Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society (SPRS) (Society of Students against Poverty) is an international non-governmental organization which has been following its activities with official record of Ministry of the Interior of Islamic Republic of Iran since 1999. IAPRS has consultative status from ECOSOC since 2010.

Vulnerable caregiving women can be empowered through necessary parenting and life skills alongside social entrepreneurship.
Social Entrepreneurship in the Iranian Homes

Introduction

The person who provides life expenses in addition to mental and spiritual support is referred to as the family caregiver. Woman become caregivers due to various factors such as divorce, decease of husband, spouse’s addiction, immigration, spouse disablement, abandonment by irresponsible husbands, and delinquent or incarcerate spouses. Dealing with various economic and social issues eventuates in mental distress, aggressive behaviors results in conflict with children, delinquency, addiction, and in some cases prostitution, ultimate depression and in the long run failure in caregiving. There are many cases in which vulnerable caregiving women are hooked and abused by ill-intentioned men and become more distrustful and insecure to receive help even from reliable sources. Provided with social support, vulnerable caregiving women can be empowered through necessary parenting and social skills and will become less vulnerable to social conflicts they are faced.

The hardships of the women heads of households in the society

In the recent years, the number of caregiving women has increased in Iran country due to economic instability, stagnation, and the change of cultural patterns. In the state, typically men are caregivers and women are in charge of the household; while, female caregivers have to manage household in addition to being employed to afford family economic necessities. In comparison to male caregivers, family issues are multiplied in case of female caregivers, because they are not skilled workers, or work with lower wages. Motherly responsibilities often conflicts with employment responsibilities and puts a lot of pressure on female caregivers, especially when they want to play both roles perfectly. Considering poverty and financial difficulties that female caregivers struggle with and the negative attitude of the public towards these women, the high rate of mental distress and disorders amongst female caregivers is no surprise. In fact high rates of mental distress and psychological disorders among female caregivers are caused by their social and economic deprivations rather than their gender.

It seems that the major causes of mental distress and specially depression among female caregivers include: history of clinical depression, dirt poor stamina and extensive use of health services, lack of social support, inadequate mothering that also leads to poor mothering, unemployment and financial difficulties. A large population of female caregivers is inhabitants of impoverished vicinities who have never sought to educate or work until they became caregivers. They do not have the necessary education or skills to find fairly-paid occupations and work as low-skilled workers with lower wages compared to men. As a result, they find no way out of poverty.

Housing is another common problem of female caregivers. They have to rent inappropriate houses in marginalized and disadvantaged slums with the lower rent as possible. Financial problems are the most important struggle of female caregivers. Although, some have argued that the structural renovation of industry will help women with more employment opportunities, this is not the case for female caregivers. Female caregivers are suffering from poverty and high rates of unemployment. Their children experience the same. So that, lots of female caregivers’ children live below the poverty line. These children are also deprived of social support and show higher rates of behavioral problems. Boys of these families are more introvert and indicate low school performance. As single parents, female caregivers have shown higher rates of dissatisfaction and distress compared to dual parent households. This dissatisfaction might be due to the extensive social pressure, the burden of heavy work, isolation, and a sense of frustration that female caregivers experience as single parents. These pressures and unpleasant experiences raise aversion and negative attitudes in their points of view that end up aggressive behaviors towards their children.
Entrepreneurship in Iranian Homes: Outreach Centers

Supportive social networks can decrease stress and operate as effective means in alleviating social and financial pressures which female caregivers are confronted with. In fact, social support serves as a shield for female caregivers. In this regard, Imam Ali’s Popular Students Relief Society has defined the range of its social activities in two fields of children and women heads of households who are considered as the most vulnerable groups of the society. The feminization of poverty we are now facing in Iranian society is one of the consequences of female caregivers’ unemployment. Unemployment of these women ends up to their incapability in managing their household. IAPSRS NGO investigates social issues in marginalized neighborhoods and suggests short-term and long-term solutions that can be used as successful models of empowerment. Entrepreneurship centers in marginalized and crime-prone slums are one of the major solutions IAPSRS has given to support female caregivers. The main mission of these centers is to provide female caregivers with sustainable jobs to bring them financial independence and self-sufficiency.

"Entrepreneurship Iranian Homes" are empowering centers established through a special process in marginalized vicinities. First, social workers of IAPSRS assess the neighborhood and then identify vulnerable female caregivers using specialized methods. While making relationships with families to gain trust of the caregivers and their children, their potentials, capabilities, and talents are explored. Then, IAPSRS plans relying on these specific data collected from each neighborhood. Even though these women are not usually educated, they are empowered by emphasizing on their local knowledge and life skill training. IAPSRS empowerment training programs are supplementary plans to motivate the mothers to fulfill their inner potentials. The main objective of empowerment trainings is to help female caregivers learn the value of their abilities as individuals who can collaborate and play effective roles in their society.

This approach of IAPSRS has aid women to value their cognitive abilities and collaborate in making decisions that highly affect their lives, substantially. It has also strengthened and promoted self-confidence, dignity, and decision-making abilities supplemented with individual counseling plans, parenting classes, social skills, and sports such as Yoga. The ultimate goal is to empower female caregivers with promoting their self-confidence and self-esteem, consolidating the family foundations, and strengthening women’s capabilities through education and training programs.

In these centers, women are taught skills such as sewing, cooking, making handicrafts, and so forth to become able to find appropriate jobs in the market or work at home. They are empowered with these trainings and encouraged to produce high-quality products, the benefits of which are all theirs. Working at home programs are applied to women with limited mobility; these women cannot work outside because of several reasons such as having young or sick children, suspicious dogmatic husbands, and their cultures. In addition to entrepreneurship programs, IAPSRS holds literacy and cultural classes for women run by dexterous volunteer. As a result, some of these female caregivers have been encouraged to pursue their education to the extent of entering universities. Trained and supported by IAPSRS, some of these mothers have started their own business relying on IAPSRS entrepreneurship loans.
Currently, IAPSR has established eight “Entrepreneurship Iranian Homes” in Tehran, Karaj, Bandar Abbas, and Mashhad. In other cities such as Kermanshah and Qom, entrepreneurship services are offered in case by case procedures.

Overall, more than 300 female caregivers are receiving social, psychological, entrepreneurial, and empowering supports from the side of IAPSR. The products of these centers include various food products, cloths, hand-crafted arts that are exhibited and sold in annual exhibitions which the NGO holds all over the country.