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EMPOWERING THROUGH EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS IN IRAN

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of women's educational rights in Iran, focusing on how the interaction of international legal frameworks, state legislation, and societal norms shape women's educational experiences. It comprehensively overviews Iran's sociopolitical and religious background, focusing on the changes following the 1979 Revolution, which profoundly influenced educational policies and gender dynamics. Despite significant increases in female literacy rates and university enrollment, the study reveals continuing obstacles rooted in Iran's legal and cultural systems. Frequently based on religious ideals, these arrangements limit women's access to equal educational opportunities. The thesis examines international treaties, constitutional rules, and historical events to highlight Iranian women's ongoing problems when seeking education and proposes reforms to remove these systemic obstacles.

1. Introduction

"If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate an entire nation." — Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey

Education has long been recognized as a cornerstone for personal and societal development. When women are empowered through education, the benefits extend beyond individuals to uplift families, communities, and nations. This thesis explores the evolution of women's educational rights in Iran, examining the international and national legal frameworks governing these rights. Despite significant improvements in female literacy and university enrollment in Iran over the past few decades, fundamental sociopolitical and cultural barriers continue to restrict full equality in educational access and opportunities.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education all highlight the importance of non-discrimination and gender equality in education. However, Iran's unique socio-political landscape, established on Islamic traditions and influenced by the 1979 Revolution, has shaped a complex environment where progressive policies coexist with traditional constraints. This thesis delves into how these factors, combined with legal structures and societal norms, impact women's educational experiences in Iran.

Through this analysis of international human rights frameworks, the Iranian constitution, historical changes since the revolution, and statistical data on educational attainment, this research aims to uncover the dynamics of gender inequality in education and assess the progress made. Ultimately, this thesis argues that while education remains a critical avenue for empowering Iranian women, further reforms are necessary to dismantle the systemic barriers that limit their full participation in society.

2. Methodology

I will employ a multidisciplinary approach in this research, combining legal analysis, historical context, and statistical data to explore women's educational rights in Iran. Using qualitative methods, I aim to examine the international and national legal frameworks that shape women's access to education. This will involve analyzing key international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), alongside relevant articles of the Iranian Constitution. To understand how historical events have impacted educational opportunities for women, I will investigate key moments before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, particularly focusing on how political shifts have shaped policies on women's education. Additionally, I will analyze statistical data on female literacy rates and enrollment figures to assess the progress and ongoing disparities in educational attainment. This approach will provide a comprehensive view of the factors influencing women's access to education in Iran and the structural barriers that continue to hinder their full participation.

3. Defining Women's Right to Education in Iran

This chapter explores the international legal framework that protects women's rights to education, highlighting its significance for gender equality and empowerment. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), CEDAW, and UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education are all discussed, with a focus on their nondiscrimination and equal access to education principles. The chapter explores Iran's involvement in these treaties, noting that, while Iran has ratified the ICESCR, it has not joined other crucial agreements such as CEDAW, raising worries about gender equality in its education system. The examination extends to Iran's Constitution, which requires free education but bases it on Islamic precepts, posing hurdles to gender inclusion. The chapter also examines Iran's accomplishments over three Universal

Periodic Review (UPR) cycles, including legislative initiatives aimed at enhancing women's education while highlighting ongoing challenges such as cultural discrimination and economic sanctions.

3.1 Overview of the International Law Framework Guaranteeing Women's Right to Education

The right to education is a fundamental component of international human rights law, essential for attaining gender equality and empowering women worldwide. To delineate and comprehend women's right to education, it is imperative to examine the worldwide legal framework that defines norms and principles guaranteeing gender equality and non-discrimination. All principal human rights treaties underscore the universality and accessibility of education as an inherent right for all individuals, irrespective of gender.¹

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) asserts that "everyone has the right to education."² It emphasizes both the universality of this right and the concept of mandatory and free primary education, establishing the standards for subsequent admission to technical and higher education based on merit.³ This foundation emphasizes education as a fundamental instrument for advancing global equality, peace, and empowerment. Education is perceived as both a mechanism for personal growth and a catalyst for social cohesion and progress, illustrating its dual function in human rights—both a governmental duty and an individual entitlement.⁴

The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) underscores the duty of States Parties to ensure equal access to education for all genders. Article 3 of the ICESCR requires nations to provide equal access to all the economic, social, and cultural rights specified in the Covenant. Article 13 explicitly expands this commitment by recognizing the

¹ Pillai, S. (2012). Right to Education and International Law - Defining the Right. In GNLU Law Review (Vols. 3–3, Issue 2, pp. 53–70).

² United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Viewed: 2024.10.08. Available: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>

³ Delbruck, J. (1992). The Right to Education as an International Human Right. German Yearbook of International Law, 35, 92–104.

