

Indices of Gender Development and Women's Egalitarianism in Irān

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Abstract

The situation of women in post-Revolutionary Irān has been under scrutiny by domestic as well as foreign investigators. The existing situation is described by some as "improper" due to the prevalence of a patriarchal society. Another perspective attempts at highlighting the scientific status achieved by the Iranian women in recent years. This article, based on the current perspectives, probes the Iranian women's situation taking into account gender development indices and compares the indices with those of other nations. The article utilizes the library and secondary data analysis methods. Based upon empowerment theory, the present study investigates factors constituting the general context, those contributing to changing women's situation, as well as factors that act to alter the ranking of the gender development indices. Such factors include an increase in the age of marriage, the decrease of fertility, popularization of secondary schooling, and a rise in number of women who enter the universities, all of which help to promote the conditions for women's egalitarianism. Nonetheless, in the areas of employment and management, women's shares remain lower than those of men. Yet, the prevailing circumstances are indicative of an improvement, as women strive for egalitarianism and equal opportunities.

Keywords

The Iranian Women Situation; Gender Development Indices; Women's Egalitarianism; Equal Opportunity; Male-Dominated Society;

INTRODUCTION

Carrying out investigation on status of the post-revolutionary Iranian women is fraught with difficulties today. Such difficulties are rooted in varying perspectives derived from extensive and numerous studies conducted on status of women belonging to the Islamic societies of the Middle East and of elsewhere. Two examples of such divergent perspectives, for instance, are published by the *Signs* journal (Majid, 1998; Mayor, 1998).

Mayor (1998) considers Irān as typical example of a patriarchal society. He sees the Islamic cover imposed on women by the clerics as evidence supporting his claim. *Majid* (1998), on the other hand, admires Irān and the Iranians, citing the higher ratio of female university teachers in Irān, as compared with those of Germany and the USA in 1997 and that of France in 1980, to consolidate his position.

Stating such contradictory views by the Iranian as well as foreign investigators inside and outside Irān, on status of the post-revolutionary Iranian women merits a closer scrutiny. It is essential to note that Irān is located in a region that *Caldwell* calls it patriarchal belt (quoted in Moghaddam, 1992), a region encompassing South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. Another researcher considers the Middle East and North Africa to constitute the world's widest gender gap; holding that women of this region are continually marginalized, as far as education and work are concerned. They are ranked lower than their counterparts in other regions of the world, they bear many children in short spacing, thus endangering their own health and that of their children as well (quoted in Kāzemi, 2000).

A preliminary and comparative study (KāzemiPour and Safiri, 2001) concerning the situation of the Iranian women before and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 showed a more favourable situation, as compared to the past, for women in terms of employment and social presence. This study argues that the liberating impact of the revolutionary movement not only has led to changes in the situation of the Iranian women but it also transformed the nature Islamic teachings in that it brought women closer to gender egalitarianism. The above study, in light of granting right of divorce to women, along with control over economic life via employment, particularly in specialized



occupations, evaluates the situation of the Iranian women, even better than that which exists in some Western countries.

STATING THE PROBLEM

Today the exposition of women's issues, gender inequality in particular, is an ongoing project undertaken by both the advanced and developing nations. The project is of interest, though variably, to the social science investigators; sociologists, psychologists, economists, jurists and so forth. Economically speaking, the theorists of development, having seen the failure of the previous development models, sought to adopt a new development approach, one which would attempt to take into account a separate, detailed, and specified status for women and men and consider an equality-oriented model for opportunities at hand. In order to take the right path leading to development, each society acts on the basis of its own socio-cultural background. The acquisition of experts' knowledge on these societies can help to provide the best possible model of development applicable in a given region. The Iranian society has been studied by various indigenous and outside investigators in the years following the Islamic Revolution. The contradictory perspectives alluded to earlier, should not serve to complicate the problem under the study. Disregarding the individuals' positions, if we consider women's situation on the basis of indices pertaining to human and gender development, indices which have been standardized during the years after the Islamic Republic took shape, we would be able to demonstrate the occurrence of change. Such an approach will point to the reason why such a heading was chosen for this paper: Women's Egalitarianism.

