

# A Study of the Achievements and Remaining Challenges in Female Education in Irān

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## *Abstract*

A considerable progress has been made towards gender equality in the Iranian education over the past decades. The study of various educational indicators points to such a fact. The most significant progress has been made at the primary and secondary education levels where the gender parity index (GPI) since 2000 has been 0.96 and 0.92, respectively. The purpose of this article is to identify the key factors that have led to higher gender equality at the primary and secondary education levels in Irān. It analyzes the educational, social, political, economic, and cultural elements that have acted as facilitating factors, and points to effective policies and innovative measures undertaken. It also identifies the in-school and out-of-school obstacles that continue to hinder efforts to close the gender gap in education. A situation analysis of the educational trend over the past decades; an analysis of the stages of the revolution, the "Question of Woman", and the dual role of women in post-revolutionary Irān; and the portrayal of the political will and popular demand for education illustrate some of the causes of increased gender equality. On the other hand, the three basic principles of the Islamic Republic of Irān —namely, politicization, Islamization, and equalization— have paved the road for increased female participation in education.

Despite major achievements in the realm of female education, shortcomings persist mainly in terms of lack of access to schooling among poor, rural, and nomadic girls. Furthermore, the continued existence of a gender insensitive school curriculum that portrays stereotypical images of men and women in textbooks creates a traditional mentality that direct female students away from what have been labelled as "male-oriented" fields of study.

Significant shortcomings notwithstanding, one can see a cycle in female education in Irān in which the ruling elite seeks to educate the ideal female citizen according to the principles of an Islamizing and revolutionary society, thus creating a generation of educated women who, in turn, influence their society and act as role models for young girls, who then seek education as a means of equality and empowerment.

## *Keywords*

Gender Equality; The Iranian Education; Primary and Secondary Education; Gender Parity Index (GPI);

## INTRODUCTION

The study of various educational indicators, including access to early childhood care and education, participation in primary, secondary, and higher education, and adult literacy rates, points to considerable progress made towards gender equality in Irān over the last decade. The most significant progress has been made at the primary education level, where the gender parity index (GPI: ratio between girls' and boys' rates) in the gross enrolment ratio went from 0.90 in 1990–1991 to 0.96 in 1999–2000, and the secondary education level, where the GPI went from 0.73 to 0.92 during the same period (UNESCO, 2002:242–243, 250–251). What are the causes of increased gender parity in Iranian education?

The purpose of this case study is to identify the key factors that have led to higher gender equality at the primary and secondary education levels in Irān. It will analyze the educational as well as social, political, economic, and cultural elements that have acted as facilitating factors, and point to effective policies and innovative measures undertaken. It will also identify the in-school and out-of-school obstacles that continue to hinder efforts to close the gender gap in education.

This paper consists of the following sections: a situation analysis of the educational trend over the last decade; an analysis of the status of women in post-revolutionary Irān; a portrayal of political will and popular demand for education; a review of remaining challenges; and recommendations for closing the gender gap in education.

## THE SITUATION ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION

Irān is a young nation with a population of nearly 70 million, among whom 40 percent are below age 15, and 56 percent between ages 15 to 64. The Islamic Republic of Irān, according to its Plan and Budget Organization (PBO), is a developing country with an upward trend in the human development index (HDI) value from 0.642 in 1988 to 0.758 in 1997 and thus considered among nations with medium human development (Plan and Budget Organization, 1999:15). The key factors leading to human development gains in Irān during the 1988 to 1997 period consisted of increased life expectancy (from 61.6 to 69.5



years); higher rates of adult literacy (from 57.1 percent to 74.5 percent); and better combined first, second, and third level gross enrolment ratios from 65.6 to 75 percent. In 1997, life expectancy at birth was 70.6 years for women and 68.4 years for men. In the same year, the female adult literacy rate was 67 percent compared to 81.9 percent male literacy. Furthermore, the combined first, second, and third level gross enrolment ratio was 73.3 percent for women and 76.7 percent for men. Irān graduated from low to medium standing on the gender-related human development index (GDI) value from 0.454 in 1988 to 0.579 in 1997 (Plan and Budget Organization, 1999:146).