⁴ Andem, P., Nwoke, T. W., & University of Public Service. (2021). An Appraisal of States' Obligations to Actualize the Right to Education under International Law. In Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence (Vols. 12–12, Issue 2, pp. 106–118).

universal right to education and outlining state responsibilities.⁵ The right to education signifies a transition from conventional liberal human rights, centered on individual liberty, to a greater state duty. This transition is essential, especially for women's rights, since it highlights the necessity for governmental intervention to eradicate historical obstacles that have hindered women's equal access to education.⁶

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is crucial to the international legal framework as it expressly addresses women's rights in education. Article 10 of CEDAW mandates that nations eliminate gender-based discrimination in education, guaranteeing women equal access to educational opportunities across all levels—primary, secondary, and higher education.⁷ The convention requires the provision of equitable career and occupational guidance, equal access to scholarships and grants, and the elimination of gender stereotypes. The provisions of CEDAW seek to establish an atmosphere in which women can reach their full potential without discrimination. The agreement provides a comprehensive framework to guide governments in the global progress of women's rights, going beyond simply providing access to education and emphasizing the quality and diversity of educational experiences for women.⁸ While international law provides a strong framework, governments' commitments must be domesticated and justiciable to be effectively implemented. Despite legal tools such as CEDAW, the real implementation of these rights frequently falls short due to socioeconomic restrictions and a lack of political will.⁹

The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education is another landmark treaty aimed at removing barriers that prevent women and girls from gaining equal access to education. The Convention applies to all stages of education, mandating states to provide equal

⁵ United Nations. (1967). International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Viewed: 2024.10.05. Available: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20PM/Ch_IV_03.pdf

⁶ Delbruck, J. (1992). The Right to Education as an International Human Right. *German Yearbook of International Law*, 35, 92–104.

⁷ United Nations General Assembly. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In United Nations General Assembly Resolution. Viewed: 2024.10.08. Available: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>

⁸ Singh, K. (2005). The Right to Education: International Legal Obligations. *International Journal for Education Law and Policy*, 1, 103–118.

⁹ Andem, P., Nwoke, T. W., & University of Public Service. (2021). An Appraisal of States' Obligations to Actualize the Right to Education under International Law. In Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence (Vols. 12–12, Issue 2, pp. 106–118).

educational opportunities in primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as vocational and adult education.¹⁰ By addressing discrimination on many grounds, including gender, the Convention emphasizes the importance of comprehensive measures to achieve equal educational opportunities for men and women. It also emphasizes the necessity of having a safe and supportive educational environment, devoid of gender-based violence and harassment, to guarantee that educational institutions are accessible and inclusive for women.¹¹

The international legal framework ensures women's access to education, but the effectiveness of these guarantees is determined by how states incorporate and enforce these rights locally. Instruments such as the UDHR, ICESCR, CEDAW, and UNESCO conventions offer the required legal framework, but their success is dependent on implementation. States must go beyond legislation to implement effective policies and build educational systems that cater to the special needs of women, ensuring that educational opportunities are equal and accessible.¹²

3.2 International treaties ratified in Iran and the analysis of the country's Constitution

Iran, as a member of the international community, ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which it signed on April 4, 1968, and ratified on June 24, 1975.¹³ This covenant emphasizes the right to education for all individuals, underscoring the obligations of states to ensure equitable access to elementary education and to progressively establish free education at all levels. While the ICESCR represents a significant commitment to safeguarding the right to education, it is important to emphasize that Iran has not signed numerous other essential international treaties that advocate for educational rights, particularly gender equality. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, and several more treaties remain unratified. This selective ratification raises questions about the

¹⁰ UNESCO General Conference. (1960). Convention against discrimination in education. Viewed: 2024.10.08. Available: <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-against-discrimination-education#item-1>

¹¹ Delbruck, J. (1992). The Right to Education as an International Human Right. German Yearbook of International Law, 35, 92–104.

¹² Pillai, S. (2012). Right to Education and International Law - Defining the Right. In GNLU Law Review (Vols. 3–3, Issue 2, pp. 53–70).

¹³ UNTC. Viewed: 2024.10.08. Available: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-3&chapter=4&clang=_en

complete realization of educational rights in the country, particularly regarding gender equality and the elimination of discrimination in education.¹⁴

On the other hand, it must be noted that the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the amendments approved by the Constitutional Review Council in 1989, underscores the right to education for all individuals across various fields. Article 3 emphasizes “free education and physical training for all at all levels, along with the facilitation and expansion of higher education.” Article 20 states that “all members of the nation, both men and women, are entitled to legal protection and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights under Islamic principles.” Article 21 mandates that “the government must uphold women’s rights in all areas according to Islamic norms and create conditions conducive to the development of women’s personalities and the restoration of their material and spiritual rights.”¹⁵

Lastly, article 30 mandates that the state must offer free education until the completion of secondary school and aims to enhance higher education facilities to the greatest extent possible. The Constitution underscores the significance of education in fostering Islamic values and national progress, guaranteeing that all individuals, irrespective of gender, have the chance to receive educational services.¹⁶

3.3 Universal Periodic Review: Changes Over Time

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a process established by the Human Rights Council mandating that each UN Member State undertake a peer evaluation of its human rights records every 4.5 years. Founded in 2006, UPR seeks to enhance human rights globally and obtain

¹⁴ View the ratification status by country or by treaty. UN Treaty body database. Viewed: 2024.10.09. Available:

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=81&Lang=EN

¹⁵ Bakhshzadeh, O., Garmroudi, M., & Entekhabian, O. (2021). The right to education and study and women’s labor rights in Iranian jurisprudence and law and the UNESCO 2030 document. *Propósitos Y Representaciones, SPE(3)*, e1123. Viewed: 2024.10.02. Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20511/pyr2021.v9nSPE3.1123>

¹⁶ Islamic Republic of Iran. (1979). The Constitution of The Islamic Republic of Iran. In *General Text*. Viewed: 2024.10.03. Available: <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/constitution-english-1368.pdf>

recommendations for ongoing advancement. Since 2008, all 193 member states have had three evaluations.¹⁷

