

THE FUTURE OF IRAN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM
**Women and Education in the
Islamic Republic of Iran:**
REPRESSIVE POLICIES, UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

By Goli M. Rezai-Rashti



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This working paper was produced for the Legatum Institute's workshop on Educational Reform on 12 November 2012. The workshop was part of 'The Future of Iran' project, which is designed to encourage Iranians to begin thinking about the challenges they will face if, or when, they suddenly find themselves in a position to carry out major political, social and economic reforms.

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This paper focuses on the increasing participation of women in education in Iran and the contradictory and unexpected consequences of such increased participation. The paper draws on theories of critical policy analysis elaborated by Ozga (2000, 1987), Ball (2006, 1994), Rizvi and Lingard (2010) and argues that policy texts at the local level of practice encounter unexpected and complex dynamics because of the "embodied agency of individuals who are its object" (Ball, 1994). In Iran, one could argue that the policies regarding women's access to education did not meet their intended expectation and failed to create 'Ideal Muslim Women' (Mehran, 2003). Today, despite such regressive policies, Iranian women have an unmistakable presence in public life and have resisted and been able to challenge their unequal treatment under the present government. As Kandiyoti (1988) argued, they have engaged in a process of bargaining with patriarchy. The Iranian experience is certainly useful for other Muslim women and women in general who are targets of the strict religious interpretations of the role of women and their status.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1979, increasing participation and access of women to all levels of education in Iran have been a significant phenomenon. Policies towards education and women have been intertwined to reflect the appropriate place of women within family and society. Women were perceived to be the holders of tradition and culture. It was argued that the previous Pahlavi regime corrupted women, constructing them as objects and treating them as commodities. As Paidar (2001) argued, gender relations were seen as the most significant social change in the aftermath of the Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini strongly believed that women are signifiers of national identity and the first task should be to Islamise their behaviour, appearance and position (p.3).

Early in the Revolution, the main focus of educational reform was on the Islamisation of the educational system. Khomeini, the leader of the Revolution, in several speeches and interviews had acknowledged the participation of women in the Revolution and their important role within family and society. He advocated for women's education as long as no one "wants to do something against chastity or harmful to the nation" (cited in

In the last three decades, the policies towards women and their access to education have experienced several transformations.

Afshar, 1982: 98). Khomeini was critical of the role of women during the previous Pahlavi regime. In his words:

The era of suppression wanted to turn our fighting women into disgraced beings, but it was God's will. They wanted to treat women like an object, like a commodity. But Islam has involved and involves women, like men, in every aspect of life. All people of Iran, whether men or women, must reconstruct the ruin which they have left us. (cited in Afshar, 1982: 99)

Only God knows what has befallen the Iranian people in these times, when women have been ordered to remove their hijabs. This rips apart their humanity. Can a Muslim possibly be pleased with what has happened and with this insolent order for women to unveil? No! The Iranian woman is also not pleased with this. She has dealt her opponent many blows and has revolted against this recklessness which calls unveiling a form of freedom. What kind of freedom is this? (Khaz Ali, 2010, p.4)

In the last three decades, the policies towards women and their access to education have experienced several transformations. We can discuss three distinct periods since the Revolution of 1979: 1) The 1980s: Islamisation, the Cultural Revolution and gender segregation 2) 1990–2005: Reform and Liberalisation and 3) 2005–present: the Conservative Resurgence. The paper will proceed as follows: in the first part, the theoretical and conceptual framework for the paper will be established; then, I will discuss policies regarding women's education and discuss current challenges and unexpected consequences based on my field research on women and education in Iran.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars in the field of critical policy analysis provide a conceptual framework that is most appropriate to the study of women and education in Iran. According to Rizvi and Lingard (2010), policy is both text and the authoritative allocation of values (p.7). Understanding policymaking in education as the allocation of values seems to be relevant to the Iranian Cultural Revolution and the consequent reform of the education system. The main purpose was to re-allocate certain values that were perceived to be in line with Islamic teaching. The Islamisation of the education system was the first priority of the government. Ozga (2000) argues that critical analysis of education policy is especially significant for understanding its impact on all those who are directly affected by the policy and its implementation. Ball (2006) argues that policy is a discourse that can determine who can speak, what can be said, how, where, and with what authority (p. 48). However, he argues that the analysis of policy at the micro level of practice is very significant. The implementation of policy encounters resistance and challenge by those who are its object. The exercise of power is never complete because of agency. Policies are contested, challenged and re-interpreted at the level of practice. Ball (1994) argues:

Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete as far as they relate to or map on the 'wild confusion' of local practice. Policies are crude and simple. Practice is sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable. Policy as practice is 'created' in a trialectic of dominance, resistance, and chaos/freedom. Thus, policy is not simple asymmetry of power: Control [or dominance] can never be totally secured, in part because of agency. It will be open to erosion and undercutting by action, embodied agency of those people who are its object (pp.10–11).

