

The Views of the Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran about Women*

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Introduction

31 years have been passed from the victory of Islamic Revolution of Iran. Countless papers, essays, or thesis have been written in analysing the Revolution. They talk about 'how' and 'why' the revolution happened from various perspectives. How did the Shah of Iran collapse in front of bare hands, despite the support of the super-powers that he had? What are the causes and factors involved in the emergence of the Revolution? And so on.

The object of this paper is to bring out the significant role of women in Islamic Revolution in Iran, by focusing on the view of the Leader of Islamic Republic of Iran (Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei) and the implementation of their views in the daily life of Iranian women after the revolution. Hopefully we can take lessons and spirit from this phenomenon and apply them –with some modifications, off course—in moslem countries, especially Indonesia.

The Role of Women in Islamic Revolution of Iran

Revolution can be defined as the collapse of the political order and its replacement by a new one.¹ Islamic Revolution led by Imam Khomeini toppled the monarchi Shah Reza Pahlevi and installed an Islamic Republic. Both the leaders, Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, have the same opinion that women is half of the population and because of that, no revolution or any social movement will be succeed without the participation of women. And both of them, hold on one opinion, that is the key of the succeed of the Revolution is the spirit of Islam.

As said by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979,

“This was a transformation that a human being could not bring about, this was a divine transformation; He who changes hearts did this. He removed the fear of this regime, which all the people harboured, from their hearts and put in its place determination and bravery, such that women and children as well as men all rose up to fight. Has there ever been such a time when women rushed into the fray like this, standing fast before tanks and cannons?”²

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¹ Arjomand (2000:87)

² Khomeini (English version, 2001)

Ayatollah Khamenei said,

*"We must not forget the activities which women performed, particularly direct confrontations. Iranian women were able to turn into a revolutionary, political, conscious fighting element through their conscious faith ... Truly, women never lagged behind in any area or on any battleground."*³

Now let us look back at the causes of the Revolution. There are many views on it. But, as stated by Zanjani, Shah Pahlevi decision to put a de-Islamization policies was the essential cause of the Revolution.⁴ Pahlevi was an U.S. and UK puppet regime. He obeyed the direction of the West to 'modernize' Iran. He performed various modernization efforts, such as 'freedom' for Iranian women to obtain jobs in government and commercial offices, go to the university, and engage in a number of professions which had been closed to them until then. They were given the right to vote and to be elected to the Parliament.⁵ Reza Khan said, "We have broken te prison bars! Now the freed prisoners can make beautiful homes intead of cages."⁶

But, 'modernization' and 'freedom' in the Western view is different with the Islamic view. Yes, it was a kind of progress when women can get a job, go to the university, or have right to vote. But, along with that, the Shah built cabarets and dance hall, bars, recreational centers, and swimming pools which 'in the service of degenerating young generation and beguiling the women'.⁷ In this situation, the women became commodity to pleasure the men.

In Shariati 's opinion, this situation is a kind of Western imperialism. Iranian women (at that time) had became the victim of cultural imperialism. They had been used as a promotional tool of Western goods production. They are exploited as a tool to change the social order; to destroy the Islamic value, and degrading their own value from a society builder to a doll with "empty-headed with an impotent spirit".⁸ In Shariati's words, "Reza Shah became the champion of women's liberation while his real intention was to divert our minds from thinking about real freedom and to turn our society into a market for imperialist production."⁹

In 1935, Shah Reza proclaimed his decision to unveiling the Iranian women.¹⁰ He ordered his forces to strip the hejab and *chador* of any women wearing them in the street. This raised ire of the clergies throughout Iran. They led demonstration to protest the Shah's action. Pahlevi faced this demonstrations with weapons and brutality. One of the massacre happened at that time is in the *Kawhar Shah* Mosque, where many women and clergies got killed. The women then took the fight by not going out of the

³ Khaz Ali (2010)

⁴ Haghighat (2000:256)

⁵ Shahidian (2002:101).

⁶ Khomeini (English version, 2001)

⁷ ibid

⁸ Shariati, quoted by Shahidian (2002:90).