THE MAIN QUESTIONS

1. What is Irān's ranking among other nations, in terms of trend change pertaining to gender development?
2. What are the background factors contributing to changing situation of the Iranian women?

METHODOLOGY

The present research utilizes the method of secondary data analysis. The data provided by the United Nations Human Development Reports of various years, as well as data furnished by Statistical Centre of Irān. These and other relevant pieces of evidence and documents constitute the information base of this research. Thus, here are presented some cases that are based on our data-supported calculations. These calculations, in our view, make it possible to present a viable analysis of status of the post-revolutionary Iranian women.

Status of the Iranian Women (from 1979 to the present)

Three decades have passed since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Irān. Today, based on universal indices of development, we can attempt to determine whether the term 'patriarchal' is apt to explain the visage of women as exhibited in various fields of activity within the Iranian context. On the other hand, we explore the possibility which may exist, one which points to 'egalitarianism' as a sound indication of the situation in which the Iranian women are found.

Today, one of the most important achievements of the world's development is the emphasis many investigators place upon the status which women occupy within the development process. In other words, investigators are keen to determine to what extent women are being affected by the development process that a given nation is undergoing? Various views are expressed about the negative effects that development process bears upon women. A welfarist view, aiming to reach the vulnerable strata (women) reminds us that our world, parallel to the emphasis being placed on Human Development Indices, has also been considering Gender Development Indices whose main target is to propound the existing inequalities between women and men, and whose ultimate goal is to introduce Women Empowerment Indices within the arenas of the workplace and that of the management, that is within the political structure and higher echelons of decision making processes. Human development indices, based on the *Human Development Reports* of various years are indicative of the operations of three main indices: index of life expectancy at birth, index of adults' literacy rate, and the purchasing



power index, that is the income earned, all of which would act to determine a country's ranking situation. The question is that what is it which can enable us to specify women's situation versus that of men? The answer seems to be a development index in terms of gender. Given this index the ranks already assigned to a given country may somewhat be altered. In this regard, even many advanced countries would encounter difficult tasks in removing discriminations and inequalities being rendered more visible through the use of the gender index, and which exist between men and women. **Table 1** describes Irān in terms of gender development index in various years. The gradual growth of Gender Development Index points to Irān's upward tendency in this regard.

Table 1. The Process of Gender Development in Irān (1992–2001)
(United Nations Development Programme, 1995; 1998; 2003)

Year	Value of Gender Development
1992	611%
1995	643%
1999	696%
2001	702%

Table 2 indicates that despite the fact that the rank of Human Development Index in Irān has fallen, yet Irān's rank in terms of Gender Development Indices have increased from 92nd to 86th.

Table 2. A Comparison of Irān's Rank in Human Development and Gender Development
(United Nations Development Programme, 1995; 1998; 2003)

Year	Rank in Human Development	Rank in Gender Development
1998	78	92
2003	106	86

Such a changing situation is described in **Table 3**, which presents the indices separately:

1. The Life Expectancy Index. A comparison of men's and women's situation (above) indicates that almost in all years (except

1970) women lived longer than men did and that there was no gender gap.

Table 3. Trend Change of Life Expectancy Index in Terms of Gender (1970–2000)

(United Nations Development Programme, 1995; 1998; 2003; World Bank, 2000)

Year	Women's Life Expectancy (years)	Men's Life Expectancy (years)
1970	54.0	55.0
1992	66.0	65.0
1995	69.1	67.9
1998	72.0	70.0
2000	71.3	68.5

2. The Education Index. Table 4 shows that there is inequality between women and men, although the extent of gender gap in education decreases gradually and an upward trend is apparent.