In the first cycle of Iran's UPR, the country demonstrated its efforts to improve socioeconomic rights, especially education in poorer regions, as part of its larger human rights program during the first UPR round. The country prioritized women's inclusion in educational activities, reporting increased female literacy and participation rates, especially in rural areas.¹⁸ However, international delegations raised concern about the systemic impediments that women face, such as discriminatory cultural norms and legislative constraints that limit their access to education. Reports found that, despite the government's promises, considerable gaps persisted, particularly among females from minority communities and isolated locations.¹⁹

By the second UPR cycle, Iran has implemented legislative measures to align its human rights policies with international standards, with a particular emphasis on the rights of women and children. The establishment of the Vice-Presidency Bureau for Women and Family Affairs and the National Focal Point for the Convention on the Rights of the Child were mentioned as initiatives towards boosting educational and socio-economic prospects for women.²⁰ Despite these legislative advancements, the interactive discussion revealed persisting problems, particularly for women's access to higher education. Discrimination against women, particularly in educational institutions, remained a major concern, and several delegations criticized Iran for failing to properly address these inequalities.²¹

¹⁷ Universal Periodic Review. (2024). United Nations Human Rights Council. Viewed: 2024.10.11. Available: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/home>

¹⁸ National Report Submitted in accordance with paragraph 15 (A) of the Annex to Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1. (2009). In Human Rights Council. Viewed: 2024.10.12. Available: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/IR/A_HRC_WG6_7_IRN_1_E.pdf

¹⁹ Human Rights Council. (2010). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Islamic Republic of Iran. In United Nations (A/HRC/14/12). Viewed at: 2024.10.12. Available: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g10/120/56/pdf/g1012056.pdf>

²⁰ Human Rights Council & United Nations. (2014). National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21. In Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (A/HRC/WG.6/20/IRN/1). Viewed at: 2024.10.14. Available: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/098/67/pdf/g1409867.pdf>

²¹ Council, H. R. & United Nations. (2014). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In United Nations (A/HRC/28/12). Viewed at: 2024.10.15. Available: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/248/22/pdf/g1424822.pdf>

In the third cycle, Iran reported additional progress, including the implementation of the Charter of Citizenship Rights and new legislation targeted at safeguarding women and children, such as the Act on Women's Protection, Dignity, and Security from Violence. The government cited growth in female literacy rates, higher education participation, and political involvement.²² While these achievements were recognized, the Iranian delegation stressed the impact of international sanctions as a major impediment to fully realizing these improvements in women's education and empowerment. During the evaluation, critics pointed out that economic sanctions and internal policy contradictions restricted the impact of these reforms and limited women's access to quality education.²³

Throughout the three UPR cycles, Iran's legislative attempts have followed a pattern of addressing women's educational rights within its socio-economic and political settings. Gender-focused organizations and policies, such as the Vice-Presidency Bureau for Women and Family Affairs, aim to boost women's education.²⁴ However, despite these efforts, practical enforcement remains slow. Discriminatory practices, both cultural and legal, continue to limit women's educational opportunities, particularly for those who are disadvantaged.²⁵ Additionally, while Iran has blamed some of its problems on the economic impact of foreign sanctions, critics argue that this does not explain the government's failure to develop an equal educational environment. International observers have noted a disparity between policy and implementation when it comes to women's education access.²⁶

²² Council, H. R. (2019). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Human Rights Council (Report A/HRC/43/12; p. 2). Viewed: 2024.10.11. Available: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g19/354/36/pdf/g1935436.pdf>

²³ Human Rights Council & Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019). Compilation on the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (pp. 1–19) [Report]. Viewed at: 2024.10.11. Available: <http://www.ohchr.org>

²⁴ Human Rights Council & United Nations. (2014). National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21. In Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (A/HRC/WG.6/20/IRN/1). Viewed at: 2024.10.14. Available: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/098/67/pdf/g1409867.pdf>

²⁵ Council, H. R. & United Nations. (2014). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In United Nations (A/HRC/28/12). Viewed at: 2024.10.15. Available: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/248/22/pdf/g1424822.pdf>

²⁶ Human Rights Council & Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019). Compilation on the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (pp. 1–19) [Report]. Viewed at: 2024.10.11. Available: <http://www.ohchr.org>

4. Historical Context: Evolution of Women's Education in Iran

The 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew the monarchy and instituted the Islamic Republic, altering Iran's political and social frameworks. Pre-revolutionary Iran undertook socio-cultural and educational changes that broadened women's access to higher education. However, cultural obstacles continue to marginalize numerous individuals, especially women from rural and conservative backgrounds. The Islamic Republic reformed education by implementing an Islamic perspective, mandating gender segregation, compulsory veiling, and curricular modifications that upheld conventional gender norms. Despite these constraints, the government underscored the importance of women's education as essential for the development of an Islamic society, resulting in heightened female enrollment. Iran's progress in women's education was skillfully presented as consistent with international standards, but underscoring an Islamic ideological viewpoint that favored state sovereignty. This enabled Iran to selectively interpret and apply international frameworks while creating a narrative of women's empowerment that aligns with its political goals.

