



## WOMEN'S EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN IRAN

Mohammad Reza Iravani

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Islamic Azad University, Khomeinishahr Branch, Daneshjou Blvd, Iran.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the issue of gender inequality in education, employment and unemployment in Iran against the background of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in the country. Traditionally girls and women in Iran have been in a disadvantageous position with reference to education and employment as elsewhere in the world. But some of the factors, such as the initiative taken during the reign of the Shah and the post-Revolution reforms have had mixed impact on the education of women in the Iran. While enrolment of girls and women in education recorded increase over the years, the nature of education remained more or less unfavourable to women. Education after the Islamic Revolution has been used to promote the values of Islam, and to construct the ideals of motherhood and wifehood. Similarly, equality in employment outside home in terms of both the types of occupations and remuneration has remained a goal still to be achieved. Both traditional values, and the types and levels of education really open to them have contributed to this situation of women's employment in Iran.

**KEY WORDS:** *Education, employment, unemployment, Inequality.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality, which refers to discrimination of the female, is a universal phenomenon found in all the societies in different degrees and forms. Education and employment outside home are two important spheres where gender inequality is realised in modern society. This paper discusses gender inequality in Iran with special reference to the post-Islamic Revolution period. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 has made significant changes in the socio-economic and political structures of Iran. It has had its impact on women's status with reference to education and employment. In dealing with the situation of women's education and employment in Iran, the paper makes certain comparisons between the periods of pre-1979 (i.e., before the Revolution) and the 1990s (i.e., the second decade after the Revolution).

The physical differences between men and women, and the different roles that are inculcated in the socialisation of the two genders, have prepared the ground for a kind of work distribution according to the gender. It also resulted in the unequal distribution of the societal resource of education between the two gender groups. How much of this kind of distribution of work and education is rational? What are its cultural grounds and social consequences? Does this kind of distribution lead one of the genders to deprivation?

Iran has been no exception to the worldwide phenomenon of gender inequality. The data on Iran gathered in 1991 showed that malnutrition in girls was nearly twice as much as in boys whether in urban or rural areas. While 13.5 per cent of the rural and 11 per cent of the urban girls were malnourished in 1991, the corresponding figures were 7 for rural and 6 for urban boys (Bina 2002). Similarly gender inequality in education and employment has continued to exist in Iran. But it has undergone certain changes in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution.

### Gender Inequality in Education

Women's literacy varies enormously from country to country and also from area to area in any particular country; women in the Arab world are still a small minority in the student population. In every country, the rate of male literacy is much higher than female literacy. Even in those countries which have initiated some reforms, there are still considerable disparities between male and female literacy, as well as major discrepancies between the type of female education offered and the socio-economic needs of the various Arab countries. This has been caused by many factors such as unfavourable family attitudes toward female education which still prevail especially in the

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\*Corresponding Author: Dr. Mohammad Reza Iravani, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Islamic Azad University, Khomeinishahr Branch, Daneshjou Blvd, Iran. Email: iravani@iaukhsh.ac.ir 00989131943910

rural areas, where the majority of the Muslim population live, and the high female drop-out rate due to the inequality between urban and rural education.

An important factor responsible for the disparity in female education so far has been the historical interpretation of the jurists. By the strong opposition to female education, it has taken the shape of a clear deviation from the genuine Islamic principles. This factor is still strong in Muslim society, particularly in Arab society, and it influences government policy on educational options and opportunities for women. Saudi Arabia presents a clear example where Islam has been used first to deny and then to discourage women's education.

Another social factor involved in access women to education is marriage. As per statistics of 1991, 2.2 per cent of the girls in the age group of 10-14 years in Iran were already married (Ghiasi 2000). It means that before these girls could finish their education, they had to assume the role of wife/mother. It may also be noted that one out of the 25 marriages that took place in this age group ended in divorce. Around 50 per cent of girls in Iran got married before the age of 19 years (Bina 2002). In marrying at an early age these girls not only increase the vulnerability of family but also are likely to fail as mothers who can motivate their children to develop themselves.

Gender discrimination in education has been quite evident in Iran. The first special school for girls in Iran was established in 1922 and the number of girls and boys who registered at schools in that year had been 7239 and 35000 respectively (Bina 2002). These figures clearly show the girls' retardation in education in 1922. In 1965 the percentage of educated men and women had been 22 and 3.7 respectively. In 1991 there has been substantial improvement in women's participation in education. The percentage of the educated was 81 and 67 among men and women respectively in 1991 (Ghiasi 2000). Although the level of women's education has had a significant increase, it is a fact that the number of educated women has been always less than that of educated men. The situation has been worse in the case of rural women. In 1991 just 50 per cent of the rural women in Iran have been educated (Ghiasi 2000). Nowadays, around 15 per cent of the rural girls of the age group of 6-9 years do not go to school (Bina 2002). Although this number, in comparison with previous years, is relatively small, it is adequate to be of concern.

