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# **Overcoming Obstacles: Opportunities of academically talented women in Iran**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the present research was to study the lifetime obstacles and opportunities of academically successful women working at Iran universities. Successful female academics in Iran are concerned about the social and personal barriers to pursuing successful careers in academia. These women continually work to overcome these barriers in an ongoing process called overcoming obstacles. This basic social process has five stages: perceiving inequality, conflicting, dissolving, empowering and acting purposefully. Throughout the process, these women have first become aware of gender inequities and then worked towards overcoming them using self-motivation properties and support from external sources such as family, mentors and colleagues. This substantive theory, though rooted in a specific country with a strong male dominated social structure, is applicable to all societies as they continue to work towards equitable access to high-level career opportunities.

## **Introduction**

For many years, researchers have studied the life and contributions to society of academically talented persons around the world. These studies have tried to increase knowledge about their features, interests, motives and also, their success and failures (Hulbert & Schuster, 1993). Many societies view the support of talent development as critical to their nation progress. Sociologists have noted that the progress and development of each nation depends on the development of its gifted and talented individuals (Kitano & Perkins, 1996).

Usually, giftedness in childhood is determined on the basis of specific intelligence testing or performance criteria; however, the process of identification of giftedness in childhood does not accurately predict giftedness in adulthood, specifically in women (Kerr, 1997). Fahlman (2004) describes the characteristics of giftedness in adulthood suggesting that these gifted

characteristics are affected by social supports and interpersonal relationships. Reis (1991) stated that human societies have interpreted the characteristics of adult giftedness according to individual performances and contributions to society. The subjects of this study will be termed gifted or talented interchangeably as each of them exhibits high levels of performance and contributions to their families, university positions and Iranian society.

From another point of view, throughout history, powerless individuals and groups without voices have been recognized as minority populations. These numbers include individuals with low social and economic status. Women, because of their social position relative to men, have been the focus of research (Bizzari, 1998). These researchers have studied and reported on such problems as accessibility to jobs, wage comparisons between males and females, the structure of family, demands of nurturing children and educational access (Garrison, 1993; Hulbert & Schuster, 1993). Despite the broad range of studies of women's issues, few studies have been carried out that focus on academically talented women, particularly studies that have shown the impact of socio-individual factors on the lives of these women in Iran. Furthermore, the few studies that have been carried out in Iran are highly quantitative in nature and, therefore, have not examined the deeper cultural meaning of the ongoing obstacles and opportunities of gifted women in Iran (Alborzi, 1998).

The lack of research on this topic in general, and specifically in Iran, provided a catalyst to conduct the present study. The authors sought to better understand the obstacles, challenges and also opportunities that academically gifted women have experienced in Iran. A good understanding of life obstacles and opportunities of academically gifted women must involve an appreciation of the cultural context within which these events and actions take place as well as an evaluation of their significance from the perspective of the interviewees. Such is the focus of this study.

The classic grounded theory research method, discovered by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and further refined by Glaser (1978) was chosen because the authors felt that this research approach would reflect the view points of participants and how they experienced their world. Uniquely, however,

grounded theory is a method that does more than just describe events; it uses such description and other data to develop theory (Glaser & Holton, 2004).

## **Methods**

The aim of the present research was to study the lifetime obstacles and opportunities of academically gifted (talented) women in Iran. Sampling in the initial stage of the study was purposeful with women who had earned PhDs or post doctorate degrees and physicians who have specialized in various fields of medicine selected as a focus population, as per Resi's definition of gifted (talented) adults (1991). In all, 40 individuals from two universities in Iran were interviewed. The major fields of their studies were human studies, agriculture, science, and medical sciences. Three of the participants were professors, five were associate professors and 32 of them were assistant professors. The interviewees were between 38 and 56 years old. Thirty-two of those interviewed were married and eight were single.