4.1 Key Policies and Changes in Participation Before and After the 1979 Revolution

In Iran, there was a nationwide protest from 1978 to 1979 that resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy, and the foundation of an Islamic republic on April 1, 1979.²⁷ Even before the revolution, during the monarchical period, major steps were made to increase women's access to higher education, resulting in a transformative phase in Iran. In 1935, the University of Tehran, the country's first modern university, enrolled both men and women. Reza Shah's policies significantly reshaped Iran in three areas: infrastructure, independence from foreign occupation, and implementing socio-cultural reforms. Concerning women, Reza Shah's

²⁷ Afary, J. (2024, September 9). Iranian Revolution | Summary, Causes, Effects, & facts. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution#ref282637>

extraordinary, yet controversial measures, marked the beginning of the fast elimination of societal taboos and constraints that had restricted women for centuries.²⁸

Reza Shah's objective of reforming Iran through a Westernized, secular education system paved the way for his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, to speed up educational changes. By the 1960s and 1970s, the boom in oil profits fueled economic growth, resulting in a greater demand for educated professionals, including women. This time saw an increase in women's educational options, and by the late 1970s, female enrollment in universities had reached a significant 30.9%. Despite an increase in the number of women at colleges, a huge percentage of the population—particularly rural women, ethnic minorities, and those from strict religious families—continue to be barred from education.²⁹ Many of these women were either prevented from attending secular schools due to cultural hurdles or did not have access to education at all.

In contrast, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 resulted in a significant upheaval in the educational landscape. The newly founded Islamic Republic tried to distinguish itself from the secular, Westernized policies of the Pahlavi era by reforming the education system with Islamic values. The traditional educational policies were enacted, in contrast to the preceding modern approach of the Pahlavi era, encompassing several measures: prohibiting co-education at all educational levels, except universities; designating female educators for girls' schools and male educators for boys' schools; altering school textbooks to illustrate a traditional division of labor between genders in both private and public domains; enforcing veiling for all female students and educators; and directing students towards "male- or female-oriented" academic fields.³⁰ Women were even excluded from specific fields of study, such as veterinary medicine, geology, and natural resources. Furthermore, implementing moral and religious criteria for university admissions restricted women's access to higher education. Notwithstanding these limitations, the Islamic Republic, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, underscored the significance of women's education, asserting that women were pivotal in the construction of Islamic society. This ideological transformation later led to a restructuring of educational policies. Although numerous restrictions were initially imposed, advocacy by women's organizations, like the

²⁸ Farzaneh, D. (2014). One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: A Brief History of Legal Discriminations Against Women in Iran and the Violations of International Human Rights. (Page: 212) Available: <https://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/annlsurvey/vol20/iss1/12/>

²⁹ Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The feminisation of Iranian higher education. International Review of Education. (Page: 333-334) Available: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9>

³⁰ Mehran, Golnar. (2003). Gender and Education in Iran (2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/50). UNESCO. (Page: 19) Available: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146809>

Women's Cultural and Social Council, eliminated many obstacles that had previously constrained women's educational opportunities.

By the mid-1990s, Iranian women were permitted to re-enter previously male-dominated sectors, and their presence in higher education increased consistently.

One of the primary reasons for the increase in female enrollment following the revolution was the Islamic Republic's ability to acquire the trust of traditional and religious households. By supporting an educational system based on Islamic beliefs and maintaining gender-segregated environments, the dictatorship made education more acceptable to conservative sectors of the populace, who had previously opposed sending their daughters to secular institutions. As a result, the number of women attending universities increased dramatically. By the early 2000s, women began to outnumber men in several academic programs, and by 2012, women accounted for approximately 60% of Iranian university students, up from 30.9% in the pre-revolutionary period.³¹ This increase in female enrollment was especially notable since it included women from a wider range of backgrounds, including rural and religious families who had previously been underrepresented in higher education. The Islamic approach to education provided a safer, more socially acceptable environment for women to pursue higher education, allowing the Islamic Republic to claim victory in improving women's educational rights within its ideological framework. This increase in women's educational attainment has had far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of numbers but also in the shifting societal roles of women, as university education became one of the few avenues for Iranian women to change their public role and status in a society still marked by gender inequality.

4.2 Discussion of societal changes influencing women's participation in education over time.

First Stage (1979-1988): Islamization and Politicization

This initial stage, from 1979 to 1988, was marked by profound domestic instability and societal transformation. It was a period of intense political upheaval, characterized by widespread unrest, internal conflicts, political violence, and the consequences of the Iran-Iraq War, which further strained the nation's resources and morale. Economically, the country faced significant

³¹ Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The feminisation of Iranian higher education. *International Review of Education*. (Page: 333-334) Available: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9>

hardships, with austerity measures deeply affecting daily life, while internationally, it grappled with isolation, as its revolutionary ideology alienated many global powers.³²

During this time, the revolutionary government prioritized ideology above all else, with a focus on the rigid enforcement of Islamic principles across every facet of society. The state sought to reshape not only the laws and institutions but also the cultural and social fabric of the nation. The ideal citizen was portrayed as a "doctrinaire" Muslim—someone unwaveringly loyal to the state's vision of Islam—and a "committed" revolutionary, wholly dedicated to the cause. This period glorified self-sacrifice and martyrdom, especially in the context of the war, with individuals expected to embody revolutionary values through both thought and action.