In this paper, I argue that on the one hand, policies introduced since the 1979 Islamic Revolution had a series of consequences for women, but on the other hand, women resisted, reinterpreted and altered some of these policies. It is also important to mention that development in women's education has not been linear and we could discuss three significant political and historical changes that affected women and their educational attainment (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011).

FIRST PERIOD (1980S): ISLAMISATION, CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND GENDER SEGREGATION

In the early period of the Revolution, the policies towards women were essentially based on dismantling the symbols, institutions and mores of the Pahlavi regime. Most policies were formulated through a variety of ad hoc initiatives by a range of stakeholders in power, many with conflicting views (Paidar, 1996, p.61). The Family Protection Act of 1967 (amended in 1973) of the Pahlavi era, which enhanced women's rights within the family, was abrogated and replaced by Sharia-based family law that reinstated men's right to divorce and polygamy, and introduced compulsory veiling for women. In terms of sex segregation, there was always gender segregation in elementary and public secondary schools in Iran. During the last decades of the Pahlavi regime, only some elite

private schools were co-educational. In universities, male and female students were able to attend class together but had to sit in separate rows.

With the launch of the 'Islamic Cultural Revolution' in 1980, universities were shut down for several years (Rezai-Rashti & James, 2009), during which time faculty were purged. When the universities re-opened in 1984, women were barred from several fields of study. According to Shaditalab (2005) women were restricted to majors in 91 academic fields (91 out of 169 majors, mostly technical and engineering) (p.44).

Furthermore, the regime established the Bureau for Combatting Corruption (the morality police) in order to spy on the activities of men and women and interrogate and imprison those who would not follow the rules. Any manifestation of Western influence on women and men and their relationship was considered a public offence (Paidar, 2001). In fact, most men and women had to carry their birth certificates in public spaces to prove a spousal relationship or other religiously sanctioned relationship (such as brother and sister).

On one hand, policies introduced since the 1979 Islamic Revolution had a series of consequences for women, but on the other, women resisted, reinterpreted and altered some of these policies.

In reforming education, there were both quantitative and qualitative improvements in the education of girls during this period. The High Council of Education laid out religious and spiritual goals first, followed by scientific, social, political and economic goals (Paivandi, 2008; Higgins & Shoar-Ghaffari, 1994). The paradoxical access of women to education (Mehran, 2003) was intended to moralise and create the ideal Muslim woman and encourage women to have key responsibilities within their families.

During this period the literacy rate among women increased significantly (from 35.5% in 1976 to 52.1% in 1986) (Shaditalab, 2005). There was also a significant growth in the percentage of women attending elementary and secondary levels of education.

Contrary to the increase in primary and secondary education, the percentage of female students in higher education decreased. This could be attributed to the closure of universities for several years and also the restriction to enter numerous fields of study for women. During this period, textbooks were revised to reflect the ideology of the Islamic Republic. Several published works and research indicate the degree of ideological influences of the Islamic Republic on school curricula (Paivandi, 2008; Alemi & Jafari, 2012; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Amini & Birjandi, 2012).

SECOND PERIOD (1990-2005): LIBERALISATION AND REFORM

The war with Iraq ended in 1988 and Ayatollah Khomeini died in 1989. Under the presidency of Rafsanjani and the High Council of Cultural Revolution, the Women's Social and Cultural Council was set up and charged with studying the legal, social, and economic problems of women (Farhi, 1998, p.6). The Council, with the support of

'Islamic feminists,' lifted all restrictions on women entering any fields of study in 1993 (Boozari, 2001). Zahra Rahnavard, wife of the former prime minister and the leader of the Green Movement in 2009, was credited with having negotiated the removal of barriers and influencing the decision of the council to lift all restrictions on women entering any fields of study (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011).

Table 1: Youth Literacy (ages 15-24)

	1987	2007
Women	65.52	96.13
Men	84.85	96.13

Source: Attaie Ashtiani, Z. (2008). Women Status in Islamic Republic of Iran. The Centre for Women and family Affairs. www.women.org. (p. 22)

During the 1990s, women's enrolment in educational institutions began to increase. The establishment and the expansion of private universities "Daneshgah-e-Azad-e Islami" also contributed to the increasing enrolment for both women and men. In brief, the 1990s were characterised by the following: a) Liberalisation and a shift in gender policy; b) the growing visibility and active participation of Islamic feminists and changing and shifting policies towards women; and c) the emergence of a reform movement which led to the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997, and again in 2001.