## THE OVERALL CONTEXT

According to UNESCO statistics, adult literacy rates in Irān (age 15 and over) have increased from 63.2 percent (72.2 male and 54 female) in 1990 to 76 percent (83 male and 68.9 female) in 2000, pointing to significant progress in female literacy over the last decade. Further gender equality is noticed when literacy rates for Iranian youth are taken into consideration. The youth literacy rates (age 15 to 24) have increased from 86.3 percent (91.7 male and 80.8 female) to 93.8 percent (96.2 male and 91.3 female) during the 1990–2000 period (UNESCO, 2002:218).

Looking at gross enrolment ratio in early childhood care and education for children age 3 and above, one observes a shift from a GPI of 0.95 in 1990–1991, showing a disparity in favour of boys, to a GPI of 1.06 in 1999–2000, indicating a disparity in favour of girls. The same trend is expected at the higher education level. According to the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, there was an increase in the percentage of women enrolled in public universities from 27.3 percent in 1990 to 44.1 percent in 1999 (Ghiāsi, 2000: 16). During the 2001–2002 academic year, women comprised 50 percent of university students, while 52 percent of those who gained admissions to state universities were women (Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, 2002:3, 43). The latter statistics indicate future disparity in favour of women in the higher education system of Irān.

## PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

The analysis of the trend in education from 1990 to 2000 points to increased gender equality at primary and secondary levels of education. The trend in access to primary education in terms of gross intake rate (GIR) shows a gender parity index of 0.98 in 1990–19991 and 1 in 1999–2000, indicating parity between sexes in that year. The net intake rate (NIR) in primary education in 1999–2000 was a total of 38.4, with a male rate of 38.7 and female rate of 38, pointing to a GPI of 0.98 (UNESCO, 2002: 234–235).

Looking at participation in primary education for children age 6 to 10 in terms of gross enrolment ratio (GER), one notes a shift from a GPI of 0.90 in 1990–19991 to 0.96 in 1999–2000. The total net enrolment ratio (NER) in 1999–2000 was 74.6 (75.3 male and 73.9 female), pointing to a GPI of 0.98 (UNESCO, 2002:242–243). As far as participation in secondary education (age 11 to 16) is concerned, there has been a shift from a total GER of 55.2 (63.7 male and 46.4 female) in 1990–1991 to a total GER of 80 (83.1 male and 76.7 female) in 1999–2000. Over the last decade, therefore, there has been a shift from a GPI of 0.73 to 0.92 (UNESCO, 2002:25–251), indicating increased parity between sexes. The net enrolment rates in secondary education are not available.

Moving beyond access to schooling, one should also assess gender equality throughout the school cycle by measuring the internal efficiency of the educational system. The proportion of pupils that reach Grade 5 (i.e. survival rate to Grade 5) is an important indicator of internal efficiency. There is considerable gender parity in terms of survival rate at the primary cycle in Irān. Looking at survival rates at Grades 4 and 5, one witnesses a GPI of 0.99 and 0.98 respectively. In 1990–1991, the total survival rate was 92.5 (92.8 male and 92.2 female) at Grade 4 and 89.9 (90.7 male and 89.1 female) at Grade 5 (UNESCO, 2002:247–275). Given the lack of statistics for more recent years, one cannot look at the trend over the last decade.

Yet another indicator of the internal efficiency of the education system is the percentage of repeaters. The repetition rate in primary education in Irān is lower for girls in Grades 1 through 5. In 1999–2000, the male repetition rate in Grade 1 was 10.2 compared to 7.9 female; 7.6 male and 4.7 female in Grade 2; 5.4 male and 2.9 female



in Grade 3; 6.1 male and 3.1 female in Grade 4; and 4.1 male and 2 female in Grade 5 (UNESCO, 2002:266–267).

According to UNESCO, increasing the proportion of female teachers is a measure of gender equality for two main reasons. Training and recruiting female teachers is an attempt to improve women's participation in the social and economic sectors. Furthermore, research has shown that using female teachers is a key strategy to facilitate girls' access to and retention in school (UNESCO, 2002:77). Available statistics point to a decrease in the percentage of female teachers at the pre-primary level from 99.8 percent in 1990–1991 to 96.8 percent in 1999–2000. During the same ten year period, however, there has been an increase in the percentage of female teachers at the primary level from 52.9 to 53.9 percent, and lower secondary level from 43.4 to 45.6 percent (UNESCO, 2002:258–259). As in most countries, there is a gender disparity in favour of men among math and science teachers (Bureau of Information Technology, 2001).

