

PERCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS SANCTION AND RELIGIOUS CODE BY IRANIAN WOMEN- AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The present study reports the perceptual analysis about religious sanctions and religious attitude among Iranian women. A total of 880 Iranian women randomly selected from Esfahan city for the present study. They were administered 2 sets of questions on religious sanctions and attitude. The data was collected in one session by contacting individually each respondent in Esfahan city. The data were subjected to chi-square test analysis and following results were observed. as far the religious sanction is considered, it was found that women were allowed to be the head of the family (92.7%), head of the office (97%), wear uniform other than veil (95.7%), work outside the family (96.9%), going for higher studies (98%), and so on. It was found that religious sanctions were not rigorous as in other fundamental countries. Iranian women were significantly positive in their perceptions on religious sanctions, where majority of them had optimistic view to a greater extent, and to a smaller extent on participation in political and social affairs. As far as the religious codes are considered, Iranian women had quite restricted perception in wearing veil and performing prayers and worships. On the whole we could see a liberal view of Iranian women on religious sanctions and attitude. These aspects have been critically discussed.

Key words: Iranian women, religious sanction and religious code.

Introduction

Islam places a high status on the responsibility of women. Muslim women play the role of being the backbone and vital element in the establishment of society. Historically, the role of the woman was to be a queen residing in her home - to make it comfortable for her husband. Her sole duties were to take care of the children, cook, clean, and cater to the needs of her family. "The most important role for a woman is motherhood. This special role that Allah has created for her, affords her honor and respect in Islam" (Hamdam). In scores of less developed nations, this perceived 'slave-like behavior' is still the main slogan. However, volumes of Islamic history state that it was quite prevalent for women to play a dual role: they could be called upon to guard their country as soldiers in war while at the same time, continue to work or even to maintain a household as a home maker. Unfortunately, many of those established traditions are still ingrained in countless Muslim regions globally, and have a direct correlation with the culture of the area and not to the religion practiced there (Competition forum, 2006).

In many ways, the Iranian revolution has brought to the fore the discrepancy between reality and mental perceptions. But in no other respect has the inconsistency been more apparent than in the private and social lives of women. Soon after the revolution, Iranian women came to discover the gap between the reality before them and the expectations that had prompted them to take an active role in the course of the revolution. They also realized the challenge that this gap was to pose before them. It is because of the impact of the events resulting from this historical challenge that many believe that the revolution has given birth to a kind of paradox in the life of the Iranian women.

As will be pointed out below, because of the revolution, women have gained greater influence and power to the extent that religious leaders have been persuaded to legitimize female participation in social and political processes. Yet because of the attitude that dominates the legislative circles and preserves the laws based on gender discrimination, women have continued to be treated as second class citizens. The question is whether the situation created by the imperatives of the process of transition of Iranian society from conditions of underdevelopment and domination of traditions to that of development and modernity can promise the final resolution to this paradox and bring about a fundamental reconsideration of the demands of women in the third decade of the life of the revolutionary system.

The fact is that the current economic, social and political conditions of Iranian society have called upon women to play new roles that are essentially different from what their status in a traditional and underdeveloped social system would warrant. Yet what has created a crisis in the area of women's legal rights is the imbalance that exists in the process of development and certain approaches to the question of development. In other words, while the legal system has its roots in the period of traditionalism, the economic, social and cultural attributes of society are undergoing a process of transformation. As a result, the legal system is no longer capable of responding to the needs of this transitioning period of political, economic, social and cultural reality. The influence of religion on women's gender role attitudes is well documented in the social science literature (Bartkowski 1999; Bartkowski and Read 2003; Hardacre 1997; Hartman and Hartman 1996; Heaton and Cornwall 1989; Lehrer 1995; Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992; Sherkat 2000; Thornton, Alwin, and Camburn 1983; Wilcox and Jelen 1991).

Women who belong to and participate in conservative denominations are typically more traditional in their gender role orientations than are those with weaker religious ties. Nationalistic, secular and reformist movements that, despite the risk of incessant onslaughts by religious and traditionalist extremists, increasingly insist on their democratic demands have come to appreciate the significant role of women in the process of transfer of power. Yet there still exists a large group of traditionalist zealots holding key positions in the country who reject that fact. From their point of view, women's rights and human rights activists are no more than rootless seculars, infatuated with modernity and Western permissiveness, whose intended reforms are bound to endanger the foundations of the religion, culture, family and society.

