

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Empowerment of rural women in east of Iran: Situations and problems**

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## **Abstract**

**Two main goals of sustainable development are increasing capabilities of human race and expansion of people choices in their lives. Despite the increasing awareness of the great potentials of women in development, women all over developing countries still face the age-old problems of neglect, inequality, lack of access to productive resources and dependency on men. It is sad to note that despite the level of civilization in the world, gender inequality and disparities between men and women are still prominent in many developing countries. Empowerment is a process in each woman's life but is also a process occurring over time in a society. Rural women cooperatives are the main local based organizations for empowering female gender in villages of Iran that had very successful performances during last two decades. In this article, author investigated various aspects of empowerment rural women by these cooperatives in South-Khorasan province, east of Iran, with emphasizing on their current empowerment situations and problems and finally present approaches for bettering them. For achieving this purpose, after a wide literature review in related contexts in world and Iran, author did a broad field research work during 2014 – 2016 on rural women cooperatives of South Khorasan province. The research design used for this study was a descriptive-analytical method. The population for the study consisted of the managers and the board of directors of these rural women cooperatives in 2014 – 2016 (about 120 rural women). Data gathering method in this study was census. Main instrument for data collection was questionnaire. Also qualitative research methods of data collection such as participation, discussion, interviewing, documentations and observation were been used. In the end, presented ways and approaches that we must do for strengthening empowerment of rural women.**

**Key words: Empowerment, rural women, cooperatives, situations, problems, Iran.**

## **Introduction**

“You can tell condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.”- By- Jawaharlal Nehru.

Men & women both are two wheels of society and contribution of both is very essential for building healthy nation (Mehta A. & Mehta M. C., 2011).

Women's' contribution to the farming sector in respect of operation and decision making has largely been ignored (Sharma, Singh, & Singh Solanki, 2014).

Rural women are extensively involved in agricultural activities. It is well established fact that these women participate in agricultural operations like manuring, weeding, land preparation, hoeing, sowing and taking care of standing crops, harvesting, threshing, home and animal care. Men and women work together in farm activities, but

the extent of participation of women is higher than men. Majority of the world's agricultural producers are women. Women's role becomes all the more important in the traditional society, where the livelihood of the people is still dependent on cultivation. Due to the lack of gender sensitive data collection women's contributions and concerns remain invisible. Women's work and women's jobs are undervalued in comparison to those done by men (Fartyal & Rathore, 2014).

Rural woman constitutes to the family, which leads to society and nation. Social and economic development of women is necessary for overall economic development of any society or a country (Behara & Niranjana, 2012). Rural women are not as aware and literate as to handle all the legal and other formalities involving in loan taking and establishing an Industrial Unit. They also lack confidence in their ability to run the entrepreneurship. They need capacity building and training in functional areas such as finance, literacy skills, marketing, production and managerial skills (Mehta A. & Mehta M. C., 2011).

It has become widely recognized that women's multiple home and market roles are of critical importance, both to households and communities as well as for national development goals. Development practitioners have become concerned about the ability of women to balance their increased economic activities with existing home maintenance and reproduction responsibilities (Bakhsh, Neumann, Paolisso, Trostle, & Jansen, 2009). The only urgent need is to create a favorable atmosphere to increase self-employment for women and over all developments of the country (Mehta A. & Mehta M. C., 2011).

Economic empowerment of women leads to development of family and community especially in changing climatic conditions which had a direct and indirect impact on economic conditions of a family. It is a well-established fact that in changing climatic conditions a combination of farm and non-farm income at household level provides resilience against adverse situations in either of the sectors, where women play an important role (Sandhu & Singh, 2012).

Empowerment in the context of women's development is a way of defining, challenging and overcoming barriers in a woman's life through which she increases her ability to shape her life and environment. It is an active, multidimensional process which should enable women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life (Rathod & Damodhar, 2015).

Rural development was earlier associated only with agricultural economy but in recent years non-farm rural economy is an integral part too. Non-farm sector can be defined as all those activities associated with wage work, self-employment in activities that are not directly derived from crop and livestock production but located in rural areas. It may include manufacturing, agro processing, accumulative (setting a small business), adaptive in terms of switching from cash crop cultivation to commodity trading, coping or survival as a response to conflict. Studies show that productivity and profitability in non-farm

sector is generally higher than in farm sector (Sandhu & Singh, 2012).

With considering above mentioned issues, main research questions of this study are as following:

1. What are the viewpoints of the respondents about empowering role and development effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province?
2. What works and attempts must be done for bettering empowering role and development effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province?

### **Literature review (Important research works on the rural women empowerment)**

Khurshid (2016) in his research showed that Women's education has become a major site for international development interests and projects in developing and Muslim countries. International development paradigms present education for women as being central to gender empowerment as well as to economic, social, and political progress for developing countries. The paradigm presents gender equality as an issue of access to resources and institutions such as schools and labor markets. This gender parity approach presumes that if we educate more women, then this will translate into more women entering the labor market, which in turn will translate into greater gender equality. Education can produce contested practices of gender equality through providing educated women access to new roles in public spaces while further integrating them in the domestic sphere. Empowerment of educated women may subject them to higher standards of domesticity and family responsibilities. Indeed, the impact of education is about more than providing access to the labor market and public mobility. In addition, it shows why the educational policies aiming to support gender equality should pay attention to the relations not only between men and women but also among differentially positioned women (Khurshid, 2016).

Yazdanpanah *et al.* (2015) in their research revealed that life skills could make an important contribution to the promotion of health and well-being. Rural people constitute a major part of the population of low-income countries. These people often do not have access to basic needs, education, health care and sanitation, and lack knowledge and skills. Consequently, life-skill-related problems are more common in rural areas. Health education and training are among the most powerful tools for rural development. When rural people are involved in the identification of their own problems and needs, they are more likely to support actions needed to address the situation (Yazdanpanah, Safari, Vafaei, & Zandi, 2015).