Based on the above statistics, one can conclude that although disparity in favour of boys still exists at the primary and secondary school levels, there has been considerable progress made towards gender equality in the Iranian education since 1990. Why? What are the reasons behind the gradual closing of the gender gap in schooling? Is the progress mainly due to school-related factors or out-of-school phenomena? An attempt will be made, in the next section, to answer these questions. The answer may be of special interest due to the fact that the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Irān, marked by fundamentalism and the rule of religio-political leaders, led many to believe that women will experience dramatic reversal in terms of their social, political, legal, economic, and educational status in society. Various setbacks notwithstanding, Iranian women have gained significant achievements in the realm of education. Why?

## **CAUSES OF INCREASED GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION**

To understand the underlying causes of increased gender parity in schools, one must analyze education within the social, political, and cultural context of post-revolutionary Iranian society. This is not to say that the educational system merely reflects the socio-political situation. This paper acknowledges a dialectical relationship between

education and society, whereby schools reflect macro-level changes at the societal level while, at the same time, the society at large is affected by transformation within the educational system and the increased number of the educated, especially women. The following analysis will, therefore, study both in-school and out-of-school factors that could explain progress in closing the gender gap in Iranian education. It will analyze the nature of the revolution, the status of Iranian women, and the role of political will and popular demand to address the issue.

### **THE STAGES OF THE REVOLUTION AND THE 'QUESTION OF WOMAN'**

Irān has undergone three distinct stages since the 1979 revolution. The "question of woman" and her role and responsibilities have been addressed in each stage. A fourth stage may have begun since the election of President *Mahmood Ahmadi-Nejād* in June 2005. At this point, however, it is too early to assess the impact of the new government on female education in Irān. The first stage, encompassing the 1979–1988 period, focused on the consolidation of the Islamic Republic as the new form of state rule in Irān. This period was marked by domestic turmoil, political violence, war, economic austerity, international tension, and political isolation. It was also a time during which ideology was in command and strict Islamic measures were enforced. The exemplary citizen of this stage was a "doctrinaire" Muslim and a "committed" revolutionary whose ideal was self-sacrifice and, ultimately, martyrdom for the cause of the revolution.

The primary goal of the religio-political leadership at this time was the Islamization and politicization of society. Islamization within the Iranian context refers to the deliberate attempt to implement Islamic laws and regulations in private and public domains and to integrate religion and politics in all spheres of life. Politicization is the process by which Iranians are to be transformed into the "soldiers of the revolution," dedicated to the cause of establishing an Islamic society, and loyal to the religio-political leadership. During this period, the revolutionary government acted as an equalizer and aimed



at providing opportunities for the neglected and marginalized sectors of the society known as the “dispossessed.” Meanwhile, there was a conscious attempt to Islamize and politicize women, the most ideal of whom were, at the time, mothers who raised pious Muslims and revolutionary soldiers seeking martyrdom.

The second stage (1988–1997), known as the period of reconstruction, focused on the need of reconstruction, after a devastating eight-year war with Iraq which was imposed on Irān. The post-war Irān witnessed liberalization, privatization, increased levels of political exchange, and reduced isolation in the international arena. Revolutionary ideals and active politicization coexisted with increased interaction with others, thus opening the doors of a formerly closed society. The new terminology included such words as economic growth, population control, and specialization. This period may be viewed as a transitional phase that prepared the ground for the next stage. During this period women were encouraged to participate in all arenas of social, educational, political, and economic life and contribute to the post-war reconstruction.

The period from 1997 to 2005 is known as the reform period during which such terms as civil society, political development, tolerance, religious democracy, dialogue of civilizations, citizenship rights and responsibilities, and meritocracy were permeating the air. While some continue to present a strict version of the Islamic and revolutionary ideology as the “true spirit” of the Islamic Republic, others aim at introducing a more “gentle version;” one that does not demarcate between the “self” and the “other” and seeks domestic and international dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding. The rights-based approach of this period no longer views women as instruments of the revolutionary ideology or economic growth. Instead, it seeks to empower woman for her own sake and raise her consciousness regarding her rights and responsibilities.

