

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN IRAN SINCE THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

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SARAH SHARMA



**WEST ASIAN STUDIES DIVISION
CENTRE FOR WEST ASIAN AND AFRICAN STUDIES
SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI – 110067
INDIA
2007**



CENTRE FOR WEST ASIAN AND AFRICAN STUDIES
SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI - 110 067, INDIA

Phone : 26704372
Fax : 91-011-26717586
E-mail : cwaas_office_jnu@yahoo.co.in

Date: 18 July 2007

DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled **The Status of Women in Iran Since the Islamic Revolution** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this or any other university.

Sarah Sharma
Sarah Sharma

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Prof. Girijesh Pant
(Chairperson, CWAAS)

Dr. Prakash C. Jain
(Supervisor)

Centre for West Asian & African Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110 067

Centre for West Asian & African Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110 067 (India)

PREFACE

As a student of feminist politics, I was always fascinated by women's issues. I was propelled to work on Iran because Iran is a unique country which is culturally different from the other countries in the West Asian region. As I was contemplating on which topic to work on, I once got a copy of the Indo-Iranian journal *Phoenix* whose cover read "special women's issue". I was spurred into action and made up my mind to work on the status of Iranian women. My guide readily agreed to the topic. This work is an honest investigation into the status of Iranian women and I have tried to give a very objective and balanced view on the issue. Though I had to work within the constraints of resources like time and money, I hope it will be highly appreciated as it gives a deep insight into the issue and tries to touch the deeper undercurrents running below the apparently simple matter.

Author

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Sarah Sharma

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CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

“Justice is the first condition of humanity”

Nobel Laureate of literature, 1986 Wole Soyinka

Is justice being given to half of the humanity? The dissertation basically tries to investigate whether the “other half” gets its just share in the pie in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It tries to find out the changes that have taken place in the status of women in Iran after the Islamic revolution. The part that the media and the feminist movements have played as votaries for women’s rights will also be discussed in the wider context of the status of women. The study also proposes to dispel many wrong notions about the plight of women in the Muslim countries and tries to bring to light the real rights and freedom enjoyed by women. Rather than just giving the factual details, the study will instead focus on analysis and break up of the data to reach gainful conclusions. The research will also deal with the overarching role of Islam in the theocracy and its impact on the status of women.

Before delving into the topic, it is important to know a few things about the picturesque country Iran. The World Development Indicators, 2005, say that Iran is a country with a population of around 66.4 million. Men constitute 34,345,000 whereas women form 33,358,000 (UN 2000). Thus, the sex ratio comes to 1000:971. The literacy rate among women aged 15-24 and men in the same age group is 81.2% and 92.5% respectively (*Ibid*). The annual population growth is 1.7.

The research focuses on the “status” of women and so the term status has to be understood before defining the status of women in Iran. The Winston dictionary defines status as the social position or rank of a person. According to Duncan Mitchell, social status refers to the position occupied by a person, family or kinship group in a social system relative to others. This determines rights, duties and other behaviours, including the nature and extent of the

relationships with persons of other status” (Shankar Rao 2001). Ralph Linton says “status is the place in a particular system, which a certain individual occupies at a particular time” (*Ibid*). The UN defined (1975) women’s status as the extent to which women have access to knowledge, economic resources and political power as well as the autonomy they have in decision making and making personal choices at crucial points in their lifetime.

The theory to be applied in the analysis of the status of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran will be the modernization theory. Apter says “modernization implies three conditions – a social system that can constantly innovate without falling apart (and that includes among its essential beliefs and acceptability of change); differentiated, flexible social structures, and a social framework to provide the skills and knowledge necessary for living in a technologically advanced world” (Jain 1991). It is argued that for the third world societies, modernization basically refers to the assumption that “the less developed countries can more or less follow the same path of development which was followed by the industrially advanced countries”. Daniel Lerner observes that “everywhere increasing urbanization has tended to raise literacy, rising literacy has tended to increase media exposure, and increasing media exposure has gone with wider economic participation (per capita income) and political participation (voting)”. Thus, the modernization paradigm defines development as the process of inculcation of certain secular, universalistic value in individuals conducive to the growth of a modern society (Jain 1991). The dissertation will find out the degree to which Iran has modernized itself and its results.

Recent developments in Iran contradict the mainstream assumptions that the evolutionary nature of the modernization process is homogenous. Iran’s Islamist Government has not put a stop to the industrialization trend of the pre-revolutionary period (Bahramitash 2004). Iran has in fact more recently opened up to the global market, encouraging foreign investment and borrowing from the World Bank and the IMF. Alongside these economic strategies, the Government has kept its anti-Western stand (*Ibid*).