Table 4. Trend Change of Men's and Women's Education Index (1992–2001)

(United Nations Development Programme, 1995; 2003)

Year	Adults' Literacy Rate		Adults' Enrolment at 3 levels	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
1992	55.0%	74.5%	61.3%	73.6%
1995	59.3%	77.7%	62.6%	67.0%
2001	70.2%	83.8%	63.0%	66.0%

3. The Index of Earned Income. Table 5 illustrates that women's share of the earned income, compared to men's share, is very little. Yet the difference decreases gradually so that the gender gap dwindles. The increase in women's share of per capita income is the result of employment rate. The economic activity, against which wages and benefits are gained, increases women's share of per capita income. Table 6 shows the extent of women's involvement in the economic activity, as provided by two *Human Development Reports*, and compares it with similar data on the developing as well developed nations.

The extent of women's involvement, considering two years under the comparison, has increased considerably, and more progress is expected to occur.



Table 5. Share of Earned Income Received by Men and Women in Irān (1998–2001)

(United Nations Development Programme, 1995; 1998; 2003)

Year	Women's Share of Per Capita Income	Men's Share of Per Capita Income	Gender Gap in Terms of Income
1988	7.6%	92.4%	84.8%
1992	14.9%	85.0%	70.2%
1995	18.9%	81.1%	62.6%
2001	21.84%	78.16%	56.32%

Table 6. A Comparison of Women's Involvement in Economic Activity in Various Nations

(United Nations Development Programme, 1998; 2003)

Nation Year	Norway	Canada	Germany	Venezuela	Lebanon	Turkey	Irān
1998	84	82	72	50	39	57	32
2003	85	82	70	54	39	62	38

The data so far surveyed are indicative of a change in the situation of gender development indices in Irān within the last seven years (1995–2001). In other words, in the present circumstances of Irān, women occupy a position which has rendered them capable of acquiring more opportunities. On the other hand, examining other social and demographic factors such as rising age of marriage, fertility reduction, universality of education to the level of the secondary schooling, women's active presence in universities and an increase of women's role in decision-making, all can shed more light on women's situation and thus portray an accurate picture of the contemporary Iranian women. Evidently, the reason for considering social and demographic factors is that they provide the context for women's upward move. Without such a consideration, the explanation of the growth of gender development indices is not feasible.

Here, we will discuss empowerment theory, as it constitutes one of new approaches in development. Based upon empowerment theory we try to assess the change in the Iranian women's situation that is to determine whether or not such a change has been in the direction of empowerment.

The Empowerment Theory

Ever since the debate over the issue of “women and development” was launched, various approaches for defining the content of its programs have emerged in various historical periods. Generally, one may attempt to classify these approaches, or theories, in three generic categories: welfarist, poverty eradication, efficiency, and empowerment (Moser, 1989). Each of the above theories has its advocates but the theory of empowerment is more generally accepted and it is still being further developed and refined. The growth of empowerment theory was in part a reaction against criticisms put forward against the welfarist and poverty eradication theories which draw heavily from economics. Earlier we mentioned the failure of development programs previously adopted. An example of such failure is the theory of poverty eradication launched by the World Bank. This program not only did not lead to an improvement of women’s situation but, based on the available data, worsened it (United Nations, 1993). Thus empowerment theory derives its impetus from the weaknesses of the former approaches. The subordinate situation of women is regarded by the empowerment theory not only as a result of patriarchy but also of exploitation and neo-colonial pressures exerted by the Western nations. Then, empowerment theory’s roots can be seen as being manifested in the Third World literature. It shows that women’s increased social presence is not an imported item. It is important, and rather ironic, to note that although women’s issues may be seen worldwide as being fundamentally similar, yet the researcher is increasingly forced to see women’s situation within the context of developing nation as “different”. Given the accuracy of such an approach, to remedy women’s problems, as seen in the developing countries, requires different planning and strategies.