Women from different strata of the society have used the terminology of the three stages to their own advantage in various fields, including education. Once educated, women have, in turn, contributed to the transformation of gender relations in society. In other words, the exigencies of the three stages have called for the creation of an ideal female citizen based on the priorities of that

period. Furthermore, the leaders of each stage have called upon the schools to educate the ideal woman of each period. Interestingly, women have benefited from the attempt to Islamize and politicize them during the first stage; provide education and employment for them during the second period; or empower them for a society based on meritocracy in the third phase. Let us see who the ideal female citizen of the Islamic Republic is.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW MUSLIM WOMAN**

The ideal female citizen in the Islamic Republic of Irān—the New Muslim Woman—is the product of the coexistence of tradition and modernity. She is thus faced with a paradox (Mehran, 2003). On the one hand, she is expected to fulfil her traditional role as the “pivot” of the home; a dedicated wife and mother; and the source of stability and tranquillity in the family. At the same time, she is also expected to be an active member of her revolutionary society. Expected to be a “soldier of the revolution,” an Islamized and politicized wife and mother, or an educated citizen—depending on the dictates of the time—the ideal woman is to play different and apparently contradictory roles. The dual role and responsibility of the post-revolutionary woman is clearly reflected in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Irān. It “considers women’s employment and their social and economic activities to be very meaningful and conducive to social well-being” while, at the same time, emphasizing the role of the woman “as a mother and her significance in maintaining strong family bonds and affectionate relationships” (Women’s Bureau of the Presidential Office, 1997:58).

The active presence of women in the 1979 revolution that led to the recognition of their power and rights, and their refusal to “return to the kitchen” afterwards, opened the doors for a range of Iranian women from diverse social, economic, political, cultural, and family backgrounds. Whether seeking tradition, modernity, or the coexistence of both, the Iranian women have found their own niche. The educated, socially conscious women of Irān strive to raise awareness, overcome obstacles, change women-unfriendly rules and regulations, fight gender discrimination, and thus pave the road for today’s girls and tomorrow’s women. They have, in the process, acted as role models





for the younger generation who is more aware of her rights and actively seeks to gain access to opportunities available in various arenas, especially education.

An analysis of the active presence of women and the coexistence of political will and popular demand will illustrate how supply and demand of education have benefited women bringing about increased gender parity in schools.

### **REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY AND THE POLITICAL WILL**

The revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic, as mentioned earlier, has been based on three pillars: Islamization, politicization, and equalization (Mehran, 2000). All three components have been crucial in shaping the content and direction of education at all levels. Islamization and politicization aimed at socializing the young and turning them into pious Muslims, committed to the revolutionary cause. Further research is needed to assess whether or not the “children of the revolution” have internalized the values instilled at schools. What has clearly been achieved, however, is an increased equalization in the realm of education. Providing educational opportunities for the deprived and dispossessed members of the society and reaching the unaffected, in poverty-stricken remote areas, has been a significant achievement of the post-revolutionary period. Girls and women have been major beneficiaries of the revolutionary ideology that views education as an equalizer.

Education has been ranked as a priority for the Iranian government, especially at the primary and secondary school levels. In 1999–2000, the total public expenditure on education (as percentage of total government expenditure) was 18.3 percent (UNESCO, 2002:283). In 1997, first and second level education expenditure (as percentage of public education expenditure) was 72.1 percent (Plan and Budget Organization, 1999:155). In 1999–2000, the public current expenditure on education (as percentage of total expenditure on education) was 91.4 percent. Education in Irān is, for the most part, in the hands of the public sector and private institutions play a minimal role. In 1999–2000, private enrolment (as percentage of total enrolment) was 12.7 percent at the pre-primary, 3.3 percent at the primary, and 5.4 percent at the secondary level (UNESCO, 2002:282–283).