Plazinic and Jovic (2014) discussed that for a long time, the female populations in rural areas have been recognized in different policies as a vulnerable social group. In this case, the vulnerability is the complex multidimensional form of economic and social dominated deprivation faced by women in rural areas worldwide.

Economic deprivation is related to the higher unemployment rate and lower income of women compared to men. Social deprivation is related to less frequent participation in social activities and different roles compared to men in terms of household and family care (Plazinic & Jovic, 2014).

Ghaderi and Henderson (2012) in their research revealed that politically and socially, the 1979 revolution was a turning point and led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic which is a theocratic state governed by Islamic principles and Shariah law. Religion is thus all-pervasive and determines how life is lived in a patriarchal society where women are expected to be submissive. Agricultural chores are customarily the domain of rural women and children, but modest mechanization has given them more time for other work and some of this is connected to tourism. Results of their research were also solicited about the role of women in tourism, government support in developing tourism in the village and understanding of and perceived barriers to sustainable tourism development. An advantage for several was the chances offered to women due to the fact that most tourism enterprises were family-based and small scale. Women had once been confined to agricultural labor and the making of handicrafts, but tourism development afforded other opportunities; this could enhance their status in society and lead to a degree of emancipation. Rural tourism can modify gender roles and relationships within communities, giving women greater independence and a stronger sense of identity. Money was earned by females from the making and sale of handicrafts and cooked foods and operating home-stay accommodation. Economic rewards for locals were, however, comparatively small and it was calculated that less than 10% of village residents depended on tourism for their livelihoods (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012).

Zhang (2012) in his research revealed that rural migrant women readily depart from peasant identity, rejecting the traditionally identity, and at the same time draw up boundaries against other rural migrants in different contexts. The boundaries they draw, however, are not static, but are fluid and ever changing in different circumstances and contexts. Migration involves more than a shift in physical location. It influences all stages of the life course of rural women regardless of whether they are migrants, migrant returnees or non-migrants. Migration offers rural women both challenges and new spaces in negotiating their identity and sense of belonging. It is through this process of denouncing, recognizing and drawing on the boundaries of Self and Other that rural migrant women start to redefine the meaning of being a rural migrant woman. The processes of the construction and deconstruction of identities form the very scenes of agency. Although the process is conditioned by structural forces, they cannot determine it. Although identities are shaped by circumstances, they are also capable of reorganizing actions in ways that can transform the circumstances (Zhang, 2014).

Yuerlita (2017) in her research revealed that women's participation in Indonesia during the decision-making

process in rural projects remains low. This is due to their low educational background. Institutional arrangements at the village level in terms of organizations that exist in the community do not encourage women to participate more actively. Only a few women are involved in the village-level organization. In fact, women who engage in the organizational activities also do not make much contribution to the decision-making process. Religious beliefs and practices also do not influence women to participate. This is because most of the women are not involved in religious activities. They tend to conduct praying activities in their house and rarely pray in the mosque. Encouraging women as well as men to participate in every phase of the project is crucial to ensure project sustainability. Women can't be encouraged to become more active participants in the project unless there is an agreement between men and women to share the work burden. Local organizations should be organized by adat (Minang culture ceremonies in rural regions of Indonesia), religious figure, respected people, and older people in the village into a better management team. They have the capability to encourage people to join the activities to build community empowerment. This might be an effective way because the people have a great dependency on their leaders (Yuerlita, 2017).

Shirazi (2012) in his research showed that Since the introduction of the Internet in Iran, Iranian women have used this medium not only as a means of accessing and disseminating information but also as the means of voicing their concerns about discriminatory laws and to participate in public discourse. In Iran, the Internet provided a voice to repressed and marginalized groups, particularly young people and educated women. Women's access to ICT training not only provided them the ability to close the gender digital gap but also to enhance their role and presence in society. In this regard, ICTs provide the women of Iran with the tools to effectively and efficiently participate in the wider public discourse. Despite the fact that women's voices in Iran seemed to be neglected by the hardliners and the conservative clergy, they were successful in organizing and mobilizing masses for their cause and to get public support. The effect of women's participation in democratic discourse expanded beyond the national boundaries and imposed positive impacts on other women across the region, in particular the female digital communities and intellectuals in the Middle East (Shirazi, 2012).

## **Research Methodology**

Location of the research was South Khorasan province, in east region of Iran (on the edge of Afghanistan borders) during 2014-2016. The research design used for the study was a descriptive-analytical method.

The population of the study consisted of the managers and the board of directors of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province in 2014 - 2016 (about 120 rural women). Sampling technique for population of the study was census.

Main instrument for data gathering and collection in this research was questionnaire. For achieving validity of questionnaire, it was given to faculty members and extension and research specialist in universities and MOJA (Ministry of Jihad Agriculture) organizations in South-Khorasan province and their corrections inserted in the final questionnaire. For achieving reliability of the questionnaire, 30 of them got to the respondents in rural women in statistical society of this research. Coefficient of Alpha scale ( $\alpha$  Chronbach) achieved 92 percent that was very good. On the next level, after achieving validity and reliability of the questionnaire and doing a little correction, final questionnaire was distributed. About 90 questionnaires that completed and returned were usable for data extraction. Then gathered data were analyzed by statistical methods such as means comparison, Spearman

and Pearson correlation in SPSS. Plus questionnaire, author used qualitative research methods of data collection such as participation, discussion, interviewing, documentations and observation. And finally in the end of the article, author presents final and exigency model that acquiring from various parts of this research.

