

Women Education in Iran after 1979

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Abstract

More than thirty eight years have passed since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, yet there remain a number of questions and ambiguities about the way the Islamic Republic and its laws deal with contemporary problems and current circumstances, particularly with regard to women and women's rights. Women and the image of women played an important role in the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution and its sequel. Women themselves participated in the uprising and firmly supported the Revolution. The government of the Shah had been determined to westernize Iran, particularly with regards to women. It championed reform on women's issues, particularly in the field of education and equal rights with men. The largest campaign concentrated on unveiling Iranian women and removing the hijab, which the government claimed would liberate women by saving them from the hijab which was an instrument of backwardness and regression. This paper will shed light on different issues and study the current position of women in various spheres particularly education in post revolutionary Iran.

Key Words: Women, Iran, Education, Khomeini

Introduction

Pahlavi's and also the Islamic regime linked women's social and familial position to the status of the nation and placed gender policies at the heart of their programmes for national development and independence. Pahlavi's were the protagonists of women emancipation, during their rule they advocated education for women. They tried to come women out from the traditional society and bring them at the forefront through education. Reza shah after ascending the throne made efforts to emancipate women he tried to make women modern like the western societies. From

time to time they made laws in favour of women by abandoning the veil and change in the marriage law. The Tehran University First time admits women for higher education in 1934. A special goal of educational policy of Reza shah was to encourage girls to go to schools at all levels and thus eventually to change the overall status of women. Under the traditional system, the number of girls in schools had been very small.¹ Reza shah provided free education and employment opportunities for women; his aim was to achieve national progress through the legal construction of women as social participants, educated mothers, and subservient wives. Mohammad Reza shah accelerated the expansion of education of women in the 1960's and 1970's. Under Muhammad Reza shah women gained more privileges such as, right to vote in 1963, and more access to education and employment opportunities. The women became more active socially and politically in this era. Before the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty the female enrolment has increased at all levels especially in higher education. But at the same time a large number of women were illiterate, mostly rural, poor and women from ethnic minorities. Generally the rural women were traditional and religious than their urban counterparts. They did not like to go the secular and co educated schools. Parents did not allow their daughters to go the schools because the teachers would have been male. Literacy rate has increased only in the urban areas. The small portion of women from urban upper and middle class has got benefitted.²

Women Education after 1979

The Islamic republic came into existence after the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, strongly advocated education for women. Imam Khomeini argued that Iranian women should have a vital role in the Iranian society. He said “we are proud that our women, young and old, are active in the educational, economic and military fields, more effectively than men, towards forwarding the goals of Islam and the holy Quran”.³ The constitution of the IRI considers women's employment and social and economic activities to be

very meaningful and conducive to social well being. While at the same time emphasizing the role of the women as a mother and her significance in maintaining strong family bonds and affectionate relationships, the main goals of the female education in the IRI are;

- Improving the conditions of women through education and improving women's participation in the socioeconomic affairs of the society and family.
- Bringing about a higher level of participation among women in social, cultural, educational and economic affairs while maintaining the values of the family and the character of the Muslim women.

The schools have been assigned the task of educating today's girl to become the ideal and multidimensional women of tomorrow, that is, the superwomen who is to be an exemplary wife and mother while being actively involved in social and political affairs.⁴

The education system of the Islamic republic of Iran, underscoring Article 30 of the constitutional law, stipulates that all Iranian children are entitled to benefit from education up to the end of upper secondary program; therefore, the Ministry of Education is duty bound to provide required grounds for making education accessible to all children and the adolescents. The entire mandatory education system, including all approved regulations, policies and strategies, underline equal access to education for girls and boys. By exercising these regulations and policies, ascending trend has been experienced in the post revolutionary Iran in terms of gender parity index with regard to intake rate, gross and net enrolment ratio, transition rate from primary up to upper secondary education. The most important factors effective in increasing gender parity are designating female teacher for girl's class, separating mixed classrooms to, organizing central-village schools, boarding schools, central dormitory, introducing more flexibility in teaching methods and distance learning. The literacy movement has contributed significantly by conducting applied education and teaching basic skills, while presenting literacy program at Community Learning Centre (CLC) have been effective in increasing women's

⁴ Golnar Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran" Islam and Education: Major Themes in Education, ed, Tahir Abbas, Vol II, Routledge, New York and London, 2011, pp 111-113

literacy rate. As a result of which, 82% of total population aged 15 and above have been literate based on national census of the year 2006. The literacy rate for men was 87% and 77% for women.⁵