Myron Weiner speaks of five main instruments which makes modernization possible: education, mass communication, ideology based nationalism, charismatic leadership and coercive governmental authority (Shankar Rao 2001). Are these five variables aiding the women's movement or inhibiting it? The work will also throw light on the aforesaid variables and its impact.

In case of Iran, modernisation was found to have contributed to the decline of polygamy in Iran, changed the pattern of fertility of Shirazi women and altered the status of urban women in the same direction as the West (Momeni 1975; Paydarfar and Sarram 1970; Toubia 1972; Paider 1995). Michael Fischer defined the main underlying contradiction between conservative Muslim leaders and an aggressive modernising state" and introduced the concept of "social value" and its correspondence to economic classes and political forces as the key to understanding the position of women (Fischer 1978; Paider 1995). Sedghi and Ashraf regarded it as their main assumption that modernisation of Iran has changed the position of women in society but introduced the role of Islamic culture as the determining influence in the creation of an environment in which the role of male dominance has been tightly interwoven with social relations (Sedghi and Ashraf 1976). However, modernisation theories suffered from many drawbacks because of their ethnocentric bias which regarded their mode of development as the best and ignored the uniqueness of other cultures. Modernisation theory was criticised for ignoring the indigenous and exogenous political process which played important roles in the formation of the nation state and secured its continuance (Sayigh 1981).

Review of Literature

The position of women in West Asia has aroused much interest but serious scholarly work has been limited because the historical work on which women could rely on are heavily re-oriented and they need to be restudied from a women's point of view (Keddie 1991). A great deal of controversy and enigma surrounds these women that make it further difficult for the

researches to survey the problem. In many West Asian countries, sociological research based on surveys are discouraged. Research is also dogged by the fact that women are relegated to the private sphere and most of the narratives of family life and domestic violence remain within the four walls of the house. The governments also suppress the information and the limited flow hamper objective studies. However, Iranian society has definitely produced whistle blowers like journalist Akbar Ganji and Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi.

The problem of marginalisation of women's issues has been responded in recent years by a growing body of West Asia's women's studies (Paidar 1995; Price 2001; Kedie 2003; Kamalkhani 1993; Razavi 1993; Hosseini 1993; Nikkolgh 1991; Safai 1991; Saraukhani 1991; Nasseby 1991; Ardalaan 1991). Though being a feminist is seen as a taboo in Iran, articles have been written by the feminists who have challenged the institutional domains in Iran (Povey 2001; Price 2001). A few articles also deal with a few case studies of particular places of Iran and thus give a greater insight into the lives of women residing in these places (Kamalkhani 1993; Razavi 1991; Saraukhani 1991; Safai 1991; Nikkolgh 1991; Ardalaan 1991; Nassehy 1991).

This issue recently came to focus and most of the literatures available belong to the nineties. (Hosseini 1991; Keddie 1991; Afshar 1993; 1993; Das 1993; Obid 1994; Jahanbegloo 2004; Keddie 2003; Ansari 2005). Since economy rules the roost, articles and book shall be discussed based on the economic status of women in Iran. Haleh Afshar's article gives a beautiful description of women's educational and occupational attainments. However, she does not touch upon the carpet industry where a lot of women have been absorbed. She basically talks about the practical aspect and neglects the legal aspect. The author does not tell us about the representation of women in the unorganized and organized sectors. There is a lack of information regarding women in the NGOs.

Female education has also been discussed in detail in a few articles (Mehran 2000). A myriad of Articles elaborate about a certain aspect of women's

status (Engineer 2000; Kar 1995; Givechian 1991; Afshar 2002). Another drawback is that not much has been written on the role of women in the agricultural sector where women play an important role (Afshar 1997). Even in the allied activities like livestock raising, dairy production and in the processing and marketing of fish, women's role is no less significant. The income variation has not been discussed. The women stepping into industry and the service sector has not been discussed much (Bahramitash 2004).

↙ Further, it is important look at the advertisements of all the Persian newspapers to know what the eligibility criteria are and which the jobs are where women stand a better chance than men in getting employment (Razavi 1993). A sizable female contingent populates the trading desks at the Tehran exchange (Reed 2004). Women are big players in the IT companies. Some are penetrating the most traditional male bastions such as heavy industry.

The second strand of my dissertation revolves around the political status of women in Iran. Much work needs to be done on the political culture, political socialization, political efficacy, political participation, the NGOs fighting for women's rights, voting pattern and the like. One of the very recent technologies is the blogosphere and it will also discuss as to how it is helping women to vent their views by keeping their identities secret.

Iranian women are trying to change their position with the ambit of Islam by reinterpreting the text to accord with the reality of their lives (Afshar 2002). A significant article mentions in great detail the spheres where women have made their presence felt. She writes at length the role of women in the legislative, executive and judicial branches. She also studies their indispensable role in the media, literature and arts, parties and in war (Kar 1995). Another article seems to be too prescriptive and she does not delve into the subject regarding women to provide a deeper insight (Koolae 2005).