The political will of the Islamic Republic in raising awareness about the importance of female schooling and highlighting the existing shortcomings is reflected in the establishment of specific institutions to address gender equality in education. The establishment of the Bureau of Women's Affairs (affiliated with the Office of the President) in the early 1990s, later replaced by the Centre for Women's Participation in 1997, was an important initiative to focus on the condition of women, address their concerns, and increase their participation in various areas, including education. The Centre has set up special women's units in various ministries and government organizations, among which is the Bureau of Women's Affairs at the Ministry of Education. The mandate of the latter is to "campaign against undesirable gender attitudes" (Plan and Budget Organization, 1999:91). The Bureau organizes workshops and seminars at all levels of the Ministry of Education to raise awareness about the need for gender sensitivity in schools and among teachers and school administrators. It also finances research projects to study the impact of gender stereotyping in textbooks and gender discrimination in the curriculum. The Bureau periodically seeks the cooperation of various United Nations agencies, university research centres, university faculty members, and centres for women's studies to accomplish its mission.

The political will of the Islamic Republic to provide educational opportunities for girls and women and create the New Muslim woman is illustrated in a variety of plans. The 1988 *General Plan of the System of Education in the Islamic Republic of Irān* addresses female education in the following principles:

- The Ministry of Education should eliminate any form of discrimination against girls, especially in the rural areas and among nomads, and give priority to girls in the distribution of resources and opportunities.
- Women should participate in the planning, policy making, management, and administration of education at all levels, especially at the top level positions.
- The Iranian educational system should recognize the identity of a woman and her role in the family and the society on the basis of Islam and plan for the content and method of her schooling accordingly.



- The educational guidance of girls should be based on their capabilities and interests, and their vocational guidance should take into consideration the kinds of occupations needed by women, best fulfilled by women, or most fit with their role and responsibility in the family.
- Curriculum development in Irān should emphasize the sanctity and stability of the family and introduce the different roles of men and women in marital life.
- Education in Irān should strengthen the social and political insight of girls and increase their self-confidence in fulfilling the social and family responsibilities (Council of Fundamental Transformation, 1988:57, 64–65, 66, 72, 73, 82).

The above-mentioned principles illustrate the commitment of the government to the cause of girls' schooling as well as the task it assigns to female education—namely, the Islamization and politicization of women and the preservation of the family.

*The First Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic 1989–1993* also addresses female education and states the following goals:

- Improving the condition of women through education and increasing women's participation in the socio-economic 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 (Plan and Budget Organization, 1989:27, 37).

The *Second Development Plan (1994–1998)* briefly touches on the issue of female education by stating the following as a goal: "Paying attention to the education of girls and the literacy training of women and young mothers" (Plan and Budget Organization, 1993:7–2).

The 2001 *National Report on Women's Status in the Islamic Republic of Irān*, published by the Centre for Women's Participation, Office of the President, clarifies the female education priorities of the period covered by the *Third Development Plan (1999–2003)*. This document reflects the concerns of its time and demonstrates a deep transformation in the approach to gender and education by calling for

increased gender sensitivity in all aspects of schooling. The report specifies the following as the priorities of female education:

- Revise existing (education) laws that are gender biased.
- Reduce gender gaps in the fields of science, mathematics, and applied sciences.
- Modify educational materials in order to portray the correct image of women's roles in the family and society and of the mutual rights of women, men, and the family at all levels.
- Emphasize the participation of female specialists in planning and policy making at all levels of education.
- Develop and promote counselling services in high schools to prepare and guide students towards more appropriate fields of study in order to eliminate the concentration of female university students in certain majors.
- Determine a particular quota for creating equal opportunities for women in a number of specific university majors.
- Teach management skills to women with the aim of enhancing their participation in the sphere of decision-making.
- Expand and diversify technical and vocational training programs for women with a view to creating employment opportunities (Centre for Women's Participation, 2001:15-19).

The principles of female education in Irān, reflected in the various plans mentioned, have guided the policies and actual measures undertaken by the Ministry of Education to facilitate girls' access to and retention in school since the 1979 revolution.

### POPULAR DEMAND

The political will of Iranian leaders to provide educational opportunities for girls has been accompanied by popular demand such that, at times, the demand far exceeds the supply. It is important to understand the underlying causes of increasing family demand for education and identify the most important in-school and out-of-school elements involved.