Clearly an environment had emerged that was more conducive to female participation in higher education. Thus in 2002-2003, more women than ever before entered all fields of studies except engineering. As shown in table 2, women's share of Bachelor's degrees in 2003-2004 was nearly 50%, their share of Master's degrees was 27%, and their share of PhD degrees was 24%.

Table 2: Number of female graduates by sector and study levels in 2003-04

Study Level	Public		Non-Public		Total	
	Female	All	Female	All	Female	All
Associate	17,130	43,866	23,100	48,477	40,230	92,343
Bachelor	40,205	74,430	43,066	92,342	83,271	166,772
Master	2,210	8,454	749	2,636	3,004	11,090
Professional Doctorate	1,945	4,669	615	1,239	2,560	5,908
Ph.D.	554	2,263	6	41	560	2,304
Total	62,044	133,682	67,581	144,735	129,625	278,417

Source: Ministry of Science, Research & Technology (2003, p. 74). Note: The female share of the total is 46.5%. At Masters and Ph.D. level it is 24-27%; for professional doctorates it is 41.6%.

Table 3 indicates that the percentage of female students at all levels increased significantly during the 15 years from 1995-2010. It is, however, interesting to see that women's participation in secondary and higher education slightly declined. This might be as a result of some regressive policies that the Ministry of Health put in place to limit

the percentage of women entering medical fields and postgraduate studies. It is not clear why the percentage is lower in secondary education.

Table 3: Iran (Islamic Republic) Female students' participation at different academic levels (1995, 2000, 2005, 2010)

Year		1995	2000	2005	2010
Pre-primary	Total number	67782	125856	256820	234365
	Percentage	48%	50%	52%	51%
Primary	Total number	4594053	3938766	2991211	2930152
	Percentage	47%	47%	48%	49%
Total secondary All programmes	Total number	3402131	4703729	4357512	3648542
	Percentage	45%	47%	48%	45%
Total tertiary	Total number	384461	635973	1083664	1874966
	Percentage	37% (1996)	45%	51%	49.5%

Source: UNESCO. (2012). Data center. Retrieved September 27, 2012, from stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx

During this period women's academic publications and research saw an increase as well (Gaeini-Radan, 2006). However, both the female share of university academic appointments and the female share of senior administrative positions remained low.

As Tazmini (2009) has argued, the Khatami era was characterised by a gradualist approach to change and reform within the existing system rather than a radical shake-up of the system. Nevertheless, expectations were raised and while reforms were constantly blocked by the conservative forces, there was a relaxation of many cultural practices. Khatami's appointment of several women to high positions within his administration (two cabinet ministers) and his reference to the significance of civil society encouraged a reform movement that sought more civil liberties and political rights. During Khatami's government, Massoumeh Ebtekar became the first vice president and head of the Organisation for the Protection of Environment and Zahra Shojaie became the advisor to the president for women's affairs. Khatami (2003) discussed the discriminatory law that prevented women's participation in the earlier years of the Revolution and believed that although 60% of admissions had been women, the government should not establish a quota system to restrict women's access to education. As he clearly stated:

In the early years of Revolution we made many restrictions for our female students to enter universities which led to a sharp decline in their progress. Then restrictions were gradually removed. As a result we witnessed the growth in women's participation in higher education at a remarkable rate. In 2000, 60% of the students who entered universities were female. This may neither be ideal nor normal. But I believe that in the near future it will reach its balance. We have to let this equilibrium to be restored naturally. It is not justifiable to artificially create obstacles for women and to reduce their participation in higher education. Current circumstances demonstrate that young women face more restrictions and deprivations than young men. The best way is to open

the higher education system at various levels to women and to remove the quota system in courses such mining, engineering and the medical discipline. (Khatami, 2007: 246 cited in Aryan, 2012, p.42)

THIRD PERIOD (2005-PRESENT): THE RESURGENCE OF CONSERVATIVES—BACK TO THE DEBATE ON GENDER SEGREGATION

This period is characterised by the resurgence of conservative ideas towards women. The Ahmedinejad government made several attempts to put an end to the reform movement. One of these attempts was to create a 'Special Council for Development and Promotion of Humanities.' The Council appointed seven humanities scholars and the main task of the council was to oversee the Islamisation of the disciplines. The Zanan Magazine (a reformist women's magazine) was shut down in 2008. A number of professors have been asked to retire or have been dismissed because they did not support the new policy (Erdbrink, 2011).