The main data source of this study was derived from interviews. Data collection and analysis was conducted over a two and one-half year period. The first author of this paper conducted all of the interviews, following Glaser's (1978) suggestion that initial data should be gathered from the individuals who are the best informants in that area. Data thus gathered helps the researcher decide where to gather subsequent relevant data. Therefore, the first participant interviewed was interested in and had knowledge of women studies. The selection of this participant brought significant information to the researchers, helping them to gather subsequent information. In the initial phase, the interviews were open or unstructured, and then the structure of the subsequent interviews changed to semi-structured interview as previously collected interview data was coded. Each interview took about between 2 to 4 hours. During each interview, field notes were taken and then, after each interview, the field notes were transcribed following which the researchers began coding procedures.

Unrestricted memoing was carried used throughout the analysis process seeking to capture creative ideas and meaning making of the data and codes (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Holton, 2004)). Memos were written for every code, concept, and category, capturing ideas about the relationships between properties and

categories, creative thoughts and ideas for further sampling. Memo sorting helped to organize the completed theory.

## **The Theory of Overcoming Obstacles**

Using constant comparative analysis of the data, the theory of overcoming obstacles emerged. Overcoming is a basic social-psychological process that enables women to tolerate obstacles in order to meet personal and professional needs, goals and values. The women in this study felt and perceived inequality in every part of their society but, because of their specific characteristics such as goal orientation, self competency and assertiveness, they were able to tolerate and overcome or pass through the obstacles.

### **Stage One: Perceiving gender inequality**

Perceiving gender inequality is the initial stage of overcoming obstacles. At this stage, subjects mentally process or feel inequality. Gender inequality is multidimensional for the women in this study. They experience inequality between women and men in their society from various points of view. It seems that the root of this inequality is hidden in the culture and tradition of the society. At this stage, the women feel and perceive these inequalities: "The culture of our society and dominant discipline causes obstacles; daughters have limitations from a cultural point of view." or "Unequal attitudes of societies in relation to the role of women are not only in a traditional society like Iran they also exist in other parts of the world." When perceiving gender inequality, these women perceive meaning and challenge when they notice these social beliefs and by facing the social interactions. These two properties of perceiving gender inequality are noticing social beliefs and facing social interactions.

*Noticing social beliefs.* As subjects notice the stereotypical gender beliefs of the society around them, they gather information regarding those social beliefs of gender inequality in order to evaluate the society beliefs. They perceive these beliefs over time from personal experiences: "Women's credibility depends on men. Society does not accept women except when they are married, and men believe that they are the crown on a women's head." or "The society believes that the man should be in a higher position than women. Decisions should be made by men."

*Facing social interactions.* The results of social beliefs that are widespread in the society are reflected in the social interactions of the members of that society. The social relations between the individuals in the socio-cultural milieu are based on social beliefs of the society. Therefore, the individuals form their initial impression of the discrimination being imposed on them; they also consider the behaviours of other members of the society in relation to the discrimination. These social interactions create a framework of perception and help the subjects make meaning: "Priorities in the society are first married men, and then single men, then married women, and finally single women, respectively."

In social interactions, the man is seen as a dominant individual, and the woman is seen as a defeated individual. However, gender inequality in social interactions is presented in gender relations, educational and vocational opportunities, and educational and social expectations. Perceptions of social beliefs and social interactions are a recursive process that enables individuals to gain more clarity regarding the dimensions of gender inequality. In this stage, emotions play a significant and vital role in deciding to overcome obstacles. The stage is associated by anxiety, indecision and perhaps fears.

### **Stage Two: Conflicting**

The second stage of the overcoming process is conflicting. When individuals perceive gender inequalities in society, they face many conflicts in their life and are confronted with uncertainty and imbalance with themselves. In the conflicting phase, mental challenging of the individual takes place through feelings of personal and social unbalance.