In figures (1-7) that are available in Appendix, author present his visiting from rural women cooperative of Kharve Olia village on Tabas city, 335 km distance from Birjand, centre of South Khorasan province, and its established greenhouse (from outside and inside) plus girls and boys that came back from their primary school that established in recent years. With presence and helping of Mr. Eng. Mohammad Reza Mosehi, Deputy and Assistant Dean in: Rural Cooperative Organization, South Khorasan province, Iran.



**Figures 1- 7:** Rural women cooperative of Kharve Olia village on Tabas city, 335 km distance from Birjand, centre of South Khorasan province, and its greenhouse (from outside and inside) plus girls and boys that came back from their primary school that established in recent years (May 20, 2014).

**Table 1:** Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of various parts of questionnaire

| Parts | Issues that coverage by these parts of the questionnaire                     | Alfa Cronbach |
|-------|--|---------------|
| 1     | Empowerment of women   | 0.95          |
| 2     | Empowerment of rural women in Iran   | 0.90          |
| 3     | Economic participation and empowerment of rural women                        | 0.83          |
| 4     | Fear, insecurity and disparities in the process of rural women's empowerment | 0.92          |
| 5     | Literacy skills and rural women's empowerment                                | 0.91          |
| 6     | Rural women and local economic development                                   | 0.95          |
| 7     | Rural women as businesses contributors and entrepreneurial activities        | 0.94          |
| 8     | Rural women and health facilities, education and employment programs         | 0.87          |
| 9     | Self Help Groups and Micro-finance for rural women                           |               |
| 1-9   | Total  | 0.92          |

As showed in table 1, all of the parts of questionnaire had good reliability.

### Rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province

Rural women are key agents for achieving the transformational economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development. But limited access to credit, health care and education are among the many challenges they face, which are further aggravated by the global food and economic crises and climate change. Empowering them is key not only to the well-being of individuals, families and rural communities, but also to overall economic productivity, given women's large presence in the agricultural workforce worldwide. Rural women cooperatives provide opportunity for poor people to raise their incomes; they are democracies empowering people to own their own solutions; they increase security for the members; and they contribute directly and

indirectly to primary education for children, gender equality and reducing child mortality. They could get various loans with low level of interest and establishing various vocations by these loans such as carpet weaving and various aspects of handicrafts, confectionery etc. These rural women cooperatives also doing several works for their members such as ((education of animal husbandry)), ((education of household nutrition)), ((education of horticulture)), ((education of handicrafts and carpet weaving)), ((helping for marketing rural women products)) etc. (Golmohammadi & Honari, 2016).

In South Khorasan province 15 rural women cooperatives available and active until 2016. Two of them namely rural women cooperative in Khorashad village and Alzahra rural women cooperative in Moud village are very successful and recognized in national and international levels and have wide cooperation with foreign related rural women development institutions and markets especially in Japan and Germany.

**Table 2:** Education degree of respondents\*

| Parts | Issues that coverage by these parts of the questionnaire                     | Alfa Cronbach |
|-------|--|---------------|
| 1     | Empowerment of women   | 0.95          |
| 2     | Empowerment of rural women in Iran   | 0.90          |
| 3     | Economic participation and empowerment of rural women                        | 0.83          |
| 4     | Fear, insecurity and disparities in the process of rural women's empowerment | 0.92          |



|     |   |      |
|-----|---|------|
| 5   | Literacy skills and rural women's empowerment                         | 0.91 |
| 6   | Rural women and local economic development                            | 0.95 |
| 7   | Rural women as businesses contributors and entrepreneurial activities | 0.94 |
| 8   | Rural women and health facilities, education and employment programs  | 0.87 |
| 9   | Self Help Groups and Micro-finance for rural women                    |      |
| 1-9 | Total   | 0.92 |

\* Managers and the board of directors in rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province (all of them are female).

\*\* All of the villagers with M.A/M.C education degree are living as part time in these villages (Their main and original places for work and living with their families are cities and urban regions).

As showed in table 2, major education degree of Managers and the board of directors in rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province (all of them are female) is diploma. This is because of lower opportunities and possibilities for continuing and utilizing from higher educational possibilities for these women.

In figures (8-14) that are available in Appendix, author presented a department store of rural women cooperative of Khorashad village (30 km distance from Birjand, centre of South Khorasan province) on Birjand city, that providing necessary requirements with moderated and reasonable prices and marketing products of their members in fields of nutrition, horticulture, medical plants, handicrafts, carpet weaving, etc.





**Figures 8-14:** A department store of rural women cooperative of Khorashad village (Distance from Birjand: 30 km) in Birjand, centre of South Khorasan province (November 2, 2016)

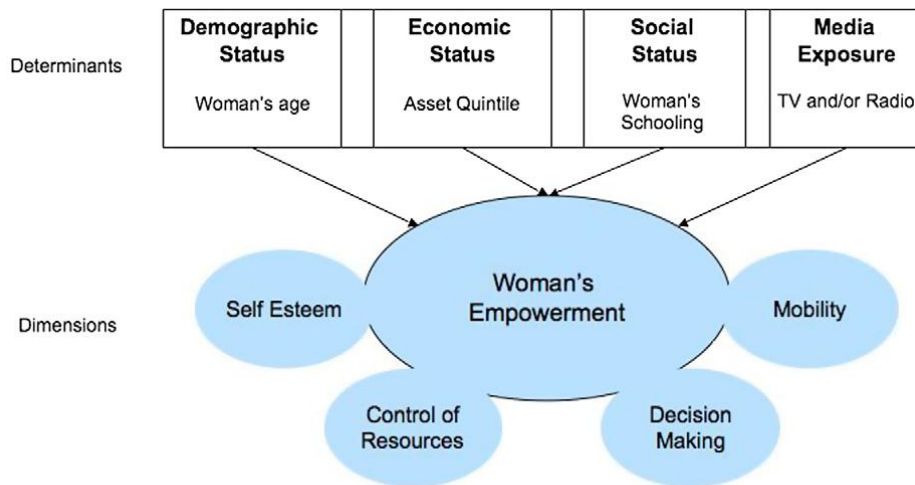
### Empowerment of women

Women's empowerment is a dynamic process that has been quantified, measured, and described in a variety of ways. Since the mid 1980s, the term has been particularly attractive to Third World feminist scholars and practitioners, who are concerned with integrating poor women in development projects in such a way that this would bring them greater self-reliance, and enable them to