The last component of my study is what has been the most widely investigated component about the women in Iran. A lot of literature deals with the relationship between Islam and gender (Hosseini 1995) and the

women's movement (Nayerah 2003; Azadeh 2005; Price 2001; Theibaut 2005; Tohidi 2002).

Most of the articles and books deal with the trajectory of the movement in the domestic sphere and ignore the organisations working for the socio-cultural uplift of women abroad (Obid 1994; Povey 2001; Givechian 1991; Rahman 2003). More work needs to be done on women's inheritance rights, domestic violence, trafficking of women, the clash of secular and Islamic feminists and the like.

Thus, this study will fill up the subtle gaps that still remain. In the wake of Information Technology, globalisation and liberalisation, the role of Iranian women need to be re-assessed. Iran has come up in the Western radar screen because of the nuclear conundrum. The human rights organisation Amnesty International stated in a report that discrimination against women still exist in 36 countries. Iran is among those on the list. The new hard line Government issued a statement that movies in which "feminist values" are emphasised must be banned. Thus, the status of women in Iran needs to be restudied with regard to its new dispensation at the corridors of power.

Scope of the Study

The research will take in account the economic, political and sociocultural states of women in Iran. In the economic sphere, it will study the educational and occupation attainments of women, their employment opportunities including those fields in which women have broken the male bastions. In the political field, it will look into the representation of women in the various strata of Government. It will also study the NGOs and their role in spreading political awareness among Iranian women. In the sociocultural sphere, the family laws of inheritance, marriage, divorce and maintenance will be analysed. Another aspect relates to their discrimination in the family, if any. The role of the state in promoting or hampering the progressive reforms will be examined.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the changing economic status of women in Iran including their educational and occupational achievement during the last 25 years.
2. To explore the changing political aspirations and demands of Iranian women including their representation in the local and *Majlis* levels.
3. To investigate the socio-cultural status of women in the sphere of family and religion.
4. To analyse the legal provisions within which women's status has been determined by the Iranian state.

Hypotheses

- 1) Women have won more and more educational and economic opportunities for themselves.
- 2) In the socio-cultural sphere, women have succeeded in winning more rights for themselves though some discriminatory provisions still exist.
- 3) The media has played a very important role in raising the educational and socio-cultural status of women.

Methodology

The research will use the modernisation paradigm to view women's issues in the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Eisenstadt (1966), "historically Modernisation is a process of change towards these types of social, economic and political system that have developed in Western Europe and North America from the 17th century to the 19th and have then spread to other European countries and in the 19th and 20th centuries to the South American, Asian and African continents". It will take the western concepts of Liberty, Equality and Freedom to analyse the empowerment of women in Iran. The study will be both analytical and comparative and would compare the present

status of women with their status prior to the revolution as well as the changes that have come about their in the recent times. In the first phase, books related to the topic will be carefully studied. Comments and criticism on the topic published in the newspapers and journals will be taken note of. Available internet sites on the status of women will be visited to gather all possible information about the topic. Thereafter, giving due importance to the primary data so obtained and the secondary data collected from the existing literature and websites, a final dissertation will be prepared. ✓

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948).

In almost all Islamic countries, the main battle of the 1990s, as Fatima Mernissi has astutely observed, seems to be the “battle over the civil codes, which women challenge as contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and which authoritarian states defend as sacred” (Mernissi 1992).

Iran was earlier called Persia and was a monarchy ruled by the Shah. The king Reza Shah Pahlavi had introduced a lot of reforms and women greatly benefited from it. Voting rights were granted in 1963 and girls’ education was promoted vigorously though it had already started in 1910 against serious opposition. The Family Protection Law, enacted in 1967 definitely improved the Plight of Iranian women. Other progressive reforms include legalising abortion in 1974, banning polygamy and granting the right to maintenance after divorce in 1976.

However, a change of guard came in the year 1979 when *Ayatollah* Khomeini climbed to the helm of power amidst protests across the country. The Shah fell from power and the socio-economic fabric of the country saw a drastic alteration. Tens of thousands of women had actively participated in the revolution. The Islamic Republic was established in January and by March

women were barred from becoming judges (Price 2001) and veiling made compulsory (Kolay 2003; Givechian 1991; Hegland 2003).

The dissertation has been mainly divided into three chapters:

- 1) the economic status of women
- 2) the political status of women and
- 3) the socio-cultural status of women.