*Feeling of personal imbalance.* Individuals confront physical, psychological and emotional imbalance in their everyday lives. These imbalances have many dimensions such as *protecting family*: "The main responsibility of women is at home". Gifted women are pulled in many directions; to cope, they master the art of *performing multiple roles*: "My time is completely managed, men need less time management. In comparison to men women need time management because they have several responsibilities." These women suffer from *feelings of invisibility* as they are often passed over for job opportunities: "The women are like the left hand, because they are not offered any

opportunities to use their abilities.” They voice *feelings of sacrifice* as they juggled their many responsibilities at home and work: “All of the responsibilities are my duties: housekeeping, taking care of children, preparing for new courses, studying, and meanwhile my salary has not been expensed for myself”.

*Feeling of social unbalance.* Individuals encountered disturbances and challenges that are imposed on them from the social context in which they live and work. These feelings of social imbalance include *psychosocial pressuring, confronting social expectations* and *justice administering*. Psychosocial pressuring causes gifted women to feel socially imbalanced. They are under constant pressure to get too many tasks completed but must live with status quo social norms: “I am anxious about my ongoing tasks”; “We are the victims of circumstances.” Women may *confront their social expectations*, recognizing them and bringing them to light: “Society has the same expectations of duties for women at home and working women.” Gifted women push for personal and societal change (*justice administering*): “Nowadays, women are completely aware about the things that are happening around them, so they push for their rights.” In the unbalancing phase, women recognize this imbalance and compare their positions to those of their male counterparts and begin to push for their rights.

### **Stage Three: Dissolving**

Dissolving is an active phase of balancing, where the intentions of the individual are to dissolve the imbalance in various ways. In this phase, advantages and disadvantages of the various actions are compared with respect to consistency of personal logic.

Dissolving emerged in the present study as a mental model used for the purpose of overcoming obstacles. It is the mental activity in a decision making process, before choosing a course of action. Therefore, dissolving is an interpretive and comparative mental activity seeking to balance the imbalance, through a motivational process. In the dissolving process, individuals decide to confront the imbalance by *resisting, self-reliance, committing* and *taking advantage of the situation*. Gifted women display resistance when recognizing the need to push back against negative conditions: “If I would like to improve my situation, I should fight.” They recognize that they are responsible for their

own success (*self-reliance*): "My husband or my boss said that opportunities have been given to me-these are not opportunities, A woman improves herself."; "I have learned in this lifetime that, if I lose something, I will acquire it again." Talented women find success by committing themselves to finding success: "Women are successful in management, because they feel more responsibility, more sensitivity, more precision, and more patience." These women find success by taking advantage of the situations they get: "I do my job in this way to take care of my family and to preserve my work."

#### **Stage Four: Empowering**

The fourth stage of the overcoming process is empowering. Empowering includes all of the factors that individuals utilize in order to empower themselves. The sources of the process of empowering are both internal and external to the individual. In this phase, the individual responds to the results of perceiving, conflicting and dissolving. In this empowering phase, women enable themselves through *self-empowering*, *perceiving support*, and *perceiving socio-cultural changes*.

*Self-empowering*. Self-empowering is the internal aspect of empowering. Self-empowering is the process of developing the total abilities that women utilize in order to empower themselves. Individuals develop their cognitive and emotional abilities to overcome obstacles. Also, in this stage, they try to coordinate the development of their cognitive and emotional abilities simultaneously. In this process, logic and emotions work in balance in order to prepare women to act effectively. A woman said: "The women can prove themselves, because they are sharper and more subtle", or, "The presence of successful women in the society is because of their abilities", or, "The women can do several things simultaneously and do them correctly".

From emotional (motivational) aspects, individuals said: "I do not feel any weakness; although the obstacles have negative effects, but sometimes they will be the motive for improvement", or, "Self-believing and self-confidence is very important, they believe that they can", or, "It was difficult to swim upstream, but I do it", or "Feeling alive is important in me, I think when I am alive I should move forward, I believe that anyone who is not bright, but wants to go forward, can do it". It seems that both aspects of self-empowering (cognitive and emotional) are

complementary. In other words, it can be said that the interactions of these two aspects of self-empowering shape the process and develop the abilities of individuals, preparing them to act effectively in order to overcome obstacles.