The expansion of schooling throughout the country as part of the revolutionary ideology that aims at equalizing educational opportunities and reaching the marginalized sectors of society, has led to increased female enrolment, especially at the primary level where



more facilities are available. Furthermore, the existence of educated female role models in the popular realm has shattered the stereotypical image of women among the Iranian families and encouraged them to send their daughters to school. There is an increasing number of female teachers, university professors, researchers, health workers, scientists, physicians, artists, writers, poets, film makers, lawyers, athletes, and journalists whose activities are visible at the local and national levels. They are further introduced to the public via innovative measures such as the celebration of woman's day, during which a range of women from diverse backgrounds and occupations are introduced through the media. The existence of female role models in various public positions raise the consciousness of both girls and their families regarding the options available for women and the importance of education as the necessary means to gain access to such positions. The increasing presence of educated women at home and in the public realm encourages girls and their families to view education as an asset. Even those who believe that the "right" place for women is at home, gradually recognize the fact that an increased level of schooling for women makes them better wives and mothers in terms of family nutrition, health, well-being, and impact on children's educational achievement.

The importance of the above factors notwithstanding, a determining factor leading to increased demand for girls' schooling has been the "Islamization" of education in the post-revolutionary period. In fact, traditional measures undertaken by the religio-political leadership to Islamize schools have assured traditional families that the school climate is not in conflict with the values cherished at home. Thus while close observers of schooling in the post-1979 era were wary about whether creating a religious climate in schools might hinder girls' participation in education and push them to the periphery, the reality was that traditional measures played an important role in removing earlier reservations by more conservative members of the society to send their daughters to school.

The traditional educational policies introduced shortly after the 1979 revolution were as follows: banning co-education at all levels of schooling except at the universities; assigning female teachers to girls' schools and male teachers to boys' schools; changing the content and

pictures of school textbooks to portray a traditional division of labour between men and women in the private and public spheres; introducing compulsory veiling for all female students and teachers; directing students towards “male- or female-oriented” fields of study based on their sex; and barring women from entering “masculine” disciplines at the university. Although some of the above measures have changed or loosened over time, they have acted as an assurance for more conservative families that their daughters would be studying in an Islamic setting.

One can see a cycle in female education in Irān in which the ruling elite seeks to educate the ideal female citizen according to the dictates of an Islamizing and revolutionary society, thus creating a generation of educated women who, in turn, influence their society and act as role models for young girls, who then seek education as a means of equality and empowerment.

### **THE REMAINING CHALLENGES**

Despite significant achievements in female schooling and considerable progress towards gender equality in Iranian education, the battle is not over yet. Quantitative and qualitative shortcomings continue to exist in the realm of education while the broader participation of women in society is far from ideal. In fact, the dramatic increase in the number of educated women in Irān is not reflected in their participation in political and economic life, although there has been some improvement in recent years.

Since gender equality in education is part of gender equality in society at large, it is important to view the educational status of women within the broader framework of female participation in the social, political, and economic arenas. The active presence of women at all levels of public life, especially at higher levels of planning, politics, and administration where they are most visible, will act as an incentive for younger women to seek further education. At the same time, an increasing number of educated women will, in turn, pressure the current leadership to provide opportunities in spheres traditionally dominated by men. The following section will illustrate the current status of Iranian women in the public realm.



While 43 percent of Iranian university graduates are female (Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, 2001:60), the level of women's participation in the political and economic spheres is low. According to the statistics provided by the Plan and Budget Organization, the rate for female unpaid family workers (as percentage of the total) is 46.5 percent, compared to 32.9 percent female professional and technical workers, 16.9 percent female clerical workers, 12.8 percent female administrators and managers, and 5.2 percent female sales and service workers. In Irān, the female economic activity rate (as percentage of the male rate) is 14.2 percent; women's share of adult (age 15 and above) labour force is 12.2 percent; and women's share of earned income is 9.4 percent. At the same time, 5.2 percent of the seats in the parliament are held by women and there are no women in the government at the ministerial level. In 1997, the gender-related development index (GDI) value in Irān was 0.579 and the gender empowerment measure (GEM) value was 0.300 (Plan and Budget Organization, 1999:146–166).

Further research is needed to determine whether the low level of female participation is a result of social, political, and cultural obstacles or based on the choices made by women themselves. Cultural values that emphasize domesticity; women's preference to remain home while their children grow; family pressure to choose the private as opposed to the public realm; gender biased rules and regulations that discriminate against women; and the existence of a glass ceiling in various professions present the range of reasons for women's low economic activity in the formal sector.