### **Progress of Women's Education in Iran**

The large gaps between the education levels of women and men that were evident in the early 1970s have essentially disappeared for the younger generation. Although they still lag behind males in mathematics and science achievement, high school females on average outperform males in reading and writing, and take more credits in academic subjects. In addition, females are more likely than males to attend college after high school, and are as likely to graduate with a postsecondary degree." Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the number of Iranian female students has rapidly increased not only in the secondary education level but also in colleges and universities. Further, the number of Iranian women professionally involved in higher education, in either administrative or faculty positions, has risen noticeably.

The National Report on Women in Iran (1995) cited that Iranian female secondary school graduates have had the opportunity to further pursue their education at the university level in the fields befitting their talents and abilities because many educational obstacles facing women have been removed. The increased opportunity for female students and faculty is related to different issues. According to the National Report on Women in Iran (1995), provision of suitable facilities, such as educational environment segregated by gender, has promoted women's education in many fields. Its impact has been seen on religious beliefs too. Consequently, there has been a decline in the difference between the number of male and female students in educational institutions. The National Report on Women in Iran (1995) revealed that academic performance of female students in Iran by 1995 stood at five per cent above that of male students.

The level of achievement of women in higher education and the proportion of female students in different fields of higher education increased noticeably by 1995. Comparison made by the National Report on Women in Iran (1995) between the academic years 1987-1988 and 1992-1993 shows the following achievements in women's graduation from universities in the span of those five years: (1) an increase of 119 per cent in the number of graduates in social sciences and humanities; (2) a two-fold increase in graduates in basic sciences; (3) an increase of 230 per cent in the number of graduates in agricultural and veterinary sciences; (4) an increase of 70 per cent in technical and engineering fields, and medical sciences; and (5) an increase of 246 per cent in different fields of arts. The number of women graduating from universities and higher education institutions increased almost two-fold between 1987-1988 and 1992-1993. The number of women staff members at universities almost doubled during this same period. Among the 30,262 academics serving in the field of education in 1992-1993, about 18 per cent were women. In 1995, 5.7 per cent of professors, 16.5 per cent of associate professors, 21.9 per cent of assistant professors, and 36.9 per cent of university instructors were women. A total of 2,220 women were staff members of the faculties of medical sciences, which represented 18 per cent of the total (The National Report on Women in Iran,

1995). The development in women's education had its impact on the position of women in Iran, especially in employment.

There has been some improvement in the participation of women in education between 1977 and 1992 (Table 1). The percentage of girls at the primary level rose from 38 in 1977 to 47 in 1992 and the corresponding figures for the secondary school were 36 and 42 respectively. Similarly at the high school level women's percentage rose from 40 in 1977 to 44 in 1992. Participation of women in university and technical/professional education has remained more or less the same. The percentage of women in university education was 30 in 1977 and 28 in 1991. Similarly women constituted 20 per cent of the technical/professional in 1977 and 19.7 per cent in 1992. These fields of higher and professional education have continued to be largely the monopoly of men.

**Table 1: Percentage of Women Enrolled at Different Levels of Education in Iran in 1977 and 1992**

Level of Education	1977	1992
Primary school	38.0	47.0
Secondary school	36.0	42.0
High school	40.0	44.0
University	30.0	28.0
Technical & Professional	20.0	19.7

Source: Amini 2001

According to the UNESCO statistics, adult literacy rates in Iran (for the population aged 15 and above) have increased from 63.2 per cent (72.2 for male and 54 for female) in 1990 to 76 per cent (83 for male and 68.9 for female) in 2000. One finds further gender equality when literacy rates for Iranian youth are taken into consideration. Similar improvement in the literacy rate is noticed in the youth population in Iran. The youth literacy rates (for the age group 15- 24 years) have increased from 86.3 per cent (91.7 for male and 80.8 for female) in 1990 to 93.8 per cent (96.2 for male and 91.3 for female) in 2000 (UNESCO 2002: 218). Although there has been significant progress in female literacy for the total population and the youth in Iran during the decade of 1990-2000, women continue to lag behind men in literacy rate. One encouraging finding here is that the gulf between the literacy rates of the male and female youth has considerably narrowed down; in 2000 the difference was only 4.9 percentage points.