*Perceiving support.* Perceiving support is the external aspect of empowering. It is the effective spiritual, mental, psychological and physical supports and assistances that talented women have received for their development. The sources of this supporting can be family, spouse or others: “My family climate was supporting, I am psychologically secure.”; “My husband creates opportunities for me, because he helped me, he did not act jealously, and did not create obstacle.”; “I had effective teachers in my schooling, they encouraged me, and they were my model.” Therefore, support is an external source of motivation that individuals perceive. Perceiving support facilitates the empowering process in talented women. With strong external support, women feel increased self-empowerment; perhaps too, their self-empowerment aids in increasing their external support.

*Perceiving socio-cultural changes.* The women in this study see that positive changes have occurred in gender equality across worldwide societies. This understanding motivates them to move towards their own empowerment. This idea, called *perceiving socio-cultural changes* directly affects the conditions of women, particularly talented women in Iran: “Worldwide changes have affected women, now they know that they have the abilities that should be seen in their behaviour.” Or “The views of the world, in relation to women have changed.” These worldwide changes have occurred in Iranian society too; therefore, the perception of Iranian women has been changed positively: “I am optimistic regarding the future of the women in Iran; our society is moving in this direction, these changes have occurred in other societies as well.” or “The conditions of women are better now; the social barriers have been decreased from before.” Both the support from various sources and perceptions of socio-cultural change facilitates and positively affects the empowering process. At the end of this stage, individuals decide to confront logically and constructively the obstacles in their lives.

### **Stage Five: Acting purposely**

In order to overcome the obstacles the individuals act purposely. The effects and the results of empowering are reflected

in various ways in the purposive behaviour of individuals. The behaviours that talented women show are based on their logical thinking and motivational beliefs. These purposive behaviours have two general aspects. Gifted women make efforts to meet their goals and employ communicating, planning and managing skills to stay on track to reaching their goals.

*Making efforts.* Making efforts are the activities and resistance of the individuals in order to attain their goals, or to overcome their obstacles: “Higher expectation of others leads to more efforts.”, or “My perseverance is good, I do everything on time.” Or “The obstacles should not be a reason for stopping.”

*Communicating, planning and managing skills.* The women in this study are skilled in interacting with others, making arrangements and organizing. They know that effective communication, planning and management skills are key to overcoming obstacles. Also, these skills have a mutual relationship with *making efforts*. When individuals have been acting on intended efforts, these skills are firmly shaped in them. The feedback that talented women receive as the result of their actions leads them to increase their efforts: “Women are imprinted, and the emotional aspects of their behaviors cause their relationships to be positive.”; “Women develop positive relationships.”; “I utilized my social skills and showed my abilities.”; “Women have the planning abilities. They are more subtle and more regulated, and they have an ability to organize.”

In summary, purposive behaviours lead women to overcome obstacles that may originate from within the empowering category. There are mutual relationships between acting purposefully and empowering. In other words, when abilities are developed, they are reflected in actions. Acting purposefully based on these abilities can, in turn, be developed through both cognitive and emotional abilities. The results of the interactions among these five stages or categories, leads women to overcome obstacles to academic success in their lives.