challenge their highly disadvantaged positions in society and family, gaining control over their lives. If we want to understand the empowerment of women in a particular society, we should look at both the structural conditions under which women live their lives and the ideological/cultural constructions of women in society, as well as how women perceive themselves in their relations with other people, particularly with men in their families (husbands, fathers, fathers-in law). One definition of

women's empowerment is "an expansion in the range of potential choices available to women so that actual outcomes reflect the particular set of choices which the women value". Empowerment is also seen as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over their lives, gaining power not over others but to achieve goals and ends. Empowerment broadly means having increased life options and choices, gaining greater control over one's life, and generally attaining the capability to live the life one wishes to live. The empowerment process is complex and not directly observable: it can only be approximated using proxies or indicators. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process. Gender inequality exists across different dimensions (social, economic, political, and psychological) and in various domains of women's lives. Women are most likely to feel empowered with respect to household decision-making and one self-esteem indicator, but relatively less likely to experience empowerment with respect to access to cash and least likely in terms of freedom of mobility. Thus, it is quite possible for there to be an increase in a woman's value to herself and the household (self worth and role in decision-making) without a commensurate increase in her personal autonomy and independence vis-a-vis men (freedom of mobility and access to cash). The indicators of empowerment used have been varied: they range from managerial control over loans, accounting knowledge, active use of loans,

women's role in household decision making, magnitude of women's economic contribution, mobility in the public domain, ability to make large and small purchases, ownership of productive assets, freedom from family domination, political awareness, access to household income and male income, and participation in "male" household decisions like purchase of land or productive assets or in crop production decisions. The first and foremost indicator is participation in a microcredit program and the nature of that participation (type of investment made with the loan, size of loan, years of membership), but other determinants were also identified, such as education, paid employment, mobility in the male-dominated public domain, and a favorable household attitude. Empowerment indicators have also been used to predict outcomes at the household level, such as consumption levels, value of women's non-land assets, total hours spent by women and men in economic activities in the home, hours spent by women in household work, whether women received treatment when ill, whether children were immunized, the gender gap in education of children, contraceptive use, and exposure to violence. Perception changes are indicated by the extent to which women experience an increase in self-worth and the extent to which there is a decline in acceptance of their lower status relative to men both in the home and in society (Mahmud S., Shah N. M., & Becker S., 2012).



Adapted from Jejeebhoy (2002 b)

**Figure 15:** Indicators of women empowerment (Jejeebhoy, 2002a) & (Jejeebhoy, 2002b), as quoted in: (Mahmud S. et al., 2012).

### Empowerment of rural women in Iran

Empowerment of rural women is an important thrust area of many rural and agricultural development programs implemented by various governmental and non-governmental organizations in Iran. In rural societies of Iran, every family can be counted as a production unit. These production units are small so that in the past, the kind of products that they used to produce and the amount of those products were most of the times the functions of each family's consumption and demand. In addition to

meeting the domestic needs of the family, these products have found their way to the larger markets at the national and international levels. Rural women have always been an important foundation of these production units. Without the presence of rural women, the economic structure of the family cannot become sustainable. The participation of rural women in economic activities is an undeniable reality. Iranian rural women are active in economic activities such as agriculture and handicrafts. These activities let them play an effective role in reducing production costs and increasing family incomes, in



addition to attending to their children and household. Therefore, gender concerns are mainstreamed in the agricultural extension process to ensure that women receive information relevant to their work (Golmohammadi, 2011).

About 30 per cent of Iranian women live in rural areas. Almost 100 percent of these rural women participate in agricultural activities. Women's share in agricultural labor is stated to be at 40 percent in Iran (Statistical and Information Department of the Governorship of the South Khorasan province, 2016).

This situation does not take into account their activities at the household level; including vegetable gardening, flower production etc. which supplements the family income. In today's Iranian society, women demonstrate

that they have capabilities and potential talents, which, under proper conditions can greatly contribute to national health and economic development. Hence, enhancement of women's participation in economic activities is one of the most important objectives of many governmental organizations, including Deputy of Extension and Farming System. In particular, Iranian extension system targets rural women through increased participation in decision-making, organizing them into self-help groups such as rural women cooperatives, building their technical competencies on skill-based technologies and their leadership abilities (Golmohammadi, 2011).

In figures (2 & 3), researcher presented a handicrafts cooperative in Yazd province in center of Iran.



Figure 16 -17: A handicrafts cooperative in Yazd province in center of Iran (2008)

### **Economic participation and empowerment of rural women**

Economic participation has been regarded as a key factor in the process of empowerment of women. It has been argued that women's wage work will enhance their bargaining power in the family, and will "provide some financial independence from men, promote independence and self-esteem, give women more decision making power in the home, promote more sharing of household chores, and prepare the way for "class consciousness" and collective organizing among women". However, empirical research in the Third World countries has demonstrated that economic participation does not inevitably bring about women's empowerment. The role of culture as a mediating factor becomes significant here. Patriarchal culture, by defining women's work as an extension of women's traditional responsibilities, may undervalue women's economic contributions and achievements, and women, through years of socialization into the patriarchal ideology, may not question gender inequality especially in those societies where women's subordination is so deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms that men's control over women is taken for granted even by women themselves". This could be called "internalized

oppression". A research conducted with poor women in Bangladesh shows the "power of culture and socialization" (Erman, Kalaycioglu, & Rittersberger-Tilic, 2002).