The pivotal issue in the empowerment theory is “participation”. In fact, participation is regarded as the main vehicle through which the aims of empowerment are achieved. These goals, or criteria, are: welfare, access, awareness, and control (over one’s life). It is acknowledged that realizing women’s “participation” is not an easy task in a patriarchal society. Thus what is initially needed is to strengthen women’s presence which is potentially regarded as an empowering element per se. Within a “developing” context, and in



reality, it is a complex process to increase women's participation. The dismal appearance of women in high decision-making positions is a testimony to the fact as presented. Then, this in turn supports the view advocating increased women's political participation. Empowerment theory, considering unsuccessful results of the development programs, from which women did not benefit much, seeks to create a fundamental change that is to convert women from inactive agents to active, independent, and able agents. Women's empowerment is a process through which women will take hold of their own destiny and thus will be able to develop and enhance their own potential abilities, which have been overlooked and hidden through the operations of unequal gender practices. Attention will be drawn toward women's socio-economic situation when the existing levels of equality, operative in a society, are challenged and treated as a serious obstacle to development.

Thus, according to empowerment theory, direct participation in social life is, at the same time, both the result and the means of women's empowerment (Mosaffā, 1994). The empowerment theory was introduced by Susan Lange.

Based on this theory to create opportunities for women is to enable them to be not solely engaged with child bearing, rather to be involved in the area of family roles. Having more control over such family roles would enable women to participate in the social life more effectively. This is the means by which women will be empowered. The opportunity of accessing their own consciousness will be provided by the general and higher education which will turn their destiny to be determined by their own actions. Here we will consider the background factors which contribute to paving the road leading to women's readiness toward growth and enhancement.

Rising Age of the First Marriage. One of the factors contributing to the change of their situation is a delay in their marriage which now usually takes place after the completion of the upper secondary education (Table 7).

Declining Fertility Rate. Rising age of marriage results in fewer years available for fertility. There are other resultant factors. For instance, the desired number of children is reduced as women's awareness increases. Hence lower birth rate and population growth. A

reduction in population growth is a main factor contributing to development (**Table 8**).

Table 7. The Mean Age at the First Marriage for Women
(Statistical Centre of Iran, 2003)

Year	The Mean Age at the First Marriage
1976	19.7
1996	22.4
2002	23.5
2003	24.1

Table 8. Population Growth in Various Years
(Statistical Centre of Iran, 2005b)

Year	Rate of Population Growth
1956	3.1
1966	3.1
1976	2.7
1986	3.9
1991	2.5
1996	1.5

Rising Level of Girls' Awareness. An increase in the number of girls completing the upper secondary education coupled with rising number of their admission to universities within the years of 1992–2005 represent an improved situation for women as far as the acquisition of higher social positions is concerned (**Table 9**).

Table 9. Percent of Girls Completing Upper Secondary Education and their Admission to Universities*
(Statistical Centre of Iran, 2005b)

Academic Year	Girls Completing Upper Secondary Education	Girls' Admission to Universities
1992	44.97%	28.93%
1997	55.25%	42.68%
2001	55.59%	50.55%
2002	55.76%	51.91%
2003	55.56%	52.91%
2004	58.64%	53.94%
2005	59.11%	53.65%

* The figures represent the percentage calculated based on the total (girls and boys)



Furthermore, an increase in women's involvement in the economic activity from 32% to 38% represents an upward trend followed by better access to the general wellbeing and acquisition of higher income, all of which are indicative of an improved control over the resources (based on empowerment theory). Women's motion towards higher levels of involvement in the affairs of society is, of course, being observed also in the area of social activity. Women's NGO¹'s has enjoyed a considerable growth in recent years. In addition, a change is currently noticed in women's activity in decision-making and decision-building institutions such as city-village Islamic Councils, and in their permeating the higher echelons of management positions.