## **Discussion**

The results of this grounded theory study indicate that, despite gender inequalities, women find ways of succeeding and overcome gender inequity obstacles. Overcoming obstacles is a

psycho-social process that motivates women to struggle more and become more aware of their life opportunities. The women in this study have confronted gender inequality. They have felt it in social interactions. They have faced inequality in gender relations, educational and vocational opportunities and educational and social expectations. They perceive the root of this inequality in the culture and tradition of their society. In a study carried out in China, Yang (2000) mentioned that it is often impossible for women to gain access to high occupation levels because it is difficult for them to obtain jobs which are related to political, economic or leadership decisions. They must expend more effort than men to find success. The reasons for this are socio-cultural beliefs that view men as stronger than women, therefore men are favoured to represent society. More critical indices are used to evaluate women. These attitudes, constructed on unrealistic opinions, extensively limit a woman's position in influential decision-making positions in society. As a result, in the lifetime cycle, men continue to feel superior and women to feel inferior. This kind of thinking influences the kinds of relationships and the roles played by men and women (in work, marriage, etc.). Men often feel that they are in positions such as "superior gender", "high achiever" and "innovator", and women continue to maintain a status of "inferior gender", "admirer" and "aide" (Yang, 2000). This point of view, which is rooted in Chinese culture, could be considered when talking about gender inequality or talking about lack of contribution of women in important decision making. The authors felt that the role of mass media is significant as it can present women with all of their real abilities and help to undermine gender inequality thus modifying public ideas in relation to women (Yang, 2000). However, in the present study, participants mention that the role of mass media in relation to women in Iran is not only is not positive but is, in fact, negative.

Kerr (1994) and Reis (1991) identified external barriers to talented women, such as attitudes of parents, schools, others in their environment, discrimination in work. They suggest that possible internal barriers such as self-doubt, self-criticism and lower expectations have existed in the lifetimes of talented women. When the women in this study perceive gender inequality, they are faced with many conflicts in their lives and feelings of imbalance. Women who are ambivalent about parenting or career roles face internal crisis and those who

strongly desire to commit themselves to creative endeavours in sciences are faced with social disapproval because of their atypical gender role. In contemporary society, exceptionally able women experience considerable stress related to role conflict and work overload (Noble, 1989). Cognitive dissonance theory assumes that people are motivated to resolve inconsistencies among their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to provide justification or rationalization for their actions and experiences (Festinger, 1957; Narmon-Jones and Mill, 1999, in Jost, Pelham, Sheldon & Sullivan, 2003). Dissonance theory is widely interpreted as an egoistic theory of the self; when a person reduces his dissonance, she defends her ego and keeps a positive self-image. It seems that the women of the present study use dissolving as a mental model to reduce cognitive dissonance in overcoming obstacles.

Tirri and Koro-Ljungberg (2002) suggest that women sometimes have to give up the activities that they really love in favour of family. In other words, the women care about their families; they prefer to spend time with family and devote themselves to family rather than personal interests. While these women have as much potential to take part in decision-making roles as men, they are not provided the opportunity. The women in the present study regard their responsibilities to family in balance with their personal needs. They work hard to manifest their potential and utilize their responsibilities to promote their professional careers and successful social relationships. Even women who are highly prestigious professionals or who are involved in occupations that are male-dominated try to establish equilibrium between their home responsibilities and their occupations. Arnold (1993) pointed out that these women cope with the system as individuals, instead of addressing the existing institutional barriers in the structure of the labour force. They obtain an ideal equilibrium between their internal and external lives (home-duties and occupation). This theme shows the importance of social valuing of family and spousal roles in societies.

In a case study of four distinguished Polish women, researchers found that talented women exhibit traits of self-reliance, ability to resist, dominant trends, and risk-taking behaviours. These successful women show career motivation, interest in education and lively feelings. Like the results of the

present study, these findings suggest that academically talented women from various nations - particularly those from developing countries - share personal characteristics of determination, love of learning and an indemonstrable will to achieve their goals. The Polish women, like those in Iran, attributed their successes to internal factors as well as familial support (Kitiano and Perkin, 1996).