In the economic sphere, women have strived hard and have crossed all hurdles. Since education is intricately related to employment, it is important to study the educational attainments of women. After the revolution, the Government produced new school books featuring a more traditional sex division of labour and Islamically dressed females. The schools were assigned the task of educating today's girl to become the ideal women of tomorrow, that is, the superwoman who is to be an exemplary wife and mother while being actively involved in social and political affairs (Mehran 2003). Moreover, not all fields of education were open to women. The Islamic republic did not allow unmarried females to go abroad for education, although this law has been recently rescinded (Hegland 2003).

Women too have been demanding their due and today nearly all University subjects are open to women (Keddie 2003). It is worth reminding that just after the revolution western schooling was abandoned and the curricula for males and females changed. Some of the restrictions imposed on women were lifted with the subjects like Geology and Agriculture belong open to women in 1989 (Paidar 1995). The quotas on women were lifted in medical, para medical and some engineering fields, and were substantially increased in some technical and industrial subjects. Female literacy has seen a steady increase from 36 per cent in 1976 to 72 per cent in 1996. Business week reports that around 53 per cent of the students admitted to universities were women. Over the years, women have started entering into all kinds of jobs. In the year 2000, in the holy city of Mashad, a major site of *Shia* pilgrimage,

more than hundred women started working as taxi drivers, one of the most male dominated professions in the world (Bahramitash 2004). Women have started playing increasing prominent roles in Iran and business and industry are no exception (Reed 2004). The first “women bank” in Iran is to be opened with the objective to plan and create entrepreneurial opportunities for women, the head of women’s Assembly of Iranian Islamic Councils said (Mahjubah 2007). The bank also aims at creating economic interest and income for all women, concentrating on poor stratum of the society and generating assets for them (*Ibid*). Women have been present in agriculture in large numbers and carry the burden of sowing and harvesting the crop. Sometimes, especially along the Caspian sea coastal areas, females worked in their farmlands or as day labourers, harvesting and processing some crops.

In the political domain, women had actively participated in the revolution but lost most of their rights after the revolution. Severely discriminated against in education, employment and judiciary, they were also deemed incapable of political leadership and barred from holding the highest position, that of the spiritual leader of the nation (Afshar 2002). In the first *Majlis*, Gohar Dastghayb and Maryam Behruzi were elected and represented two prominent parties, Islamic Republic and Crusaders for Islam (Price 2001). Altogether 217 members were elected to the first *Majlis*, 3 were women (*Ibid* 2001). Article 21 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic guarantees women’s right within the framework of the Islamic standards (Tajuddin 2001). Azam Taleqani, daughter of a leading revolutionary *Ayatollah*, who heads the radical Islamic Women’s Foundation, *Moassesse Eslami Zanan* argued that Article 115 of the Constitution is ambiguous. It states that candidates should be selected from the royal *siassi*, an Arabic term which literally translated can mean either distinguished people in politics (Afshar 2002). Eight women had put their names forward as potential presidential candidates to force the issue, but the Council of Guardians rejected the candidature of all without explanation (Afshar 2002: 110). However, women like Shahla Habibi have gained high positions in the government. In 1992, she was appointed to the

newly created post of Presidential advisor on women's affair (Omid 1994: 198). To one's surprise, many women in the higher positions were reluctant to shed their conservative views on women. In April 1991, Maryam Behrouzi demanded that bills allowing an earlier retirement, reform of some of the more draconian divorce laws and provision of national insurance for women and children be put before the next session of *Majlis* (*Ibid*). Finally, she succeeded in pushing a bill, which allowed women to retire after twenty years of active service, while the men had still had to serve twenty-five years (*Ibid*). It is very costly to run for elections in Iran. Despite this problem, there has been a large number of women willing to contest and in 1996, of the 5359 candidates in the fray, 305 (6%) were women and in 2000, 7% were women (*Ibid*: 112).

Coming to the socio-cultural sphere, the private-public dichotomy comes to the fore as in all countries. Kathleen Barry uses the concept of "sex colonisation" or system which includes wife battery, incest, marital rape, the Muslim code of "honor" regarding female chastity, marriage through seclusion, and bride price, genital mutilation, and enforced prostitution of which pornography is the ideology" (Barry 1979: 316-317).

The idea of gender equality was slowly reversed with Khomeini at the corridors of power. It meant redefinition of women's public dress code, replacement of the family protection law by *shariat* law, segregation of sexes in public places and transport and Islamic norms of morality which are more restrictive for women than men and which are strictly imposed by the moral police both men and women (Tajuddin 2001: 18). The critiques of these Islamic norms and gender relations have called it "sexual apartheid" and the division of the Iranian nation into two classes based on gender (*Ibid*: 18). Domestic violence is rampant in Iran. Women's magazines featured stories of the suffering of women experienced under despotic husbands, such as wife beatings, suicides and loss of children (Keddie 2003: 293). The official statistics on the increased rate of divorce, often discussed in the *Majlis* and the alarming increase in the number of suicides and self-burning, indicate

both women's suffering and discontent and their protest (Moghissi 1997: 254). According to the Director General of Iran's Forensic Medicine, in 1990 50 women died in Tehran because of self-burning (*Ibid*). The figure reported for the first six months of 1991 was 40 deaths (*Ibid*).