Various educational indicators, such as participation in primary, secondary and higher education, and adult literacy rates, point to considerable progress towards gender equality in Iran over the last decade. The most significant progress has been at the primary education level, where the gender parity index (GPI) or the ratio of girls in gross enrolment has gone up from 0.90 in 1990-1991 to 0.96 in 1999-2000, and at the secondary education level the GPI rose from 0.73 to 0.92 during the same period (UNESCO 2002: 242).

**Table 2: Repetition Rate of Boys and Girls in the Five Grades of Primary Education**

Grade	Girls	Boys
First	7.9	10.2
Second	4.7	7.6
Third	2.9	5.4
Fourth	3.1	6.1
Fifth	2.0	4.1

Source: UNESCO 2002: 266

Yet another indicator to assess the progress towards gender equality in education is the rate of repetition in a grade or class. The repetition rate in primary education in Iran has become lower for girls in grades 1 through 5 (Table 2). In 1999-2000 repetition was consistently higher for boys in the all the five grades. In the fifth grade it was twice as that of girls.

#### **Nature of Women's Education after the Revolution**

Many scholars believed that one of the positive outcomes of the Islamic Revolution was the founding of all-girl schools for the continuation of female education. Schools were valued because the girls accepted the role models of educated women, as they saw other women applying their education towards economic improvement. Also, parents were not worried about sending their daughters to the universities because they believed that the Islamic education posed no harm. Besides, the fact that there were no male students and male teachers in the schools for girls brought peace of mind for parents. In addition, schools were built after the Revolution to accommodate the baby boom in Iran. With the strict application of the veil, parents were willing to send their girls

to school because the veil was seen to protect them in the streets. It is also noteworthy that since the separation of the sexes in education the number of female students at the universities also increased. This may be because of the lack of job opportunities elsewhere. Education became an outlet for their dreams for improvement.

The human body and specifically the reproductive organs have been left out of biology textbooks and so has nudity in any religious reference, such as in the Garden of Eden. Another consideration for the textbooks and their applicability has been the cultural and geographical diversity of Iran. There have been so many ethnically and linguistically different groups in Iran that there have often been complaints about the context of the textbooks. The citizens of rural, remote areas of Iran have found it difficult to associate themselves with the textbooks because of their dominance of urban images and examples. Moreover, the topics that the female students were allowed to study changed after the Revolution. Women were not offered courses like agriculture, geology and accounting, while the study of gynaecology and midwifery became solely their responsibility. Jobs that required temporary relocation or extensive travel were guided away from women because that would remove them from their 'natural' habitat.

As of 1985, however, many restrictions were lifted and all study areas became available for both the sexes. The formal order was given in 1988 by President Rafsanjani when he stated that there were no barriers to education for women in any field and in 1989 he emphasised the need to create greater higher education opportunities for Iran's youth as well as equal pay for equal work by women. Many authors did mention, however, that one could never be sure about which subjects were open and which ones were not. Overall, the subject of female education in Iran has remained controversial. But it appears that women are now assuming more than ever demanding roles in society, other than those of mother and wife. They are looking for employment and fair opportunities. They aspire to be doctors, engineers, and teachers and to contribute to their family income. Girls are absorbing what they are taught and are ready to apply it when they graduate. However, the problem remains that the high rate of poverty, in conjunction with the stereotypical patriarchal ideas, does not make it easy for them to prove their value and utilise their educational training adequately.

The dual role and responsibility of the post-Revolutionary woman is clearly reflected in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Constitution "considers women's employment and their social and economic activities to be very meaningful and conducive to social well-being" and at the same time emphasises the role of the woman "as a mother and her significance in maintaining strong family bonds and affectionate relationships" (Women's Bureau of the Presidential Office 1997: 58). We are not the guardians of women to give them something by force or take it away from them. We are only preparing the ground for women to recognise their rights and capabilities, and acknowledge their own merits. Once they have done that, they will reach their rightful position in society. And the first prerequisite is to increase women's knowledge and education (La'li 1999: 239).

### **Employment of Women in Iran**

Employment of women outside home is directly based on the level and type of their educational achievement. Acquisition of higher occupational status requires professional training. As the number of women pursuing higher and professional education is low, one cannot expect large number of women in professional careers. In view of the trend of increasing number of women pursuing higher education and professional training, one can expect higher participation of women in economic activities in the future.