### **Fear, insecurity and disparities in the process of rural women's empowerment**

Many women empower themselves through their own negotiation of danger. Following the well-established literature on women's fear in urban contexts, a small but important literature has also begun to document accounts of boldness, fearlessness and empowerment. Studies of women's fear of crime have concentrated on both environmental and socio-political dimensions. A rural perspective highlights the powerful discursive construction of fear in relation to environments and social relations, for in contrast to urban empirical and cultural imaginings, rural life has often been idealized as safe, socially supportive, and predominantly free of crime. The use and form of the city, in particular its segregation into separate zones characterized by employment, recreation or residential use, serves to disadvantage women in terms of their access to different functions of the city. In so doing women's vulnerability to attack is increased (Panelli, Kraack, & Little, 2006).

It is well recognized that unless women are involved in decision-making processes, through more control over resources and economic independence, and enhanced access to knowledge, their health status cannot be improved. However, the on-going societal transition in rural areas may worsen the subordination of the women in a patriarchal society. There is evidence that women's workload in farming is increasing putting them at risk of sub nutrition and depriving them of time for rest and proper child rearing.

In developing countries, traditional and cultural practices could have a great influence on the health of women. Women's health services focus mostly on women's reproductive health and do not cater to the wider health needs of rural women. Moreover, organizational deficiencies such as lack of supplies, lack of trained personnel, and a weak referral system (at the first referral level) may discourage people from seeking medical care and encourage them to continue to rely on the traditional healers that are readily available and accessible to them.

Poor nutritional status due to food shortage, high fertility levels, heavy work load, poor environmental conditions, socio-cultural and traditional harmful practices, and low access to health and education act in concert to place the health of women in developing countries in jeopardy. This holistic approach should integrate interventions aimed toward improving access to health care, enhancing women's educational and social status, and implementing mechanisms to alleviate poverty. The community needs to be encouraged to learn more about its problems and to take informed action to alleviate deep-rooted female health problems through locally available resources, and by introducing appropriate technology to boost the economic and social independence of women (Berhane, Gossaye, Emmelin, & Hogber, 2001).

Under the communal tenure regimes, women traditionally obtain usufruct rights to family land but they do not possess inheritance rights. This has limited their ability to create wealth and earn reasonable income. Being born a female affects one's life chances and opportunities in most developing countries. Gender disparities in rights constraint the set of choices available to women in many aspects of life, often profoundly limiting their ability to partake in or benefit from development. As such, women in rural communities of developing countries command less range of productive resources especially land and forest resources (Adedayo, Oyun, & Kadeba, 2010).

The importance of economic and social factors in the context of health improvement has been emphasized frequently. In the recent past women-focused poverty alleviation programs with money lending facilities have been the major focus of development initiatives in the developing world. Some of these programs are comprehensive and are expected to have diverse positive effects, specifically on women's lives and the family, and also on the society at large. Health programs alone, on the other hand, also have been in place to reduce mortality and improve the health of individuals, and eventually make a positive contribution to the overall development of

the society. Despite the widespread presence of both development and health programs in developing nations, any clear-cut evidence of their impact on mortality, health and other well-being indicators has been scanty. This is true for development programs than for health programs, perhaps due to the lack of a proper experimental set-up to study such an impact (Bhuiyaa & Chowdhury, 2002).

### **Literacy skills and rural women's empowerment**

A major goal of most women's literacy programs is to bring about better socio-economic conditions for women (Puchner, 2003).

Experience in most countries has shown that women are important actors in development and to hold them back is to hold back the potential for economic growth. Education is perhaps the primary enabler of women's ability to participate in the development and growth of nations. It is clear that one cause of low rural income can be blamed on "information poverty" – the lack of access to information and knowledge that could improve earnings potential (Dlodlo, 2009).

Few people would dispute the fact that under certain societal conditions in most industrialized country settings, for example literacy skills are advantageous to women. There is also evidence that schooling for girls may have beneficial socioeconomic outcomes in developing countries as well, and that these outcomes may derive more from changes in general attitudes and practices influenced by schooling rather than from literacy skills themselves. Further, much anecdotal and some other evidence exists showing benefits of adult literacy for women in a variety of developing country settings. Simply providing people with literacy skills will not necessarily lead to a positive change in social or political status. Reading, writing and numeracy are never independent of social context, and that the context in which literacy is learned and the power and ideology surrounding literacy determine its consequences.

An additional area in which literacy skills may have had an impact is in altering the perceptions of women by themselves and by others in the community. Time and other social conditions not only limited ways in which women could learn literacy, it also limited literacy use.

Development committees for agriculture, credit, and other domains were dominated by men. Since community leaders were men, and since the pool of literate men was larger than the pool of literate women, when uses for literacy were created by the community, they were more likely to assign men to carry out these activities. This approach assumes that women will only be motivated to learn literacy if they feel they need it to accomplish another task.

Providing more motivation for learning literacy may have helped the literacy program, but it may not have removed the majority of social constraints to women's literacy acquisition and use that existed.

Subtle ideological forces in the communities made it difficult for literacy to bring about socio-economic change in women's lives. Rather, 'women's literacy' had been

appropriated into the prevailing male-dominant socio-political culture. Other forces besides literacy level, such as race and class, also have powerful influences on the socio-economic lives of women (Puchner, 2003).