A critical component of this era's transformation was the deliberate effort to Islamize and politicize the role of women in society. Women were not seen merely as passive participants but as central figures in the state's vision of revolution. The ideal woman was depicted as a mother and nurturer who raised devout Muslims, while simultaneously instilling in her children—particularly sons—the values of revolutionary zeal and readiness for martyrdom. The state promoted a highly politicized vision of motherhood, wherein women were expected to serve the revolution by producing and raising the next generation of soldiers, both for the ideological struggle and the physical defense of the nation.³³

Second Stage (1988-1997): Reconstruction Era

After the war ended, the period from 1988 to 1997 marked a significant shift in focus as the country embarked on a path of reconstruction and recovery. The devastation left by years of conflict necessitated a new national agenda centered on rebuilding the country's physical infrastructure and social institutions.³⁴ This era saw the introduction of new policy frameworks aimed at fostering economic growth, population management, and the promotion of technical and professional specialization. These changes reflected a broader recognition of the need to transition from revolutionary fervor to a more pragmatic approach to governance and development.

³² Karshenas, & Pesaran. (1995). Economic Reform and the Reconstruction of the Iranian Economy. Middle East Journal. (Page: 89) Available: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328773>

³³ Mehran, Golnar. (2003). Gender and Education in Iran (2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/50). UNESCO. (Page 6-7) Available: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146809>

³⁴ Karshenas, & Pesaran. (1995). Economic Reform and the Reconstruction of the Iranian Economy. Middle East Journal. (Page:91) Available: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328773>

Women, who had been heavily politicized and instrumentalized during the previous stage, were now encouraged to contribute in more practical and diverse ways. The role of women expanded beyond the ideological constraints of the revolution, as the state promoted their participation in all aspects of society—social, educational, political, and economic. Women were increasingly seen as vital actors in the process of post-war reconstruction, contributing to nation-building through active involvement in various sectors. The state advocated for their engagement in formal education, workforce participation, and even in governance, marking a shift towards a more inclusive view of their societal role, although still within the boundaries of state-defined Islamic values.³⁵

Current Period (1997-Present): Reform Era

The current phase, beginning in 1997, has been characterized by a noticeable evolution in the state's ideological and political landscape, often referred to as the "Reform Era." This period has witnessed the introduction of new discourses centered around civil society, political development, and individual rights, signifying a gradual shift from the more rigid, doctrinal approach of previous decades. Concepts such as religious democracy, tolerance, and citizenship rights have gained prominence, reflecting a broader effort to modernize the nation's governance and social structures while still maintaining an Islamic framework.

One of the most significant aspects of this era has been the transformation of the state's approach to women's roles in society. Unlike earlier periods, where women were primarily viewed through the lens of ideological or economic utility, this phase has adopted a more rights-based approach. Women are no longer merely considered instruments for achieving the state's broader goals, whether in the context of revolutionary ideology or economic development. Instead, the focus has shifted towards empowering women for their own sake, recognizing their intrinsic rights and agency as individuals.³⁶

Despite the lack of appreciation to international principles such as CEDAW, the growth of women's education rights in Iran is mostly driven by the state's ideological and political interests rather than an explicit commitment to gender equality. While ratifying the ICESCR, the Iranian government aligns its education policy with the framework of Islamic values outlined in the

³⁵ Mehran, Golnar. (2003). Gender and Education in Iran (2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/50). UNESCO. (Page: 7) Available: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146809>

³⁶ Mehran, Golnar. (2003). Gender and Education in Iran (2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/50). UNESCO. (Page 7-9) Available: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146809>

constitution. This method has allowed the state to promote women's education as long as it contributes to the larger goal of establishing an Islamic society and preserving social stability. Government officials frequently underline that expanding women's access to education is a method to incorporate them into the state's socioeconomic development plans while keeping these possibilities consistent with Islamic teachings.

During UPR cycles, Iranian officials have cited advances in women's education as evidence of their commitment to international norms. They do, however, position this success in an Islamic ideological perspective, presenting increases in female literacy and university involvement as achievements that adhere to Islamic ideals rather than secular world standards. The Iranian government emphasizes the importance of education for women's roles in the family and society, but it is selective about which treaties it ratifies, implying that international human rights norms are interpreted and applied through a lens that prioritizes state ideology and sovereignty over universal principles. This method enables the state to explain its selective adherence to international frameworks while controlling the narrative surrounding women's empowerment within its sociopolitical structure.

5. Statistical Analysis of Women's Education

Iran has witnessed considerable increases in female education, with female adult literacy rising from 24% in 1976 to 81% in 2016, and girls completing elementary school virtually uniformly by 2017. Higher education enrollment for women has also increased, from 3% in 1978 to 59% in 2018, indicating a shift toward gender equality in academia. Despite initial obstacles, women's participation in universities has grown, with women outnumbering males in admissions by the early twenty-first century. However, only 20-25% of educated women enter the labor force, demonstrating societal impediments to economic independence and persistent segregation in prestigious fields such as engineering. The Kunkur entrance exam, a crucial factor in university admissions, also reflects broader gender issues. While these accomplishments indicate improvement, Iranian state data must be examined closely due to probable political biases and a lack of independent verification. Despite advances in female education, the disparity between educational options and labor participation highlights the need for institutional adjustments to alleviate long-standing gender inequality and assure women's economic independence.