However, the status of occupation of educated women and the income obtained from it are often not commensurate with the level of education that they have achieved. In most cases, women are forced to accept jobs that are simpler and less remunerative than those that men with the same level of education get. At times perception of such discrimination makes employed women to leave the labour market and stay at home.

The higher the women get educated and professionally trained, the more will be their opportunities for jobs with better salary and fringe benefits. Increase in higher and professional education, and employment of women would mean differential expectations on women's contribution to national economy and family income on the one hand, and decrease in the influence of traditional attitudes and practices. It also delays marriage of women, postponement of pregnancy and reduction of children. These are changes that facilitate women's increased entry into the labour market. An important issue is of encouraging women to get a job immediately after higher/professional education.

The present conditions for investment in human resources development of women are not ideal and one does not expect that increasing the sum of money invested in, can lead to increasing women's participation in economic activities. Another issue, that we must pay attention to, is the people's cultural attitude toward women's occupation. The mass media, unfortunately, especially movies and textbooks, do not set a suitable cultural pattern about women's occupation. Rectification of cultural attitude of society to women's occupation in producing or doing social services can improve the participation of women in economic activities.

**Table 3: Economically Active and Inactive Women in Iran by Work Status during 1956-1996 (In Percentages)**

Women	Work Status	1956	1966	1976	1986	1996
Economically Active	Employed	09.2	11.5	10.8	06.1	07.6
	Unemployed	00.0	01.1	02.1	02.1	01.2
Economically Inactive	Learning	03.0	07.4	14.8	16.6	26.6
	House-keeping	79.5	73.3	68.8	68.7	58.4
	Gaining income without working	00.0	00.0	02.1	00.8	01.6
	Other	08.3	06.7	01.4	05.7	04.6
<b>Total (N)</b>		<b>100 (6242)</b>	<b>100 (8206)</b>	<b>100 (11206)</b>	<b>100 (16033)</b>	<b>100 (22379)</b>

Source: The Statistics Centre of Iran 2002

The data in Table 3 show that about 10 per cent of the women in Iran were gainfully employed during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The two decades following the Islamic Revolution saw a decline in the percentage of employed women. Another observation on the data here is that the majority (58.4-79.5%) of the women were engaged in house-keeping during the period. Another point that is visible in the data is that the percentage of women engaged in education has been increasing steadily – from 3 per cent in 1956 to 26.6 per cent in 1996.

**Table 4: Percentage of Employed Women in Iran, and Some Developing and Developed Countries During the 1980s**

Developing Countries			Developed Countries		
Country	Year	Percentage	Country	Year	Percentage
Egypt	1984	18.7	Austria	1987	40.1
India	1981	25.9	Canada	1986	42.9
Indonesia	1985	35.9	France	1987	43.3
Korea (South)	1987	39.9	Germany	1987	39.5
Pakistan	1980	03.7	Italy	1987	36.4
Tunis	1984	21.3	Japan	1985	38.6
Turkey	1980	30.0	Sweden	1987	48.7
Iran	1988	09.0	United States	1987	45.5

Source: ILO 1988: 169

Table 4 gives information on the percentage of employed women in some select countries in the decade following the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Among the 16 countries appearing in the table Iran had the lowest percentage of women employment (9%) after Pakistan (3.7%).

### Prospects of Women's Employment

One of the most important motivations that make women to work outside home is the need of contributing to family income. This is especially true in the cases where income from man's economic pursuit is inadequate to support the family. But not all women, who really want to work and earn, are able to do so. From the part of women there are many factors that block the progress in their employment. Contrary to public opinion, it is not richness or lack of interest or low level of education, but taking care of children in family is the main reason why women are forced to sacrifice gainful employment and stay at home.

In order to establish equality of opportunities between men and women, they must be given equal salary and fringe benefits. This needs change in the position of women in the labour market. But it will not be an easy task because, under the influence of the predominant social and cultural values, most people think that men are superior to women in the political, social and economic spheres.

In order to achieve the goal of gender equality in employment, the government should strictly ban any gender discrimination in employment and provide women a situation conducive to equal opportunity to get jobs and remuneration commensurate with their education. Women must be made capable of benefiting from development programmes through access to better health, new skills and technologies, higher occupational status and more income. This will enable them to have equal rights with men and control over their own body.

The government and other employers must recognise the activities of women at home and provide them social insurance and facilities to help them combine household activities with employment outside home. They may consider reducing the time of women's work outside home, so that women can perform their other works related to the family.

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