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Ibid: 110

house. They stayed inside their house until 1941. If they needed to meet with other women or relatives, they did it in the roofs of their houses.¹¹

This is what Imam called 'a divine transformation'. The firmness of the Iranian women in holding on the Islamic values is the important factor of the succeed of the Revolution. The awareness of the issue of women from Islamic perspective is added strenght to Iranian women. They believe that they are belongs to a holy war to save their belief, their people, and also their identity. These women even more powerful because they embody the purity, power, and commitment of their community.¹²

The significant role of women in the Revolution was also stated by Povey (2007). She revealed two types of civil society organizations which are quite influential in Iran, namely the trade unions and women's NGOs. According to Povey, although women's NGOs are not involved in the structural reform efforts, their effect on the institutional strength was crucial to the democratization process. In addition, Khosrokhavar (2007) pointed out that there are three important social movement in Iran: the youth movement, the intellectual movement, and the women's movement. All three are very instrumental in modernizing the Iranian society and partially prompted the Islamic Revolution.¹³

So, when women were able to identify the values of Islam that must be fought for, that is where their strength up. This is what is called by Shahidian *heightened self-worth* which empowers women and emancipates them from any barriers such as fear, fragility, or egoism. When the women could identify their role in communtiy, they get the power to expand their activity and responsibility. They do not just think about their household, but far beyond it. In Rommelspacher words, they will "liberate themselves from the constraints of the family and also from a relatively self-referential existence".¹⁴

This phenomenon is related to what the Ayatollah Khamenei has stated,

"In an Islamic society, men and women enjoy sufficient freedom. Islamic works which exist in this regard and the equal social duties which Islam has assigned to men and women bear testimony to this fact. Prophet Muhammad (s.w.a) said: "One who spends a night without caring about the affairs of Muslims is not a Muslim." What the Holy Prophet (s.w.a) said is not limited to men only. Women should also feel responsible towards the affairs of Muslims, the Islamic society, the world of Islam, and everything that happens in the world. This is an Islamic duty."

This is the factor that encourage Iranian women to go to the streets against the Shah. They integrate the principles of Islam, the call of Islamic freedom, and the spirit of 'jihad' (serving Islam). With with great courage, they rallied in the streets to protest the Shah. That was why Ayatollah Khomeini said, "Our uprising is indebted to women. Men took the example of the women into the streets. Women encouraged the men to revolt, and

¹¹ Khaz Ali (2010)

¹² Shahidian 2002:15

¹³ Bradley 2007:27

¹⁴ Shahidian 2002:56.

sometimes even led the way. Woman is a wonderful creature. She possesses fiendish, strong [and] passionate capabilities.”¹⁵

The Iranian Leader View on Women’s Role in Society

In Islamic view, women and men are having the equality, but not sameness and uniformity. Therefore, Islam opposed Western view of feminism, which seek identity of sexes. Muthahari stated, “Islam outlines equality of rights between men and women, but Islam does not agree on the similarities of rights between the two, but also, Islam does not outlines the similarities of responsibility and punishment between man and women.”¹⁶

In his speech in front of the women scholars and top personalities, Ayatollah Khamenei identified two important points regarding women. One, position of women in life and society. Second, position of women in their family.¹⁷

a. Position of Women in Life and Society

About the women’s position in society, Ayatollah Khamenei criticized Western society that puts women in a position as a creature that can be exploited by men. In Western culture, if a woman wants to get a good position in society, she must show sexual attraction. She must come up with clothes that attract attention the public eye. “In my opinion, this is the greatest deprivation that occurs over a woman. In this environment, women are the exploited,” said Ayatollah Khamenei.

Ayatollah Khamenei criticized the Western banning of hijab in the name of ‘pluralism’. According to him, the hijab is not a mere religious symbol, but rather an ideology that sees women as being noble. With hijab, women will be recognized as herself, not as a creature that could be exploited for the sake of men. The anti-hijab ideology is an ideology that wants to exploit women. “That is why today we see the fate of women in the world is very bad. Women trafficking is rampant and become the fastest growing businesses today,” said Ayatollah Khamenei.

Therefore, both Leader agree on on the same view: women must return to Islamic values in order to achieve independence, free from exploitation of men, and to have a starring role in building a glorious civilization.