More recently, there has been increasing discussion about the high percentage of women and their access to various fields of study at universities. Both the Ministry of Education (Elementary and Secondary Education) and the Ministry of Science and Technology are attempting gender segregation and limiting or restricting women's access to some 77 fields of study. It is reported that the most restrictions were published in the annual manual of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, which regulates higher education in Iran. The manual that was published in August after the entrance examination in June (Concour) listed the available fields of study for women and men. In that, each individual university imposed its own restrictions based on gender—36 public universities have banned women from studying in 77 fields of study that included technical and applied science majors, political science, computer science, and engineering. These fields are more prestigious and have a higher probability of access to job markets and higher paying jobs. The manual also restricted male applicants to study fields such as history, linguistics, theology, applied chemistry, and Arabic/Persian Language, literature, sociology and philosophy (University of Esfahan). Interestingly, neither these universities nor the Minister of Science, Research, and Technology have explained why they restricted choices and adopted the process of 'single-gendering'. It is, however, public knowledge that Kamaran Daneshjoo, the Minister responsible for higher education since his appointment in 2009, emphasized the significance of gender segregation and the establishment of quota systems that resulted in limiting women's access to some postgraduate courses and the segregation of some classes for women and men (Vakil, 2012).

Overall, there does not seem to be a clear pattern for single-gendering the fields. It appears that this move does the following: 1) facilitates the government's desire for gender segregation in higher education 2) limits women's access to fields with higher employability in the labour market and 3) fulfils their interpretation of the religious and misogynist views that some fields are not naturally suitable for women.

The Ministry of Education also announced that they will extend gender segregation in school curricula and textbooks (Frud, 2012). On January 16, 2012, the Minister of Education, Hamidreza Gadzhibabai, announced in a press conference that the Ministry is planning to design textbooks relevant to the education system in Iran.

In terms of the number and percentage of women in higher education institutions, there seems to be a significant decline in the percentage of women in private universities (Islamic Azad) while the percentage increased in public universities. In addition, in 2008–2009, 68% of Payam Noor Distance Learning University was female (Aryan, 2012).

Table 4: Total number and percentage of female students in Public Universities

Gender/Year	1991/92	2001/02	2005/06	2008/09	2009/10
Female	28%	50%	55%	58%	59%
Total	344,045	579,070	1,191,048	1,917,183	1,679,863

Table 5: Total number and percentage of female students in Islamic Azad (private) universities

Gender/Year	1996/97	2004/05	2006/07	2007/08	2009/10
Female	41%	48%	46%	44%	39.7%
Total	613,468	1,098,491	1,289,637	1,302,569	1,460,009

Source: Aryan, K. (2012). p. 46

THE IMPACT OF HIGHER EDUCATION—VOICES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN

This part of the paper is based on my field research in Iran during 2006–2009. In total, I have conducted 52 interviews with male and female university students and professors. Obtaining official permission to conduct research is very difficult. The initial intention was to conduct more interviews but considering the political turmoil and dangerous nature of conducting the field work, it was decided that the data collected was sufficient for understanding the impact of access to higher education on gender relations.

I would argue that women's access to higher education had some significant impact on gender relations in Iran. Returning to the conceptual framework established in the beginning of this paper, one cannot look at repressive policies directed by the government to assume that those policies could be practiced as intended. Several studies (such as Paidar, 2001; Tohidi, 2003; Najmabadi, 1998; Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009) have already demonstrated the complexities of the political situation and the significant role that the 'Islamic feminists' (or as Paidar calls them, 'pragmatic feminists') played in changing gender relations and claiming women's rights in Iran. In following the same nuanced analysis, one could argue that the regime has not been successful in imposing its repressive policies without challenge. Mehran (2003) argues that perhaps the regime was not able to create its ideal Muslim woman.

In the following section I provide several examples that indicate the impact of higher education on gender relations.

Change of Attitude

Participants generally discussed the positive impact of higher education on gender relations. They discussed that access to university education is creating an environment that provides opportunities for social relations that would not have been otherwise possible. Female students discussed how university has created a safe space and how they are becoming more confident. As one female PhD student who claimed to be from a traditional family discussed:

I think there is no difference between women and men. I experienced this myself. When I came to university, I was staying away from interacting with men at first but gradually because I was a very good student during my Bachelor's degree, my confidence improved and this affected my relationships. Now, I don't see any difference between men and women and I can become friends with them and feel comfortable and equal.