The media has been long debating on women's issues. Hundreds of books about feminist issues were and are published including radical feminist books and biographies (Price 2001). They have boldly challenged the Islamic laws, which oppress women and tried to reinterpret these laws in favour of women. Faezeh Hashemi's newspapers and the *Zanan* magazine have played an important role in championing women's rights as a part of human rights. Faezeh Hashemi created *Komisione Bonovan* (Women's Committees) in many cities to lift the lives of women from the abysmal depths of despair and subjection. Personal laws have changed a lot because of the determined efforts of these brave women who were unnerved even in the face of state brutality. It was because of her dogged determination that now a woman in Iran can claim compensation for all the housekeeping work she did for all the number of years of married life if it is proved that wife is not to be blamed for divorce (Price 2001). If divorce takes place for no fault of the women, she can claim half of the property acquired during the married years or its equivalent. ✓

Since 1986, women's sports management has launched planning for women's sports, and is actively taking women to sports activities throughout the country and abroad (Iranian Government Report 1994: 18). Women are increasingly seen alongside men in sports like skiing, waterskiing and bicycling. However, wearing the Islamic dress is compulsory. Women were barred from men's soccer match. But, in 1997, they broke through a stadium and finally in 2003, one soccer club announced that it had no problems in allowing them to watch as spectators. The Iranian Government elevated one woman to the post of Deputy head of the National Olympic Committee and it also held the first Congress for solidarity of women through games in Islamic countries in 1991 (*Government Report 1994: 18*). Iranian women have started

participating in many international sports events. Iranian women's first attempt was at Asian games held in Beijing, which paved the way for the further participation in international games (Jamshidian 2006: 19). Women have participated in sports like target shooting, rowing and boating, chess, special Olympic games, track and field, karate, *taekwondo* trapshooting, mountain and rock climbing, skiing, football, badminton, skating, squash, table tennis, riding, volleyball and handball. Women in Iran have also entered into the military but with the provision that Islamic principles are represented.

In the religious sphere, very few women in Iran have reached the position of *Ayatollah* (Hegland 2003). Often the less advantaged women either stayed in separate areas, behind or out of sight of men, or did not come at all (*Ibid*). Usually, women did not go to the mosques and also did not enjoy the social networks of women's segregated religious rituals and seemed to receive only hurtful, misogynous teachings (Friedl 1991; Hegland 2003). Urban women are sometimes seen to participate actively and even hold leadership positions in women's segregated rituals (Hegland 2003). Women have become religious teachers. They have also started reinterpreting *Quran* and *Hadith* and subtly question male authority (Hegland 1999; Kamalkhani 1998). However, since the formation, women's opportunities have increased manifold in the religious sphere. Now, officials welcome women in the mosques. Both men and women travel in the same bus to go for a pilgrimage.

Iranian women are waging a quiet but resolute battle against the Islamic state to assert some control over their lives (Moghissi 1997: 264). In the West Asian region, the plight of women in Iran is still somewhat better when compared to countries like Saudi Arabia. Iran had tried to distance itself from ultra conservative regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the past Taliban controlled Afghanistan. In the WANA (West Asia and North Africa) region, another country which is seeing a quiet emergence of women is Algeria. In the Arab country, women, make up 70 per cent of the country's lawyers and 60 per cent of its judges (Slackmen 2007). Although men still hold all of the

formal levers of power still women make up only 20 per cent of the work force, that is more than twice their share a generation ago, and they seem to be taking over the machinery of state as well (Slackmen 2007). Women may have emerged as Algeria's most potent force for social change, with their presence in the bureaucracy and on the street having a potentially moderating and modernising influence on the society, sociologists said (*Ibid*). Similarly, in Kuwait women have recently acquired the right to vote and contest for elections. In Turkey, though sex segregation is there, people want more women Parliamentarians. Therefore, social change is slowly but inevitably coming in all these countries though in their own unique way. Women have been asserting themselves and asking the Government to deliver them their due. Changes have been slow but they are ushering in changes in the mindset of the men folk. Women Parliamentarians have been garnering support and bringing in pro-women legislations. Men have been slowly sensitised about women's problems. Islamic feminism has emerged which talks of change within the framework of Islam. Iran is certainly at the cusp of change.