5.1 Analysis of statistical data on literacy rates and female enrollment rates

Female education in Iran has advanced dramatically in recent decades, as shown by significant improvements across a variety of educational metrics. Female adult literacy increased significantly, more than tripling from a modest 24 percent in 1976, during the monarchy's final years, to a remarkable 81 percent in 2016. This major rise in literacy demonstrates the transformative shift in women's access to education in Iran. Similarly, the proportion of girls who completed primary education experienced a sharp increase, rising from 36% in 1971 to almost universal levels by 2017, when 99% of female students completed primary school.³⁷

The rise in female enrollment in higher education in Iran has been particularly striking, highlighting a significant shift toward gender equality in academia. Women's participation in tertiary education began with a modest 3 percent in 1978, but this figure grew nearly twentyfold to 59 percent by 2018. This remarkable increase reflects evolving societal and institutional attitudes that have progressively opened the doors of higher education to women. Data from the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology further supports this trend, showing that the percentage of women enrolled in public universities rose from 27.3 percent in 1990 to 44.1 percent by 1999. By the 2001-2002 academic year, women accounted for 50 percent of all university students, with 52 percent of admissions to state universities being female.³⁸ This progression not only highlights the expanding role of women in higher education but also suggests an increasing imbalance in favor of women within Iran's academic system in the years to come.

A multitude of causes have led to this tendency. The 1979 revolution, although establishing a more stringent gender framework in certain areas, paradoxically facilitated increased female participation in education. The policies of the Islamic Republic underscored the necessity for an educated citizenry, and although the educational domains available to women were initially restricted to those considered suitable, their access to higher education expanded over time.³⁹

³⁷ Part 5: Statistics on women in Iran. (2020, December 10). The Iran Primer. Viewed: 2024.09.15. Available: https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/dec/09/part-5-statistics-women-iran?fbclid=IwAR3vFgevwCWBMyn5vMgTgYxQnJGqdpQPjisbl-1cmK2tx7SudoDr_D620Cg

³⁸ Mehran, Golnar. (2003). Gender and Education in Iran (2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/50). UNESCO. Available: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146809>

³⁹ Rezai-Rashti, G. M., Mehran, G., Abdmolaei, S., Anne M. Harris, Stacy Holman Jones, Sandra L. Faulkner, Eloise D. Brook, Scholes, L., McAllum, M.-A., Msibi, T., &

The feminization of higher education has resulted in notable transformations in the social environment, as education serves as both a means of social mobility and, for numerous women, a field of restricted autonomy.

However, challenges persist. Despite high enrollment rates, only 20-25% of educated women enter the workforce.⁴⁰ This gap between education and employment reveals lingering societal barriers that limit women's economic independence. Furthermore, restrictions on women's participation in prestigious fields such as engineering and computer science continue to reflect systemic gender biases.⁴¹ Nevertheless, education remains a critical avenue for Iranian women to challenge and reshape their roles within the confines of a still largely patriarchal society.

When assessing the official statistics on education in Iran, it is crucial to approach the figures with caution, as the Iranian government's reporting processes and transparency may not consistently conform to democratic and internationally recognized standards. Owing to possible political reasons and an absence of independent verification processes, certain facts may be shown in a manner that aligns with the government's preferred narrative rather than the real circumstances. Consequently, it is essential to analyze these statistics with pragmatic metrics, recognizing the potential for discrepancies and taking into account corroborative data from external, independent sources where accessible.

5.2 Understanding higher education admissions in more detail

To gain a deeper understanding of the factors that drive young Iranian women toward higher education, it is essential to analyze the foundational stage of their academic journey—high school. In Iran, secondary education culminates in a high school diploma after three years. However, students who choose to pursue a fourth year embark on a specialized, academically demanding college-preparatory track, focusing primarily on the Kunkur, the highly competitive national entrance examination for universities. This exam serves as a crucial gateway for higher

Brockenbrough, E. (2019). Women, Islam, and Education in Iran (E. F. Henderson & Z Nicolazzo, Eds.).

⁴⁰ Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The feminisation of Iranian higher education. *International Review of Education*. (Page: 333-334) Available: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9>

⁴¹ Rezai-Rashti, G. M., Mehran, G., Abdmolaei, S., Anne M. Harris, Stacy Holman Jones, Sandra L. Faulkner, Eloise D. Brook, Scholes, L., McAllum, M.-A., Msibi, T., & Brockenbrough, E. (2019). Women, Islam, and Education in Iran (E. F. Henderson & Z Nicolazzo, Eds.).

education, dictating the futures of students who aspire to secure a place in public universities—widely regarded as the most prestigious institution in the country.

Remarkably, more than two-thirds of Iranian high school students choose not to continue into higher education, illustrating the immense pressure and selectivity of the academic system. Of those eligible to extend their studies into the fourth year, only 36% choose to do so, a decision that renders them qualified to sit for the Kunkur and compete for university admission. The intensity of the fourth year is undeniable, as students dedicate their time almost exclusively to preparing for this exam. The Kunkur is not merely an academic test; it represents a social rite of passage and an aspirational peak for over 1.5 million Iranian youth annually, although only a small fraction—approximately 10% of each age cohort—will ultimately be granted admission to public universities.

The gender dynamics of this process have evolved significantly over time, particularly in the early 21st century. In 2001, out of those who successfully passed the Kunkur, 61,000 (40%) were men, while a striking 91,000 (60%) were women. This marked gender gap has only widened in subsequent years. By 2003, 62% of those passing the exam were women, with men making up just 38% of successful candidates.⁴² This growing disparity highlights a broader societal shift: fewer men are deciding to take the Kunkur, and of those who do, an even smaller percentage manage to pass. The trend reveals an increasing divergence in educational attainment between men and women, a phenomenon that has far-reaching implications for gender roles, professional opportunities, and socioeconomic mobility within Iran.

The preference for public universities over private ones further adds to the stakes, as public institutions are perceived to offer superior education and greater career prospects. This reality amplifies the pressure on students, particularly young women, who view higher education as a critical pathway to upward mobility, autonomy, and professional success in a society where opportunities are often limited.