Similarly, male students also discussed the positive relationships that they have established with female students. One of the fourth year engineering students talked about how the relationship between men and women is changing. He saw this transformation through a personal experience and considered this a generational issue:

For our generation, we are starting to believe in women's abilities ... For example although in my department there are 75% men and only 25% women, in the past few years I have noticed that some of the girls are far superior in terms of their intelligence ... Girls are making more effort and the best student in our faculty is a woman with the highest mark in our class of fourth-year engineering.

Another important element of access to education is the entry of women from traditional families and from the lower middle class, as well as some from rural origins and small towns (Mehran, 2009). It is argued that women from these categories have been influenced even further because education provides an opportunity for them to leave their small town and village and have a sense of independence.

MARRIAGE, FERTILITY AND EDUCATION

Women's access to education is changing the traditional role of women and men. Those interviewed discussed the difficulties for young educated women to marry someone with less education and earning power. For example, my interview with a young female professor who was just promoted to full professor revealed that this is certainly an issue that concerns many women and men. She explained:

When I was studying for my Bachelor's degree, I had many proposals for marriage. After entering the Master's degree, the number of proposals decreased and by the time I entered PhD program, they became non-existent.

A female PhD student who was married to someone who just entered a doctoral program also talked about the difficulties of marriage for both women and men. She said it is not only men who do not intend to marry someone better educated, but also that women themselves are reluctant to marry someone who is less well-educated. She described her own situation:

I wanted my husband to be accepted in the PhD program. He wanted it too. We both liked it ... One of my conditions for the marriage was for him to get accepted. I wanted my husband to be at the same level of education.

Another graduate student claimed that as she was gaining more education, she was becoming more conscious of the difficulties she would face to get married:

The more education I had, the more worried I was getting. First of all, there would be fewer cases of men who would propose to me. Some men might even be afraid to approach. I think men have trouble being involved with someone who has higher education than them. It rarely happens.

As a result of increasing women's access to higher education, the age of marriage for both men and women has increased to the mid to late twenties (Aryan, 2012). In the 1980s there was a significant increase in population. However, after the war with Iraq and because of the effective family planning program organised by the government, Iran now has one of the lowest fertility rates in the Middle East and North Africa. In 1976, the growth rate was 2.7. In 1986, it increased drastically to 3.9, but by 2006, it was reduced to 1.6 (Aryan, 2012, p.42).

MEHRIEH: TRADITION OR MODERN?

Mehrieh is a price that is normally specified in the marriage contract and is payable to women after the consummation of marriage. The woman can claim her mehrieh anytime during the marriage, but traditionally claims it after the divorce (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011). Discussing mehrieh with students and faculty members shows that women use their agency to overcome discriminatory laws imposed on them (Rezai-Rashti, 2011). They have used tradition in an effective way as a bargaining chip to claim their access to divorce and custody of children (which was granted to men after the Revolution).

One female participant who had personal experience with the family laws because of her own divorce was a strong supporter of mehrieh. She discussed the significance of mehrieh in the context of current family laws in Iran:

For myself, I am a strong believer in mehrieh for women. Mehrieh should not be seen in a traditional sense. In this country, women cannot negotiate their civil rights through legal means. I was married for five years and found out that I could not live with my husband any longer. We discussed divorce but he said no. My mehrieh was 1,370 gold coins [Sekeh-ye-azadi]. I threatened that I would litigate for my mehrieh. This was the only way that I could secure my divorce. I am absolutely sure that because of my high mehrieh he agreed to divorce.

It appears that culture became both a problem and a solution for women. The mehrieh has provided a space for women to bargain for their civil rights that had not been granted to them by the Constitution of Islamic Republic (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Gender relations are going through significant changes. Women's participation in education is providing them with a space for social relations, increasing their confidence, and making them challenge their unequal treatment within family and society. It is safe to argue that the regime's paradoxical ideas of educating women did not achieve its intended goals. Women's presence in public life in Iran will create challenges for any future government that gains power in Iran. Recent development towards the discourse of re-segregation in universities is as a result of the government's loss of control of gender relations and its attempt to figure out how best to control women's aspirations for independence and access to fields of study that would secure them higher paying jobs in the future. This is a backlash and a challenge for the women's movement in Iran. It is no doubt that the current Iranian government is in a serious crisis politically, economically and socially. However, women will persevere in this process, challenge and demand their rightful place and continue to bargain with the patriarchal gender regime in Iran.

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