is still an area largely dominated by men.

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