After the revolution the students were segregated by sex, there were separate schools for boys and girls. Only female teachers teach in girl's schools and male teachers in boy's schools. The exceptions are only where there is shortage of classrooms or female teachers. However, both male and female university professors teach at coeducational and women's universities. At the Universities and higher colleges there is coeducation. The parents were feeling comfortable by sending their daughters to the separate schools; they look the environment of the schools conducive for the education of the girls. Accordingly they send their daughters to schools and in this way the enrolment of the girls started increasing just after the revolution. The number of women attending institutions of higher education has been steadily growing in Iran since 1989. The results of 2002 *Konkur* (the national entrance exam), 62% of those who passed were women.⁶ The women have surpassed men in higher education. Colleges and universities are full of female students. Many factors have contributed to the increased enrolment of women in Iranian colleges and universities. First commonly cited reason for women's progress in entering institutions of higher education is the solid and strong Islamic identity that Iranian universities have established. It is an atmosphere that has secured the trust of traditional religious families, who compose the majority of the Iranian population. Higher education enables them to gain financial independence, to escape from restrictive family environments, increase their worth in the marriage market, respect in the family and to advance their social status.⁷ The decrease in the male enrolment at the university level is because of the higher success rate of girls in completing high school and passing the competitive university entrance examinations. There is also growing belief among the young Iranian males and their families that a university degree does not lead to

⁵ National Report on Development of Education in the I. R. of Iran, Ministry of Education of the I.R. of Iran, Bureau of International Scientific Cooperation, October 2008, pp 34- 35

employment, and it is indeed better not to waste time at college if one can find a decent job without a university degree.⁸

In 1985, Iran adopted the “sponsorship for foreign students act,” according to which the Ministry of Higher Education may send students abroad to acquire expertise in certain fields of study approved by the government. But the women graduates who qualify according to this act can apply only if they are married and can go abroad accompanied by their husbands. In 2001, however the Iranian parliament passed legislation that allowed single women to study at foreign institutions on state scholarships after having acquired the consent of their fathers.⁹

Women have made massive advancements; there is powerful presence of women in the education system of Iran. We witness that a significant increase in female enrolment and completion rates at every educational level, a reduced gender gap in primary and secondary schooling, and increase in the rate of university acceptance and enrolment among women. The women in Iran are asked to be traditional as well as modern at the same time dual role has been assigned to women there.¹⁰ In the post revolutionary Iran the increase in the female access to schooling reduced the gender disparities in the educational sector and women is being educated for their proper role in the family and society. It is the policy of the government to create the ideal female citizen who is socialized, politicized, and Islamized can serve the traditional needs of the religious society, as well as modern demands of the country. According to president Mohammad Khatami, the central role of the women at home “as the manager and master of the house” should not marginalize her from public life, while her presence in the social arena should not lead to the deterioration of the family and undermining of its strength and stability. This duality is present in the education provided for women in the IRI.¹¹ Khomeini and his successors made staunch commitments to female education. Khomeini stated “you [women] should

endeavour for knowledge and piety. Knowledge is not the monopoly of a particular group but belongs to all and it is the duty of all men and women to acquire knowledge. I hope the authorities will assist you in this and provide the educational and cultural facilities that you need to enable you to succeed.” Rafsanjani avowed that in Islam, “there are no barriers to the education of women in any field”. The supreme leader, Ali khamenei, has said, “an Islamic environment cannot tolerate even one illiterate person.”¹²

Conclusion

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic ensures the provision of free education for all Iranians to the end of the intermediate stage and commits to developing the provision of free higher education in order to make the country self-reliant The educational revival began after the Islamic Revolution with a campaign fervently promoted by Imam Khomeini to wipe out illiteracy, and then with a call for higher standards of education. Imam Khomeini announced the struggle during the beginning of the triumphant revolutionary period in a speech, saying that Illiterate men and women must begin their education, and the literate must teach them. Education and learning are forms of worship which Allah has called us to perform. During the last thirty eight years, the Islamic Revolution has been able to realize significant levels of equality. It has achieved major successes with its struggle against illiteracy, which have caught the attention of international organizations including UNESCO which proclaimed Iran the most successful country in tackling this problem. Iran has been able to raise the literacy rate of those over the age of six. Iranian women in particular have taken great strides in this area during the past thirty eight years, which is clear proof of successful educational and cultural planning after the Revolution. In higher educational institutions, Iranian women occupied 60% of the seats within an extraordinary short space of time and made unprecedented progress in all academic, specialist and technical fields. This is clear proof of successful academic planning for higher education in Iran after the Revolution. It also positively indicates that equal opportunities were provided to

the two sexes. A number of Iran's female doctors have developed new innovations and achieved great scientific success

References

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3. Ibid p. 130
4. Golnar Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran" Islam and Education: Major Themes in Education , ed, Tahir Abbas, Vol II, Routledge, New York and London, 2011, pp 111-113
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7. Field study by the research scholar; also Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Feminization of Iranian Higher Education" Islam and Education: Major Themes in Education , ed, Tahir Abbas, Vol II, Routledge, New York and London, 2011, pp 135-138
8. Field study by the research scholar
9. Golnar Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran" Islam and Education: Major Themes in Education , ed, Tahir Abbas, Vol II, Routledge, New York and London, 2011, pp 115
10. The women by assuming her role and responsibility as a wife and mother and acts as the pivot of the home and the agent of peace and stability in the family, at the same time, expected to act as a responsible member of society, to be engaged in sociopolitical affairs, and actively to contribute to national progress.
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