In summary, while the admissions system in Iran's higher education appears gender-neutral and has allowed more women to excel academically, persistent challenges in employment and field

⁴² Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The feminisation of Iranian higher education. *International Review of Education*. (Page: 333-334) Available: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9>

segregation reflect deeper societal constraints that need to be addressed for true gender equality.⁴³

6. Factors Influencing Women's Education

Women's access to education in Iran is shaped by a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors, each influencing their opportunities and decisions in distinct ways. While government initiatives such as free education and affirmative action have contributed to increasing female participation, financial barriers remain a significant obstacle, particularly for women in rural areas. These economic challenges are compounded by cultural conventions that emphasize early marriage and family responsibilities, often forcing women to prioritize domestic roles over academic aspirations.

Despite these impediments, education continues to serve as a critical source of empowerment and social mobility for many Iranian women, offering pathways to greater independence and improved societal standing. However, disparities in access, regional inequalities, and systemic biases create a landscape where progress remains uneven and contingent on socioeconomic and geographic factors.

This chapter investigates the intersecting economic, social, and cultural dynamics that influence women's access to education in Iran. By examining these elements in detail, the chapter highlights both the opportunities available to women and the structural barriers they face, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these factors shape educational outcomes for women across diverse social backgrounds and regions.

6.1 Exploration of various factors influencing women's access to education, including economic, social, and cultural factors

A complex interaction of economic, social, and cultural factors influences women's access to education in Iran. Economically, while government policies such as free education and affirmative action for women have helped increase female participation, financial pressures

⁴³ Kheiltash, O. (2013). The New Majority: A View into the Motivations and Aspirations Of Iran's Women in Higher Education (By University of California & California Digital Library). Available: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0459h7nv>

remain significant, particularly for rural families. For instance, limited access to scholarships, high transportation costs for attending distant institutions, and the opportunity cost of girls not contributing to home labor all enhance educational inequality.⁴⁴ In 2013, approximately 70% of rural women aged 15-24 were illiterate due to economic restrictions, a trend that underscores the persistent gap between rural and urban areas. Cultural traditions favor marriage and childbirth over academic accomplishment, with 60% of young women in poorer areas suffering early marriage pressures, often shortening their educational journey.⁴⁵ Culturally, however, education is an important method of empowerment. Many young women want higher education to boost their social position and marriage prospects. For example, studies show that highly educated women are viewed as more desirable partners, which might occasionally counteract the cultural propensity for early marriage. Studies indicate that over 80% of women in universities seek financial independence through education.⁴⁶ However, the lack of job options for women frequently tempers this desire, resulting in a mismatch between economic accomplishments and educational objectives. As a result of these social and economic variables, women's access to education varies between geographies and socioeconomic backgrounds. While metropolitan women are more likely to benefit from supportive infrastructures and shifting cultural attitudes, rural women—especially those from lower-income families—face additional obstacles.⁴⁷

6.2 Analysis of gender disparities in educational attainment and enrollment rates

Despite considerable advancements in female enrollment, gender inequalities remain in Iranian educational attainment, especially in higher education and specialized disciplines. Female enrollment in universities increased significantly in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Women dominate subjects such as humanities and social sciences, where they account for more

⁴⁴ Rezai-Rashti, G. M., Mehran, G., Abdmolaei, S., Anne M., Harris, S., Holman Jones, S. L., et al. (2019). Women, Islam, and Education in Iran. In E. F. Henderson & Z. Nicolazzo (Eds.).

⁴⁵ Kheiltash, O. (2013). The New Majority: A View into the Motivations and Aspirations Of Iran's Women in Higher Education (By University of California & California Digital Library). Available: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0459h7nv>

⁴⁶ Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education. International Review of Education, Page: 333-334. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9>

⁴⁷ Part 5: Statistics on Women in Iran. (2020, December 10). The Iran Primer. Viewed: 2024.09.15. Available: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/dec/09/part-5-statistics-women-iran>

than 70% of students in these disciplines.⁴⁸ However, due to gendered expectations and societal biases, women are still disproportionately underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) sectors. For instance, structural impediments to admittance into historically male-dominated fields are reflected in the fact that less than 30% of engineering and technology students are female.⁴⁹

Furthermore, there are still noticeable gender and geographical differences even though female literacy rates have greatly increased, reaching 95% in metropolitan areas. Because of the combined effects of socioeconomic disparity and cultural norms that devalue girls' education, female literacy rates in rural areas can be as low as 70%.⁵⁰ This striking disparity between rural and urban locations highlights the unequal advancement of women's education throughout Iran, which is influenced by both gender-specific and geographic variables. Rural girls' educational possibilities are further restricted by additional challenges such as early marriage, inadequate school facilities, and limited mobility.⁵¹

6.3 Examination of barriers hindering women's participation in education

Multiple obstacles continue to limit Iranian women's participation in education, particularly at the higher levels. One of the most important barriers is the legal and societal expectation that women prioritize family duties prior to career or academic development. According to studies, approximately 65% of Iranian women feel compelled to marry before completing higher education, and many experience societal criticism if they pursue employment after marriage.⁵² This cultural expectation often results in women delaying or abandoning their educational pursuits entirely, particularly in regions where early marriage is heavily emphasized. Such

⁴⁸ Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The feminisation of Iranian higher education. *International Review of Education*. (Page: 333-334) Available: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9>

⁴⁹ Mehran, G. (2003). Gender and Education in Iran. (2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/50). UNESCO, Page: 19. Available: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146809>

⁵⁰ Part 5: Statistics on Women in Iran. (2020, December 10). The Iran Primer. Viewed: 2024.09.15. Available: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/dec/09/part-5-statistics-women-iran>

⁵¹ Haeri, S. (2013). No End in Sight: Politics, Paradox, and Gender Policies in Iran. *Boston University Law Review*, 93(3), 1049–1062.