The findings of a study carried out in Tehrān under the heading of "Attitudes and Socio-Cultural Behaviour", shows that the ratios of membership in associations by men and women are 10.7% and 6.3%, respectively. The ratios of participating in associations for men and women are respectively 23% and 25% (Mohseni, 2000).

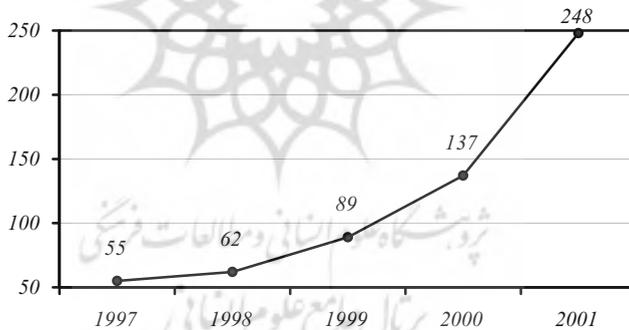


Diagram 1. The Growth of Non-Governmental Organizations
(Centre for Women's Participation, 2002)

Women also participate in city-village councils to decide on the issues involved. **Table 10** illustrates this fact.

Table 10. Women Elected to City and Village Councils
(Centre for Women's Participation, 2002)

Location	Number	%
Village	300	38
City	483	62

¹ Non-Governmental Organization

Viewed from a disadvantageous plane, women's little presence in senior management and high-ranking positions is a factor which acts to marginalize them. **Table 11** is illustrative of the fact that women's occupancy of such positions is very low. Such figures are dismal and reflect a cultural stereotype of man-woman difference and which in turn strengthens the agenda for discussing the dominance of patriarchal views in Iran.

Table 11. Occupational Grouping in Terms of Gender
(Statistical Centre of Iran, 2005a)

Occupational Group	Women	Men
Managers and Legislators	1.60%	1.90%
Specialists	20.60%	5.25%
Technicians	4.47%	4.00%
Administrative Clerks	5.50%	3.60%
Service and Sales Personnel	4.70%	12.20%
Skilled Agricultural Workers	30.40%	19.90%
Industrial Sector Workers	26.90%	17.60%
Operators of Motor Vehicles	0.50%	11.46%
Unskilled Workers	4.50%	14.47%
Total of Employees	13.70%	86.3%

If we look at **Table 11** more thoroughly we would see that the ratio of male managers to the total male employees is 1.9, while the same ratio for women is 1.6. This indicates that we are not dealing with a very wide gender gap in this regard. Such a view is further supported by the fact that among the category of specialist females include 20.6% of total woman employed, while the same figure for men is only 5.25%. Similarly, male industrial workers compose 17.6% of total male employees, while the same figure for women is 26.9. Such results show that about half of women employed in management and legislation are specialists or are those who have had industrial training. Holding these positions requires higher education and effective work experience. The available statistics indicate that women are highly capable in these fields.

Caution: The respective ratio of each occupational grouping is the result of dividing the relevant figure by total employees of that column (that is, men or women). Thus is derived the ratio of each female occupational grouping to the total women employed. For



example, if we assume the number of women as being 100, then 30.4% of them are classed as skilled agricultural workers.

Moreover, the extent of women's involvement in the economic activity can be taken as representing their enjoyment of higher levels of wellbeing, earnings, and access to more resources. On this score, Irān, in recent years has witnessed a 6% growth rate. It is expected that along with graduation of the current female university students, the employment situation be somewhat improved. The increase in number of women in decision-making positions and their increased social participation reflects their more active presence in NGO's and city-village councils in order to gain positions.

DISCUSSION AND DELIBERATION

Considering the soundness of various views on status of women in the post-revolutionary Irān (after 1979) and in view of the claim that Irān is mainly a patriarchal society, we were prompted to introduce indices of human development, and those of gender development, in particular. This was done in order to determine, based on standard universal indices, whether women's situation, as compared with that of men, has improved in recent years or not. In other words, is it the case that the current situation is indicative of a patriarchal society in which women have no control over the conditions of their lives?