CHAPTER – II

ECONOMIC STATUS OF IRANIAN WOMEN

The economic status of Iranian women depends on certain matrices such as their education, employment or their role in agriculture industry, services and other economic activities. The chapter also highlights Iranian women's role in Non-governmental organizations and the legal framework, which binds them. It sheds light on the changes that have come about in the present times. The overall position and welfare of women is improving over time but these improvements are primarily due to changing economic environment rather than specific measures taken by the government to improve the status of women. Women literacy has touched astounding heights that is enviable and women are slowly leaving their mark in almost all professions despite handicaps.

“Allah created you from a single soul and from the same soul created his mate. Allah makes no distinction between men and women. They are to be equally rewarded or punished for their deeds. He will deny no men or women among you the reward of their labours. You are the offspring of one another.”(The Holy Quran)

The Holy *Quran* speaks of equality between genders but the concept of equality is meaningless unless women are economically independent, strong and self-sufficient. Certain important areas are discussed here.

FEMALE EDUCATION IN WEST ASIA

There has been much discussion about the status of female education in the West Asia and North Africa in the past decades (Mehran 2003). The available statistics illustrate that female net enrolment rates in the region (71 percent)

lag behind other regions in the world except South and West Asia (67%) and sub-Saharan Africa (54 percent) (UNESCO 2000). The primary cause of this unsatisfactory level of women's education lies in the religious tenets because people believe that Islam prohibits women's education as was the case in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule. Such explanation has disregarded the Islamic tenet that "The pursuit of knowledge is an obligation of every Muslim, men and women alike" (Mehran 2003).

Literacy

Statistical analysis of literacy trends in 1976, 1986 and 1991 indicates that women have been advancing in their efforts to narrow the literacy gap with men. Before the Islamic revolution, over 50 percent of the Iranian female population did not know how to read or write. In the post-revolutionary years, women have shown an increasing willingness to become literate (*National Report on Women 1997*).

According to 1976 statistics, 35.5 percent of the Iranian female population or 4.7 million were literate. In the same year, men's literacy rate was 58.9 percent (8.2 million). The first post-revolutionary national census in 1986 indicated that women's literacy rate climbed to the level of 52.1 percent and that 9.8 million women had become literate by the year, and finally the 1991 census showed that in that year 67.1 percent of the total female population over six years of age (14.9 million) were literate. The corresponding figure for the male population was 80.6 percent or 19.1 million (*National Report on Women, 1997*).

The number of students and enrolment ratio by gender in different levels were as follows for 1976/77, 1986/87, 1991/92 and 1993/94.

Table 2.1

Primary School Enrolment in Iran 1976-77 to 1993-94

School year	Total Million	Total Million	Total Million	Ratio % of total	
				Male	Female
1976/77	4.8	2.9	1.8	62	38
1986/87	7.2	4.1	3.2	56	44
1991/92	9.8	5.2	4.6	53	47
1993/94	9.9	5.2	4.7	53	47

Source: *National Report on Women 1997: 47*

Table 2.2

Junior Secondary School Enrolment in Iran 1976-77 to 1993-94

School year	Total Million	Total Million	Total Million	Ratio % of total	
				Male	Female
1976/77	1.37	0.88	0.49	64	36
1986/87	2.30	1.41	0.89	61	39
1991/92	3.54	2.05	1.49	58	42
1993/94	4.44	2.50	1.92	56	44

Source: *National Report on Women 1997: 47*

Table 2.3

Senior Secondary School Enrolment in Iran 1976-77 to 1993-94

School year	Total Million	Total Million	Total Million	Ratio % of total	
				Male	Female
1976/77	0.740	0.447	0.293	60	40
1986/87	1.77	0.14	0.463	57	43
1991/92	1.770	0.984	0.786	56	44
1993/94	1.95	1.063	0.885	55	45

Source: *National Report on Women 1997: 47*

IRANIAN WOMEN AS HUMAN RESOURCE

The concept of human resources development (HRD) is of comparatively recent origin. HRD is a process, which consists of a series of activities conducted to design behavioural changes in a specific period. HRD as a system depends on work itself, which generates a higher degree of responsibility for the employees; the individual's personal and professional growth; the improved quality output as a result of increased responsibility; organisation as an open system (Lippit 1978).

Rao defines HRD as "a process in which the employees of an organisation are continuously helped in a planned way to (a) acquire or sharpen capabilities acquired to perform various tasks and functions associated with their present and future expected roles; (b) develop their general enabling capabilities as

individuals so that they are able to discover and exploit their own inner potential for their own and/or organisational development purpose; and (a) develop an organisational culture where superior-subordinate relationships, team work, and collaboration among different sub-units are strong and contribute to the organisational health, dynamism and pride of employees” (Rao 1985).