Since the success of the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, images of Iranian women have come to epitomize the worst kind of retrogressive oppression, symbolized by compulsory veiling, polygyny, and the exclusion of women from public life. With the spread of Islamist movements and their unprecedented attention to women's roles and position, these images have been sobering for women activists and others who concern themselves with women's issues in many societies. There have been researches on employment, divorce, and family that partially and indirectly are related to the issues of women. There are also some descriptive studies on the rural women, tribal women, special women and addiction in women though none of these studies and researches has directly examined the perception of religious sanction and religious code of women in emerging Iran for a modern world. Present study examines how a selected women sample from Iran perceives about religious sanction and codes.

Method

Sample

The sample population is drawn from the entire parts of Esfahan city, that's why, clustering sampling is adopted. To achieve the goal the researcher considered the latest census of year 2006 with regarded the Esfahan province on the basis of three classifications as low, medium and high density of population. Then two provinces from each division and one city and village from each province were selected at random. Due to the statistics 2006 on the city settlement ratio, 76.3 percent of the samples are selected from city dwellers, 23.8% from villages.

Procedure

The data collection on was done in a single setting. The required data was collected through administering the tools. The interview was held during the leisure time of the respondents in a free and congenial atmosphere. The researcher informed every respondent the objective of the study and established a rapport with the respondent to collect the required and relevant data. Further, an attempt was made to collect the required secondary data through discussion with the respondents. They were given clear instructions and were asked to give true responses in the sheet provided. Whenever they had doubt in understanding the question, the researcher made them clear by their local language.

Once the data were collected, they were verified for completeness and scores were assigned and a master chart was prepared. Later the master chart was fed to the computer, and with the help of SPSS for Windows, chi-square tests were employed for the analysis for responses on various statements on religious sanction and religious codes.

Results

The obtained results for differences in responses for various statements on religious sanctions and codes, along with the test statistics are presented in tables 1 and 2.

a. Religious sanction

Table 1 Frequency and percent responses for various statements on religious sanction the results of chi-square test

Sl. no	Statements	Frequency	Percent	Chi-square	P value
1	Whether Islam permits a woman to head the family?	816	92.7	646.62	.000
2	Whether Islam permits a woman to head an office or institution?	854	97.0	779.07	.000
3	Whether Islam permits a woman to wear a uniform dress other than veil?	842	95.7	734.56	.000
4	Whether Islam permits a Woman to Work Outside the Family?	853	96.9	775.31	.000
5	Whether Islam permits a woman to go for higher studies?	862	98.0	809.47	.000
6	Whether Islam permits a woman to go for Islamic studies?	777	88.3	516.22	.000
7	Whether Islam permits a woman to take independent decision?	796	90.5	576.07	.000
8	Whether Islam permits a woman to take part in political and other social institutions?	622	70.7	150.56	.000

When the respondents were asked whether Islam permits a woman to head the family, 92.7% indicated ‘yes’, 97% of them indicated that Islam permits a woman to head an office or institution, 95.7% opined ‘yes’ for Islam permitting a woman to wear uniform dress other than veil, 96.9% of them indicated that Islam permits a woman to work outside the family, 98% for higher studies, 88.% for Islamic studies, 90.5% for taking independent decision, and lastly 70.7% of the respondents indicated that Islam permits a woman to take part in political and other social institutions.

b. Religious codes

Table 2 Frequency and percent responses for various statements on religious code for women the results of chi-square test

Sl no	Statement		VI	I	SI	NI	NAI	X ²	P value
1	One has to observe prayers for Three times strictly	F	742	95	24	-	19	1667.85	.000
		%	84.3	10.8	2.7	-	2.2		
2	One should observe fast strictly and compulsorily during Ramadan month	F	638	186	34	7	15	1637.44	.000
		%	72.5	21.1	3.9	0.8	1.7		
3	One should wear veil compulsorily	F	390	269	209	6	6	643.94	.000
		%	44.3	30.6	23.8	0.7	0.7		
4	Woman are allowed to enter tomb of the Muslim saints	F	162	177	364	146	31	326.51	.000
		%	18.4	20.1	41.4	16.6	3.5		
5	Woman can perform worship with offerings	F	146	114	270	251	99	142.81	.000
		%	16.6	13.0	30.7	28.5	11.3		

Note: VI-Very important, I-Important; SI_Some what important; NI-Not important; NAI-not at all important

When the opinions on statements of religious practices were verified, following trends were observed. 84.3% of the sample had indicated that observing prayer for three times strictly is very important, 72.5% of them indicated that observing fast strictly and compulsorily during the month of Ramadan is very important, 44.3% of opined that one should wear the veil compulsorily is very important, 41.4% of the sample opined that women may be allowed to enter the tomb of the Muslim saints is somewhat important, and 30.7% of the sample opined that women may perform worship with offerings is somewhat important. The chi-square values obtained for all the statements indicating significant differences between frequencies of responses.