The question that remains is whether families can “afford” to keep women at home in a period during which a single pay check is no longer sufficient to run the household. Furthermore, how long can educated women be kept on the sidelines without economic, political, or moral justification? The rights-based view of the status of women in society and the new generation of educated Iranian women will undoubtedly seek to transform the existing status quo.

Shortcomings in the realm of education exist mainly in terms of access to schools and the content of schooling. A glance at the number of out-of-school children shows that in 1999–2000, a total of 2,398,000 children were not enrolled in schools, 49.9 percent of whom

were girls (UNESCO, 2002:292). In order to identify the factors that lead to girls remaining out of school, a field research was conducted at the national scale during the 1993–1995 period in a joint Ministry of Education-UNICEF, Tehrān Girls' Education Project (the author was education consultant to UNICEF for this research). In-depth interviews were conducted with out-of-school girls, their families, and school teachers/principals in provinces with the highest gender gap in education, to understand the underlying causes of girls' lack of access to or drop-out from primary schooling. The results of the study pointed to the existence of three categories of hindering factors — namely, cultural, economic, and educational. The most frequently stated issues were as follows: cultural factors (traditional thinking regarding the uselessness of education for girls; prioritizing the education of boys over girls); economic factors (financial poverty; mothers' need for the help of girls in housework; the family's need for the economic, income-generating activities of girls); and educational factors (absence of female teachers; co-educational schools). It should be noted that a number of the factors categorized as economic and educational, have strong cultural overtones (Ministry of Education, 1995; Mehran, 1997). The fact that both in-school and out-of-school factors restrict girls' access to schooling conveys an important message for educational planners and policy makers that a multi-faceted approach is needed to correct the situation.

Gender disparity in education is quite visible when one compares male and female enrolment patterns at the secondary school level. The distribution of students during the 1999–2000 academic year was 43 percent female and 57 percent male in the mathematics-physics branch; 62 percent girls and 38 percent boys in experimental sciences; 55 percent female and 45 percent male in literature; and 30 percent girls compared to 70 percent boys in the technical-vocational branch (Bureau of Women's Affairs, 2002:29). Additional problems in secondary education include shortage of female teachers in mathematics and sciences; limited number of women in management and decision-making positions; low rate of female enrolment in remote rural/nomadic areas; and insufficient attention to girls' technical-vocational education. Furthermore, a content analysis of primary and secondary textbooks demonstrates that school books continue to





present a traditional division of labour in the private and public realm. Gender stereotyping prevails in textbooks in which men and women are portrayed in traditional gender roles assigned to them (Ferdows, 1994; Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari, 1991; Mehran, 1989; Touba, 1987).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite quantitative gains in female access to and retention in schools, much more needs to be done to bring about gender parity in education. Practical recommendations based on the field research conducted in 1993–1995 (Mehran, 1997), pointing to cultural, economic, and educational factors that lead to girls' lack of access to schooling are as follows.

1. Seeking the help of trusted community leaders to convince more conservative families that education is an asset for girls;
2. Training and recruiting local female teachers in areas in which the presence of male instructors has resulted in family refusal to send their daughters to school;
3. Building schools closer to communities in which distance to school is a hindering factor for girls; and
4. Establishing girls' dormitories especially at the secondary school level for students who live in remote, less populous rural/nomadic areas where there are no high schools for girls.

General recommendations that can guide long-term action in the quest to bring about further gender parity in Iranian education include:

1. Developing a gender sensitive school curriculum;
2. Removing stereotypical images of men and women from textbooks;
3. Transforming the traditional mentality that directs female students away from what have been labelled as "male-oriented" fields of study;
4. Providing gender training for teachers; and
5. Raising awareness among instructors to avoid conveying a "message of inability or inadequacy" to female students.

The above are important qualitative measures that need to be undertaken to eliminate gender discrimination in schools.

Empowering male and female students to make choices that match their interest and abilities and are close to their hearts is the

future challenge of an educational system that seeks gender parity at all levels. It should be emphasized that a true gendered approach to education must take into consideration the needs and abilities of boys as well as girls and attempt to eliminate the measures that put either of them at a disadvantage. In sum, using a gender lens to assess the educational status of both boys and girls and analyze how and why schools short-change them is of key importance in providing education for all.





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