### **Rural women and local economic development**

Working in local communities is not new for many women in small rural towns. Women have used their domestic skills to raise money for their local communities by plying their trade as cooks, seamstresses and craftswomen producing goods for sale at local fetes and markets. Working for their local community is a normal activity for many women in rural areas. One powerful image of gender identity in the countryside has been that of women as auxiliaries playing a supporting or 'invisible' role. Women have been constructed as 'other' in that they are perceived as helpmates, wives, mothers, domestics and generally subservient to the dominant economic work of the men. Women in local townships also experience 'invisibility' where two overriding axes of power prevail: first, men's material power and the economic dependence of women; and second the ideology of gender which defines men's activities as superior and women's as inferior. Newer women's organizations have developed in the rural areas, which promote a more inclusive role for women. Where the traditional groups use domestic skills to raise money, contemporary groups draw upon research and submission skills to seek funding from governments and other funding bodies. Many contemporary organizations cover broader social issues such as the environment with membership rarely women only. To say that rural communities are undergoing massive structural changes and adjusting themselves to deal with a variety of global, national and local pressures is almost a truism (O'Toole & Macgarvey, 2003).

### **Rural women as businesses contributors and their entrepreneurial activities**

The greatest deterrent to rural women entrepreneurs is that they are women (Mehta A. & Mehta M. C., 2011). The initiation by women of local-scale entrepreneurial activities aims at empowerment of the position of rural women by transforming them from an invisible subordinate labor force. With more general dynamic of rural restructuring (economic diversification, commoditization of the

countryside) brings new opportunities for rural women to move beyond the narrow limits of the farm and of domestic duties in the context of the plural active farming household. As rural restructuring advances, rural women are more and more participating within the formal economy both in the labor market and as entrepreneurs. Rural areas hold little appeal for those seeking to embark on entrepreneurial activity. This lack of attractiveness is related to structural weaknesses (inadequate infrastructures, shortages of specialized personnel, the small scale of local markets, etc.) as well as to social and institutional deficiencies. The countryside is thus characterized by a plethora of small and very small businesses whose defining feature is an intense attachment to local productive systems (utilization of locally available raw materials, pronounced territorial specialization in traditional sectors, etc.). In fact, although globally women's entrepreneurship is on an upward curve, there are still many fewer female entrepreneurs: women account for around one third of all people involved in entrepreneurial activity. The fact is that in rural areas women encounter more obstacles that restrict their opportunities and limit their chances of success. Hegemonic masculine constructs and gendered attribution of professional skills and merits, the persistence of patriarchal ideologies within the farming household; all these factors can discourage women's initiatives in rural entrepreneurship. It is furthermore to be noted that rural development policies have embraced traditional rural gender ideologies by incorporating masculine working practices and values.

Women tend to be more conservative than men as entrepreneurs because of their greater aversion to risk. Lack of resources (capital, education, working experience) is another important factor on rural women's entrepreneurship. Employment of women in the production of quality, traditional, home-made foods still reinforces stereotyped views and images of rural women, who are regarded as nurturers and guardians of traditional values rooted in motherhood in the context of an idealized image of the countryside. In any case, they themselves put forward as their primary objective "to help with the finances of the family" (Anthopoulou, 2010).

In figures (18-19), researchers presented entrepreneurship lecture for managers of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province (2010).



**Figures 18 & 19:** Entrepreneurship lecture for managers of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province (2010)

**Rural women and health facilities, education and employment programs**

The community, with its strong male bias, utilizes the health facilities and education and employment programs more for the benefit of men and boys than women and girls. Many community health programs in the developing world seek to address the issues of gender bias and the unequal status of women, with an emphasis on women’s health, education and employment. In spite of such efforts, women face discrimination and continued adversity, especially in rural areas. Efforts at achieving gender equality with increased opportunities to improve women’s health, education and employment have resulted in continued poorer outcomes for women in terms of health and social indices. While much has improved, the improvement is not significant when compared with that achieved for boys and men. Programs to achieve gender equality should not only focus on the provision of equal or greater opportunities for women. They should also concentrate on achieving equality in gender outcomes within a reasonable time frame. To accomplish this, all plans and projects within community programs need to be examined through a gender lens (Jacob *et al.*, 2006).

**Self Help Groups and Micro-finance for rural women**

The Self Help Groups organized by women do play a vital role maritime them. It is a matter of great concern that, despite the economic and socio cultural significance of it, the women at large are outside the mainstream of the society in the economically disadvantaged category without accruing the benefits from available industry (Vipinkumar & Asokan, 2014).

Micro-finance has, in recent times, come to be recognized and accepted as one of the new development paradigms for alleviating poverty through social and economic empowerment of the poor. It enables poor people especially women to grow their savings and access the credit which banks are increasingly willing to lend. It enhances equality of status of women as participants, decision makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of life (Kumar & Tochwawng, 2014).

**Findings of the research**

In table 3- author presented viewpoints of the respondents about empowering and development effects and roles of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members.

**Table 3:** Viewpoints of the respondents about empowering and development effects and roles of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members

| Issues  | Number of respondents | Mean (from 5) | Range (1-5) | Std. Deviation | Rank |
|---|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|----------------|------|
| Improving economic participation & contribution of rural women for local economic affairs and access to resources (capital, professional training and managerial education) | 90                    | 4.78          | 3           | 0.71           | 1    |
| Improving rural women ability to create wealth and earn reasonable income   | 90                    | 4.75          | 2           | 0.93           | 2    |
| Helping women on gaining greater control over their lives   | 90                    | 4.73          | 3           | 0.95           | 3    |



As showed in table 3, major of respondents evaluated empowering and development effects and roles of rural women cooperatives in South Khora