⁵² Haeri, S. (2013). No End in Sight: Politics, Paradox, and Gender Policies in Iran. *Boston University Law Review*, 93(3), 1049–1062.

societal norms are exacerbated by a lack of policies promoting gender equality in educational and professional spheres.⁵³

Lack of supportive institutional measures, such as cheap childcare or flexible working conditions, contributes to higher dropout rates among women seeking to manage family and school. Additionally, the absence of on-campus childcare facilities and part-time study options disproportionately affects mothers pursuing higher education, forcing many to make difficult choices between their academic and familial responsibilities.⁵⁴ Rural women face a disadvantage due to limited access to education, with less than 50% of girls completing secondary education. Factors such as poor school infrastructure, inadequate transportation, and a shortage of female teachers in rural areas further hinder their ability to access quality education.⁵⁵

Many Iranian women face challenges to higher education, including economic restrictions and cultural standards. Financial difficulties, especially in low-income and rural households, frequently force young women into home chores or informal work, which further limits their options for pursuing higher education.⁵⁶ Along with limited mobility brought on by conservative standards, cultural stigmas against women pursuing male-dominated fields also serve as important obstacles.

⁵³ Haeri, S. (2013). No End in Sight: Politics, Paradox, and Gender Policies in Iran. *Boston University Law Review*, 93(3), 1049–1062.

⁵⁴ Mehdizadeh, N. (2012). Beyond cultural stereotypes: Educated mothers' experiences of work and welfare in Iran. *Critical Social Policy*, 33(2), 243–265. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018312449809>

⁵⁵ Mehran, G. (2003). Gender and Education in Iran. (2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/50). UNESCO, Page: 19. Available: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146809>

⁵⁶ Rezai-Rashti, G. M., Mehran, G., Abdmolaei, S., Anne M., Harris, S., Holman Jones, S. L., et al. (2019). Women, Islam, and Education in Iran. In E. F. Henderson & Z. Nicolazzo (Eds.).

7. Conclusion

The progress in women's education in Iran over the last few decades is a paradox, revealing both positive gains and ongoing obstacles. On one hand, the country has seen a significant rise in female literacy rates, and women now outnumber men in many academic institutions. This shift reflects a gradual transformation in societal attitudes toward female empowerment through education. For many Iranian women, education has become a vital tool for social mobility, professional growth, and personal fulfillment, offering a glimmer of hope for broader gender equality.

However, this progress is overshadowed by the stark fact that women's rights in Iran continue to be in crisis. While women have made considerable educational achievements, their capacity to transfer academic accomplishment into real professional or political empowerment is limited. The systemic challenges to women's rights are profoundly rooted in Iran's legal and political framework, which combines religion and state. The Islamic Republic's constitution and legislation, which are primarily influenced by religious values, continue to restrict women's freedoms in ways that undermine the gains made in education. Despite their academic successes, Iranian women continue to confront workplace discrimination, limited job opportunities, and widespread legislative restraints that limit their liberty in areas like as family law, employment, and personal rights.

One of the most critical challenges is the inseparability of religion and state law, which reinforces traditional gender roles and sustains systemic discrimination. While Islamic principles have, in some ways, facilitated women's access to education, they simultaneously restrict broader gender equality by legitimizing unequal treatment in areas such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. This duality creates a paradoxical reality where education is both an avenue for empowerment and a domain limited by societal and legal constraints. Without significant reforms, the alignment of religious values with state policy will continue to stifle progress, leaving women in a state of precarious empowerment.

This tension is particularly evident in the face of global movements advocating for women's rights and gender equality. As the international community increasingly embraces secularism and human rights-based governance, Iran's rigid integration of religion and law presents unique challenges to achieving parity. In this global context, Iranian women find themselves in a painful limbo: their educational potential is acknowledged and celebrated, yet systemic

injustices prevent its full realization. The imbalance between educational advancement and legal stagnation exemplifies the broader crisis of women's rights in the country.

While the rise in women's educational attainment is a noteworthy milestone, it alone cannot dismantle the entrenched legal and cultural systems that sustain gender inequality. True progress for Iranian women will require addressing these foundational challenges, particularly the relationship between religion and governance. As long as religious laws dictate personal liberties, women's rights will remain vulnerable to political and ideological fluctuations. To ensure that educational achievements translate into broader empowerment, Iran must undertake comprehensive legal and structural reforms that prioritize gender equality and individual freedoms.

In conclusion, the case of women's education in Iran reflects a broader global issue: the difficulty of achieving gender equality in societies where religion and law are intertwined. Education provides women with tools to challenge their circumstances, but systemic barriers continue to limit their progress. The rise of women in academia is a promising development, yet it highlights the deeper crises of rights and freedoms that persist. True and lasting change will only be possible when education is coupled with reforms that recognize women's full equality—independent of religious dictates. By embracing a more secular and inclusive governance model, Iran can unlock the full potential of its women, enabling them to thrive not only in education but in every facet of society.

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