Iran is trying to develop its female population too as Human Resource. The female literacy rate has gone up. Women pursuing senior secondary school education had increased three fold in the year 1993-94 as compared to the figure of 1976-77. In 2002-03, 53% of the students admitted to Universities were women (Keddie 2003). Women are now found in plenty in medical and professions like journalism. Many women are going abroad for higher education after the restriction was abolished (Bollag 2001).

IRANIAN WOMEN AND EDUCATION

The educational experience of Iranian women has been marked by contradiction since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. On the one hand, one witnesses a significant increase in the female enrolment and completion rates at every educational level, a reduced gender gap in primary and secondary schooling, and an increase in the rate of university acceptance and enrolment among women.

On the other hand, post revolutionary educational policy is characterised by the banning of education, the compulsory veiling of female students beginning at the age of 6 years, explicit gender stereo-typing in school text books and guiding female students toward feminine specialisations deemed appropriate for women. (Mehran 2003)

Prior to the revolution of 1978-79, during the regime of the two *Pahlavi* Shahs, women enjoyed a lot of freedom. The *Shahs* wanted to modernise women to become symbols and means of westernising Iranian society

(Sanghvi 1968). They enjoyed more access to education and employment. But after the revolution, Iran became a theocracy. The conservative elements in power saw westernised Iranian women as symbol of moral corruption, western control and the decline of Iran. They thought the sexes must be segregated in order to maintain women's modesty and prevent the threat of their uncontrolled sexuality to society; ironically, they needed trained females to work with women in order to accomplish sex segregation (Hegland 2003). Female doctors, nurses, teachers and other service personnel had to be available to deal with women. Women, therefore, had to be provided with education and job opportunity.

After the revolution, the government produced new schoolbooks, featuring a more traditional sex division of labour and Islamically dressed females (Omid 1994). The government continues to promote education and girls' school attendance has risen (Afshar 1997). The traditional Muslim families were comfortable with this system. Schools became agents, held responsible for creating the new Muslim women. They have been assigned the task of educating today's girl to become the ideal woman of tomorrow, that is, the super-woman who is to be an exemplary wife and mother while being actively involved in social and political affairs (Mehran 2003).

The first economic, social, and cultural development plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989-1993 gives the following as the goals of female education: (a) Improving the conditions of women through education and increasing women's participation in the socio- economic affairs of the society and family, (b) bringing about a higher level of participation among women in social, cultural, educational and economic affairs while maintaining the values of the family and the character of the Muslim women (*The first economic, social and cultural development plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran 1989-93*). *The second economic, social and cultural development plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1994-1998* briefly touches on the issue of female education by including the following goals: paying attention to the education of girls and the literacy training of women and young mothers. The education

plan 1988 expects the following ideals by promoting female education in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Mehran 2003).

- (1) The Iranian educational system should recognise 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.
- (2) The educational guidance of girls should be based on their capabilities and interests and their vocational guidance should take into consideration the kinds of occupation needed by women, best fulfilled by women or most fit with their role and responsibility in the family.
- (3) Education in Iran should strengthen the social and political insight of girls and increase their self-confidence in fulfilling their social and family responsibilities.
- (4) Curriculum development in Iran should emphasise the sanctity and stability of the family and introduce the different roles of men and women in marital life.
- (5) The system of education should take into consideration the unique characteristics of boys and girls at the age of seven years and send female teachers to girls' schools and male teachers to boys' schools.
- (6) The ministry of education should eliminate any form of discrimination against girls, especially in rural areas and among nomads, and give priority to girls in the distribution of resources and opportunity.
- (7) In order to encourage married women to continue their education, special school should be created, educational radio and television should be provided, correspondence education should be

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encouraged, and day- care centres should be provided for their children.

- (8) Women should participate in the planning, policy making, management and administration of education at all levels, especially at the top level positions (*Ibid.*).

The above principles point to the fact that while women are trained to abide by their Muslim identity and fulfill their traditional roles and responsibilities in the family, they are also expected to have social and political insights according to the dictates of a revolutionary society and to assume “top level positions” in educational planning and decision making based on the criteria of a modern state.

NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IRANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Certain basic features of Islamised educational system are male female segregation, compulsory veiling for female teachers and students and defining certain branches of study as unsuitable for females. It seems that Iranian women were denied certain basic rights what Iranian men thought not to allow to their counterpart, It give a puzzled picture of Iranian temperament which wanted to harmonise modernity with traditionalism.

(a) Male-Female Segregation

The Islamic authority in May 1979 banned co- education in Iran. This was done soon after they gained power. All educational institutions with the exception of universities and rural schools were segregated by gender. In 1980 teaching was also segregated so that only female teachers could teach in girl schools, and only men could teach boys (Mehran 1992). Another gender based decision was to deny women access to state scholarship for foreign study at the university level. In 1985, Iran adopted “Sponsorship for Foreign students Act” according to which the ministry of higher education may send

students abroad to acquire expertise in certain fields of study approved by the Government (Price 2001). Women who qualify for higher study according to this Act were permitted to go abroad only when they were married and accompanied by their husbands. After a lot of protest, the Iranian women could succeed to win over the situation and in 2001, the Iranian Government passed a legislation that allowed single women to study at a foreign institution with their father's consent (Bollag 2001).