**Table Test of**

|   |    |      |   |      |    |
|---|----|------|---|------|----|
| Increasing in a woman's value to herself  | 90 | 4.71 | 3 | 0.91 | 4  |
| Increasing in a woman's value and role to the household decision-making                                   | 89 | 4.70 | 2 | 0.79 | 5  |
| Increasing rural women's freedom of mobility in society and public domain                                 | 90 | 4.68 | 3 | 0.78 | 6  |
| Increasing accounting knowledge, managerial control and active use over loans for rural women             | 90 | 4.67 | 2 | 0.73 | 7  |
| Improving rural women's access to employment programs   | 90 | 4.65 | 2 | 0.72 | 8  |
| Enhancing women's educational and social status   | 90 | 4.62 | 2 | 0.71 | 9  |
| Increasing women's ability to make large and small purchases  | 90 | 4.61 | 3 | 0.93 | 10 |
| Increasing women's ownership of productive assets   | 90 | 4.59 | 3 | 0.95 | 11 |
| Increasing women's freedom from family domination   | 90 | 4.55 | 3 | 0.90 | 12 |
| Increasing women's political awareness  | 90 | 4.54 | 3 | 0.90 | 13 |
| Increasing access to household income and male income   | 90 | 4.53 | 3 | 0.92 | 14 |
| Increasing in women's received treatment and accessing to health care and facilities                      | 90 | 4.51 | 3 | 0.85 | 15 |
| Increasing children immunization  | 90 | 4.50 | 2 | 0.65 | 16 |
| Decreasing gender gap in education of children  | 90 | 4.49 | 3 | 0.88 | 17 |
| Increasing contraceptive use (reducing high fertility levels)   | 90 | 4.47 | 2 | 0.77 | 18 |
| Decreasing women's exposure to violence   | 90 | 4.44 | 2 | 0.86 | 19 |
| Reducing fear, insecurity and disparities of rural women  | 90 | 4.42 | 2 | 0.72 | 20 |
| Enhanced access of rural women to knowledge, skills and educational facilities                            | 90 | 4.41 | 2 | 0.83 | 21 |
| Helping rural women on accessing to micro-finance   | 90 | 4.37 | 2 | 0.84 | 22 |
| Decreasing heavy work load & poor environmental conditions of rural women                                 | 90 | 4.32 | 2 | 0.82 | 23 |
| Decreasing women's harmful socio-cultural and traditional practices                                       | 90 | 4.29 | 3 | 0.95 | 24 |
| Helping rural women for decreasing negative effects of prevailing male-dominant socio-political culture   | 90 | 4.27 | 2 | 0.68 | 25 |
| Increasing rural women's role as businesses contributors and entrepreneurial activities                   | 90 | 4.24 | 2 | 0.92 | 26 |
| Reducing obstacles of rural women that restrict and limit their chances of success in economic affairs    | 90 | 4.22 | 2 | 0.85 | 27 |
| Increasing attractiveness of rural areas for economic affairs   | 90 | 4.19 | 2 | 0.65 | 28 |
| Decreasing patriarchal culture on the farming household   | 90 | 4.18 | 3 | 0.88 | 29 |
| Helping rural women for establishing Self Help Groups for involving them in the mainstream of the society | 90 | 4.15 | 3 | 0.77 | 30 |

Hypotheses

| N o. | Hypotheses  | Tests results     |
|------|---|-------------------|
| 1    | There is meaningful correlation between education (years of schooling) of respondents and their viewpoints about economical effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members. | Confirming (H1) * |
| 2    | There is meaningful correlation between age of respondents and their viewpoints about social effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members.                                | Confirming (H1)   |
| 3    | There is meaningful correlation between economic situation (wealth) of respondents and their viewpoints about economical effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members.    | Confirming (H1)   |
| 4    | There is meaningful correlation between economic situation (wealth) of respondents and their viewpoints about environmental effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members. | Not confirming    |

san province for their members very high and valuable. In table 4 - presented a brief on Hypotheses of this study and final results of their tests.

**4: results**

|    |  |                 |
|----|--|-----------------|
|    | Khorasan province.   | (H1) **         |
| 5  | There is meaningful correlation between age of respondents and their viewpoints about economical effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members.   | Confirming (H1) |
| 6  | There is meaningful correlation between economic situation (wealth) of respondents and their viewpoints about sustainable human development effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members.    | Confirming (H1) |
| 7  | There is meaningful correlation between education (years of schooling) of respondents and their viewpoints about sustainable human development effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members. | Confirming (H1) |
| 8  | There is meaningful correlation between age of respondents and their viewpoints about sustainable human development effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members.                            | Confirming (H1) |
| 9  | There is meaningful correlation between years of membership in rural women cooperatives of respondents and their viewpoints about their sustainable human development effects for their members.                                 | Confirming (H1) |
| 10 | There is meaningful correlation between years of membership in rural women cooperatives of respondents and their viewpoints about their economical effects for their members.  | Confirming (H1) |

\* The Alternative Hypothesis  
 \*\* The Null Hypothesis  
 \*\*\* The level of significance is .01

As showed in table 4, major Hypothesis of this research were confirmed and only between economic situation (wealth) of respondents and their viewpoints about environmental effects of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province, there wasn't meaningful correlation.

## Conclusion

Empowerment is a process in each woman's life but is also a process occurring over time in a society (Mahmud S. et al., 2012). Women's empowerment in rural regions of Iran has been empirically studied, primarily with respect to its relationship with access to financial services, education, ICTs etc. Moreover, an independent source of information is an important resource for women in rural Iran with potential for empowerment in terms of action and in terms of new attitudes and altered perceptions.

In many developing countries such as Iran, rural women, who are active in various trades of agriculture, dairying, food processing, handicraft, micro credit etc. Though highly productive, economically active and enterprising; individually they are weak as are (a) unrecognized (b) long working hours with low returns, (c) limited access to equipments, markets, productive

resources, opportunities (d) restrictive social protection (e) low representation (f) low inclusion in labor & economic policies etc. Thus there is a need to organize informal sector women workers. A key solution for overcoming this problems that recommended by many scientists and researchers is building their own economic organization such as rural women cooperatives that are very successful in villages of Iran during 18 years ago. Rural women cooperatives are the most successful organizations in grassroots level that during 18 years ago played a major role in enhancing socio-economic status of their members and creating various job opportunities for women, organizing their productions marketing and finally enhancing revenues and welfare of their members' families.