Having looked at the indices we have noticed Irān's elevation in gender indices: It was shown that Irān's rank was improved from 92nd in 1998 to 86th in 2003. To study the trend more thoroughly we turned to social and demographic factors conducive to creating a more favourable context in which women's more active presence in various arenas could explain the growth of gender indices. Factors such as literacy, universality of the upper secondary education, high numbers of girls' admission to the universities, the rising of women's average age in the first marriage, all acted to reduce fertility and hence lower population growth rate.

A reduction in fertility accompanied by an expansion of education both act to create new opportunities for women to become aware of their own abilities, and based on such awareness increase their social activities, acquire higher levels of self-confidence, and perform social and political roles, along with their continued family-

related functions. Today, women's presence in many arenas such those of occupation and education indicate the partial removal of discriminations characteristic of a patriarchal society. Women's wage levels, for instance, in all occupations are same in base salary as those of men's. One may cite an exception in that some fringe benefits such as children's support allowances are paid to men only. As regards this, one may think of women as deprived. Yet based on a research in Canada in 2000 (Safiri, 2003), the findings showed that despite the fact that Canada enjoyed being number one on the scale of human development, yet there existed wage discrimination in the amount of \$9000 per annum in favour of men. Despite the fact that human capital theory allows lower education and fewer working week for women, the above research demonstrated that women's education was higher than that of men and that women's working weeks differed only 1.5 weeks, a fact that cannot justify a \$9000 annual discrimination against women. Thus recourse to gender relations theory which explains such an issue by employers' male stereotypes and by occupational structures, (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1994) the issue could be explained (Safiri, 2003).

In Irān, nonetheless, female and male employees are protected by the Equal Pay Act¹. Women's and men's base salaries are legally the same and no woman's base salary is lower than her male counterpart. It is worth noting that another research conducted among 50 workshops and factories indicated that employers tended to employ more men than women (Safiri, 1998). Perhaps this explains why in view of a considerable increase in female university students, women's economic activity growth rate has registered only 6% (see **Table 11**).

Furthermore, measures such as driving women towards the secondary occupations (less important jobs with lower wages and less job security), and marginalizing them have been the characteristic features of a patriarchal society. In Irān, according to statistics used in this research it was shown that about 50% of the employed women served in senior management positions (1.6), specialists, physicians and dentists accounted for 20.6%, technicians 4.47%, and female

¹ Article 38 of Labour Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran, enacted in 1990 (1369 A.P.), declares: "For doing same job which is undertaken in similar conditions in a workshop, equal wage must be paid to women and men. Discrimination in allocating wage on the basis of age, sex, race, ethnicity, and religious and political beliefs is forbidden."



industrial workers' share was 26.9%. It is evident that all these occupations require high specialization.

More active social participation such as in NGO's and in decision-making centres like city-village councils may further improve women's chances of being in equal conditions with men (empowerment indices). Although women's presence in high-ranking positions such as management and membership in the Islamic Parliament has enjoyed little increase but along with completion of their course work, the graduating female university students will fill the gap further by occupying high positions.

In all, in light of various views propounded in the West on status of the post-revolutionary Iranian women, we cannot confirm the views which attempt at portraying a visage of women who have no control over their living conditions and on their destinies. The cases introduced and the statistical analyses conducted show that women's egalitarianism has occurred in many fields. Looking at the Iranian women from the viewpoint provided by the empowerment theory indicates that the acquisition of equal positions has begun by women and has enabled them to gain control over their destiny. Thus the claims put forward at the beginning of this research have no credence, claims suggesting that women are looked upon only for reproductive purposes in Irān. Today, in the Iranian society the women's situation has changed. They have gained control over their familial activities and perform social roles: they participate in socio-political life of their society.

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