DISCUSSION**Main findings of the present study**

1. Iranian women were significantly positive in their perceptions on religious sanctions, where majority of them had optimistic role to a greater extent, and to a smaller extent on participation in political and social affairs.
2. As far as the religious codes are considered, Iranian women had quite restricted perception in wearing veil and performing prayers and worships.
3. On the whole we could see a quite liberal view of Iranian women on religious sanctions and attitude.

It was observed that 84.3% of the sample had indicated that observing prayer for three times strictly is very important, 72.5% of them indicated that observing fast strictly and compulsorily during the month of Ramadan is very important, 44.3% of opined that one should wear the veil compulsorily is very important, 41.4% of the sample opined that women may be allowed to enter the tomb of the Muslim saints is somewhat important, and 30.7% of the sample opined that women may perform worship with offerings is somewhat important. A recent study by Aghili (2008) indicated that Female professionals were found to be more religious in nature of God, formal religion, prayer and worship, spirits and spirit world and total Religious Attitudes.

Iranian feminist are actively involved in a social movement; this movement emerged out of a populist mass movement, i.e. the Islamic Revolution that instead of fulfilling their demands made the discriminations and inequalities worse for women. The regime could not close the whole society after the end of Iran-Iraq war and the hibernated demands came out of every corner of the society, even the religious base of the government. Women played a central role in years after 1996 in the reform movement that then led to domination of the reformists in the Iranian parliament, municipalities and presidential office.

Meanwhile, the Iranian woman has borne the brunt of pressures needed to arrive at this stage. Before the revolution, a number of reforms for instance in the laws relating to marriage and divorce, were legislated in favor of women. These reforms, on the whole, came from the top of the state apparatus. At the time, the political and cultural elite discovered that in view of the long-standing contact with modernist ideals and the appearance of educated women at various levels of employment, the traditional legal structure could hardly meet the needs of women for protection within the structure of the family. Moreover, to meet the imperatives of population control, the state exerted such a policy, providing the means for family planning that, in turn, enabled women to become socially more active. In the corpus of laws legislated in response to the need for creation of new employment and social opportunities for women, the Iranian women were granted the right to sit as judges. They also could volunteer for military service and spend their period of conscription as "soldiers of knowledge" (village teachers) or "soldiers of health" (village doctors) in remote rural areas. This gave many girls their first opportunity to experience an independent life.

Before Muslim women enter into the global village, a framework needs to be formulated to assist them in achieving, acceptance within their societies. Women are a greatly underutilized asset for economic development in Muslim countries. Muslims need to take a fresh look at the world and at their collective selves (Khan, 2000) and realize that future success lies ; in the ability of Muslim women to overcome past repressions and move forward to continue to progress on the world stage. Foreign disturbances and influences experienced by millions of Muslim women are causing many to become more involved in the workplace and in present-day society than ever before. Regardless of the chosen society, mere is a shared philosophy which states a society without the working power of women is an incomplete society.

Today, the bone of contention between the reformists and the traditionalists is the fateful subject of political development. The moderators have ever thought about limiting the absolute rights of divorce, which remain the sole prerogative of men. While the majority of the Iranian women naturally have sided with the reformists, it is still hard to deny the fact that they have a long, arduous and hazardous way to go before they have the appropriate channels for the expression of their views in the form of independent civil societies and formations. Numerous messages of cross-cultural cooperation are shaping the global image of Muslim women worldwide - reaching communities with roots in hundreds of nations. Whether it is from the bedouins to the boardrooms, furthering knowledge of the world requires nations to know and understand one another. It is said that Islam is a melting pot for all races and ethnic identities, therefore accepting cultural cues is crucial for the stability, success, and sustenance of all Muslim women.

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