“A woman is not a thing, but a great human being who raises and cares for society. Her embrace is the creator of men. She is the nursemaid of humankind, and the source of the people’s compassion and happiness,” said Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁸

In other occasion, Ayatollah Khomeini said,

The role of women in the world enjoys certain special characteristics. The rectitude or immorality of a society stems from the rectitude of immorality of the women in

¹⁵ Khaz Ali 2010

¹⁶ Muthahhari (Indonesian version, 2000:74)

¹⁷ The speech is uploaded in you tube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN0vah1uamY>

¹⁸ Khomeini (English version, 2001)

*that society. Women are the only creatures who can bestow upon society individuals raised in their care whose deeds can be a blessing to communities and can inspire perseverance and lofty human values, or can have the opposite effect.*¹⁹

b. Position of Women in Family

Ayatollah Khamenei acknowledged that unfortunately, many muslim women are still facing the unfair behavior of their husbands. However, this is not caused by Islamic rules. On the contrary, Islam strongly encourages the noble and affection attitude toward women. Ayatollah Khamenei quoted some hadiths related to the position of women in the family. Prophet Muhammad SAW said, “*Al mar’atu sayyidatu baytiha*” (women are the most noble in her family). Imam Ali said, “*Al mar’atu rayhaanah laysat wa bi qahrimaanah*” (women are something fragrant and not workers). Prophet Muhammad SAW said, “The best among you is the best reply behavior toward female (wife).”

Ayatollah Khamenei said, “Words like these are very much scattered in the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams. However, unfortunately not much practiced. Therefore, its implementation must be supported by legislation, law, and execution. It is this for years, unfortunately not done by Muslims.”

Ayatollah Khamenei reminded that what is lacking in the muslim community does not necessarily indicate the advantages of Western society. On the contrary, data shows that many women in the West are treated badly, experiencing domestic violence, and become victims of women trafficking and neglect. Because of it, a deficiency in Muslim society is not addressed by seeking a model from the West but by digging back Islamic values and apply them properly.

The legislation mentioned by the Ayatollah Khamenei is not limited to theory alone, but has applied by Iran. For example, about the right to obtain a job for women. Imam Khomeini said, “Of course there is no objection to women taking up employment, sound employment, but we do not want a repeat of the way it was during the Pahlavi era. Then they did not have employment in mind for women, rather their aim was to degrade both men and women, pulling them down from that position they occupy.”²⁰

With this paradigm, Iran has been established appropriate laws. For instance, article 39 and 75 of Labor Law of Iran stated that:

- for the implementation of the same work under similar circumstances, and in the same workplace, men and women should earn the same salary.
- the job is dangerous and should not be left to the weight of female employees.

The Worker Protection Act mentioned that the main female role and work is in the family. Based on this starting point of the view, some articles in the Law on the Protection of Women Workers give great support to women workers so that they can still perform their function as mothers. Among others, chapters 76 and 78 stated that:

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ Khomeini (English version, 2001)

- Women workers are entitled to maternity leave and childbirth, and are entitled to a childcare facility during working hours
- Workplace that has a female employee, must give a half hour every three hours, to women to breastfeed their children, until the child is aged two years and a half hours of leave should be counted as hours worked.²¹

This is the real freedom that a moslem women should achieve: freedom to defend their rights on the basis of Islamic principles. As Azzam Taleghani, one of key figure-woman in the Revolution, puts it; it was after the Revolution Iranian women gain their real freedom. "We have come a long way to achieve our rights. We are now engaged in all areas of life, social, cultural, political, economic," said Taleghani.²²

Conclusion

As stated by Ayatollah Khamenei, half of every country's population and human resources is comprised of women. So if a moslem country wants to make development and progression towards the quality of its life, that country should focus on right conception about realities of this world, about the nature of men and women and their responsibilities. If there is a misconception about women, such as put women as an exploitative creature, progressive will not be achieved. And for the woman herself, she should be aware of her position, rights, and responsibilities from an Islamic perspective so she could fight for the betterment of her nation and *ummah*.

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²¹ Quoted from Dina Y. Sulaeman's paper (2005)

²² Siddique 2002:152

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