Rural women cooperatives played a major role in empowering rural women in this region because of rural women could get various loans with low level of interest and establishing various vocations by these loans such as carpet weaving and various aspects of handicrafts, confectionery, etc. by them. Also rural women by these cooperatives, accessed to higher socio-economic situation in their families and local community and more independence from their wives because of their income

generation and better and more situations and opportunities for continuing education of their children.

In figures (20-33) researcher presented various empowering activities of rural women cooperatives in Birjand, centre of South Khorasan province (2010-2015).







**Figures 20-33:** Various empowering activities of rural women cooperatives in Birjand, centre of South Khorasan province (2010-2015)

With respect to findings of the research we can summarize them as following issues:

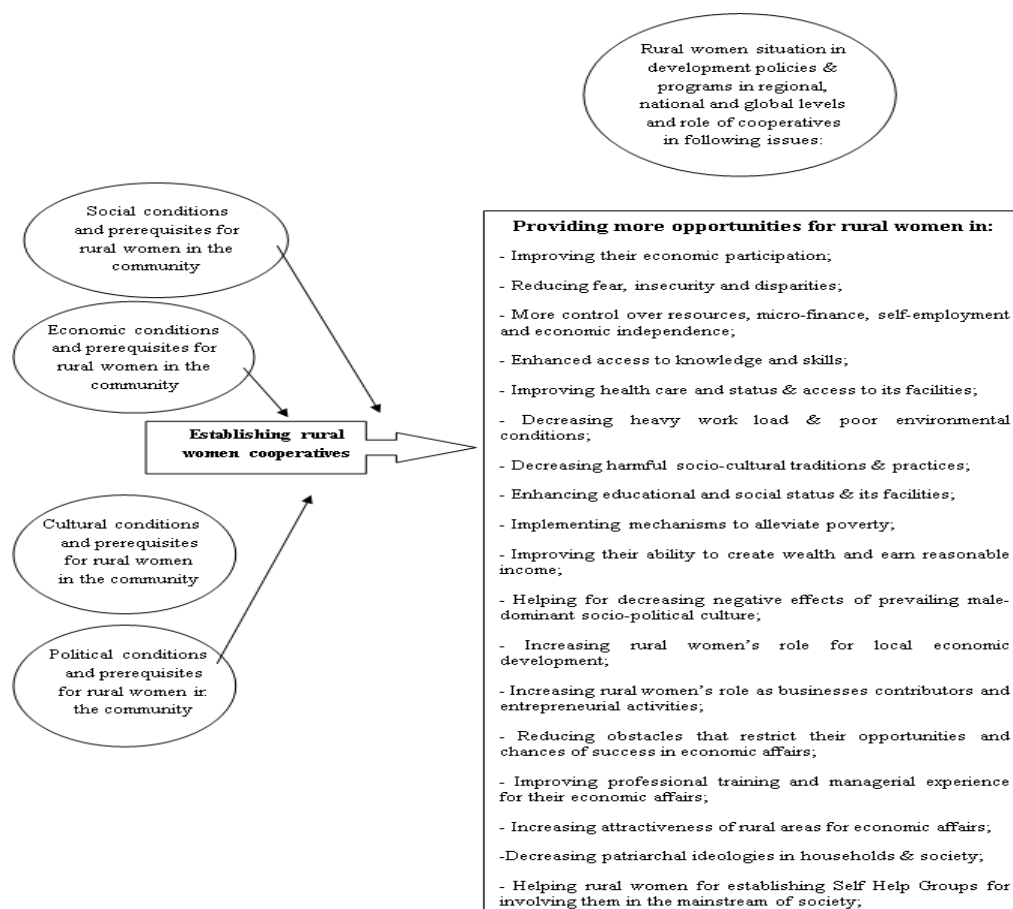
- Major education degree of Managers and the board of directors in rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province (all of them are female) is diploma. This is because of lower opportunities and possibilities for continuing and utilizing from higher educational possibilities for these women. For increasing productivity of these Managers and the board of directors, we must provide various and favorable opportunities, incentives and facilities for continuing education and updating their knowledge and skills.
- As showed in table 3, major of respondents evaluated empowering and development effects and roles of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members very high and valuable. This indicates that during approximately less than two decades from beginning work of these cooperatives, they could gain a huge amount of satisfaction from rural women in this deprived, isolated, dried and frontier region of Iran.
- As showed in table 4, major Hypothesis of this research were confirmed and only between economic situation (wealth) of respondents and their viewpoints about environmental effects of



rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province, there wasn't meaningful correlation. This is maybe attributed to the fact that culture of environmental issues didn't internalized among rural and urban people of Iran and in many cases in recent decades we observed that for implanting various projects in the country, many environmental issues were been neglected. For decreasing this huge and emergency problem, policy makers and governors must give very more pay attention to environmental issues and diffusion and dissemination its culture among people especially by mass media such as TV, Radio, Magazines and Newspapers, Text books from primary schools to higher education, etc. and prioritizing them in their development policies, programs and projects.

- In the interviewing of author with members of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province, all of them were very satisfied from these grassroots and people participatory oriented and locally based organizations. All of them noted that these cooperatives are the best vehicles for empowering rural women and heightening their situation in the society and household. But they also noticed that if central governor pay more attention, budget, power and authorities to them, they can play a more significant role in the sustainable human development for their members and rural regions in South Khorasan province, east of Iran.

In Figure 34, presented acquired final and exigency model of this research:



**Figure 34:** Final and exigency acquired model of this research on the empowering and development effects and roles of rural women cooperatives in South Khorasan province for their members and improving life people conditions in rural regions

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