A number of studies have reported intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate a gifted woman to achieve her goals. Their success is attributed to external factors such as support of influential teachers, financial aid, advisors, families and faith as well as internal factors such as resilience and courage (Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2002; Kitano & Perkins, 1996). According to expectancy learning theory, (Atkinson in Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2002), individuals are motivated to act either from a desire to approach success or from a desire to avoid failure. The women of the present study wanted to do what they feel is right by creating some sort of changes in their lives. According to this theory, motivation to act is a function of the interaction between a particular goal and the motive of the individual's expectancy that will lead to purposeful actions.

In the present study, the process of empowerment identified by the life cycle process of overcoming obstacles suggests women manifest behaviour in accordance with their emotions and cognition. Through their abilities and by their hard work, women overcome obstacles and attain a constructive balance between their vocational commitments and family lives. Talented women believe that in order to reduce discrimination and acquire balanced lives for all women, they should be seeking remedies in various domains, individually and socially.

## **Conclusions**

Stereotypes are tools that serve to disempower disadvantaged groups (Jost and Banaji, 1994). Once these stereotypes are internalized, group members may begin to believe that their lower status is legitimized and consequently they do not fight against it (Foster, Arnt, and Honkola, 2004). In the grounded theory of overcoming obstacles, when academically gifted women experience gender inequality, they try to dissolve the imbalance by various means in their desire to overcome personal obstacles. Rather than disempowering themselves, as

system justification theory suggests, they empower themselves. This reaction is more in accordance with social identity theory with women, as a low-status group, responding to negative social identity by choosing to redefine characteristics of their identity in order to attain a more positive, empowering identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Group consciousness theories (Barky, 1977; Bovles and Klein, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Wilkinson and Schneider, 1990) have been explicit in redefining women's social identity, so that it is empowering rather than debilitating. In particular, these theories suggest that social groups be defined along the historical experiences of the group rather than by stereotyped traits. (In Foster, Arnt, and Honkola, 2004).

## **Research Implications**

Larry (1998) stated that the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework for recognizing obstacles and challenges of gifted women should be preceded by studies that lead to an emergence of theory. This study's grounded theory highlights the problems related to female career success and how successful women overcome these problems. Gender inequality in educational, cultural, professional, legal, and employment backgrounds continue to exist in Iranian and other developing societies. This gender inequality is tied to domination of men and socio-cultural expectations in society that cause challenges for women. The results of these challenges sometimes lead capable women to give up their social activities. However, in spite of these conditions, some women have utilized their abilities according to their responsibilities. They have exhibited motivation, expended great effort and, with external support and socio-cultural changes, have developed their abilities to try and overcome the obstacles in their paths.

This study, although focused on female academics in Iran, is applicable to all societies. Even in countries where gender equity appears to exist it is important to monitor public opinion and value systems that may indicate decreasing equities (Yang, 2000). The implications of this emergent theory suggest that young women can be helped by counselling and planning to better understand their abilities and assist them in self-empowerment. Societies and responsible persons in these societies should pay more attention to the needs of women in order to decrease

societal and career challenges and obstacles.

The results of this study show family and other external supports have significant roles in the lives of successful women. These external supports should be fostered and developed to better meet the needs of developing women. Programs should be developed that foster family, school and societal relationships for women. Individuals who are responsible for educating women who show academic promise should be prepared to foster and support these interests. Finally, responsible authorities in society need to lead nations in helping women take positive steps, eradicating obstacles and facilitating accessibility to their lifetime aims.

### **Relevance and Rigor**

In grounded theory development, academic rigor is measured by the extent of a theory's fit, relevance, workability and modifiability (Glaser, 1978). This theory fits as it emerged from data drawn from the words and ideas of talented women working in a male dominated society. It is relevant to those living in societies with open gender bias but also to societies with hidden biases. This theory works as it explains how gifted female academics manage to succeed in their careers while balancing social demands that are not always equitable. The theory of overcoming obstacles is readily modifiable, based on new data that might arise through additional theoretical sampling. The theory would remain fairly stable given new situations, however, categories or properties of categories may emerge as additional populations, such as those in other countries or other minority populations are sampled for data.

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