(b) Compulsory Veiling

The Iranian authority prescribed a dress code for women. A girl child at the age of six years must be veiled which was compulsory throughout Iran irrespective of religion and nationality. The female instructors were to use complete black veil at literacy classes. Female employees and students were supposed to wear a special Islamic dress.

(c) Feminine Fields of Study

In the beginning, every attempt was made by the Iranian authority to separate feminine fields of study from that of masculine fields of study. The traditional notions about suitable areas of study for male and female were the basis of such segregation. Tailoring, nursing, teaching and the like considered to be feminine were emphasised in girls' books, while male students learnt about the various fields of engineering and mechanics. However, it may be mentioned here that the curricular text books were same for both the sexes but the text books of professional studies were different for boys and girls. Another system introduced in the year 1982 was known as *Kar Va Danesh* (KAD; work and study) project (Mehran 2003: 279). Secondary school students were given one day off in a week so that they can perform practical work under the supervision of their teacher. The work done by the girls were confined to feminine areas such as health, nutrition, child rearing, cooking, knitting etc. The aim of KAD project was "familiarising the male students with industrial agricultural and scientific subjects" while the goal for female

was acquainting them with skills demanded by the Islamic culture and society” (Iranian Ministry of Education 1984).

In the university level also, such distinctions existed. Female students were not able to pursue courses in mining, engineering veterinary science etc. However, women were allowed to study medical, so that female physicians could treat female patients. For them, women’s medical colleges were established. This was enforced strictly during the eighties but gradually due to emancipation of women and their protest, the situation improved and presently female university students are able to gain admission to almost all disciplines offered at all institutions of higher education (Mehran 2003).

ASSESSING FEMALE EDUCATION IN IRAN

Knowledge is power. After the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, women’s education was encouraged in accordance with the Islamic philosophy. Compulsory veiling, separate schools for girl students, introduction of feminine courses and the like encouraged the traditional Muslim families to send their daughters to schools which enhanced the rate of enrolment of female students. Table-2.4 gives the following figure.

Table 2.4

Comparison of Male and Female enrolment from primary level to university level

Level of Education	2000-01 Academic year		1976-77 Academic year	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
Primary	52	48	60	40
Guidance	55	45	64	36
Secondary	51	49	60	40
Pre- University	39	61	-	-

Source: Mehran 2003

It is clearly visible from the figures of table – 2.4 that the gender gap changes in favour of girls at the pre- university level in which 39 percent of the students are males and 61% are females.

Table 2.5
Male and Female Percentage in Primary and Secondary Schools

School year	Primary School		Junior Secondary School	
	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
1976/77	61	39	62	38
1986/87	57	43	58	42
1991/92	54	46	56	44
1993/94	53	47	52	48

Source: National Report on Women 1997: 48

It is seen from Table 2.5 that the difference in male female ratio is drastically reduced and if the trend continues gradually more females will be in primary and junior secondary schools.

ENROLMENT IN UNIVERSITIES AND INSTITUTES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

During the academic years 1988/89 to 1993/94 female students on the average constituted 30% of the total enrolment in universities and institutes of higher learning. Average break down of figure in different fields were as follows.

Table – 2.6
Percentage of Male and Female Students in Technical and Professional Institutions

Type of Higher Education	Ratio (% of total)	
	Male	Female
Medical Science	55	45
Science	62	38
Arts	64	36
Social Sciences	63	37
Technical and Engineering Fields	95	5
Agriculture and Veterinary Science	96	4

Source: *National Report on Women 1997: 49*

Table 2.6 clearly indicates that due to male female segregation in the fields of study, the presence of female students in technical and professional studies is very marginal, but once the barrier is removed, the ratio will increase like that of medical science.

Traditionally women in Iran were regarded as an instrument to serve the family, rear children and raise pious Muslims. Now, Iranian women are sufficiently empowered and they have managed to change this traditional thinking. In recent years, one witnesses a new approach to womanhood in Iran, in which, the woman is not treated solely as an instrument but as a human being endowed with human rights. The new approach speaks that women are to be empowered not for the sake of family or society but for their sake so that they can demand their true position in the society. The speech of President Khatami reiterates this idea, “We are not the guardians of women to give them something by force or take it away from them. We are only

preparing the ground for women to recognise their rights and capabilities and acknowledge their own merits. Once they have done that, they will reach their rightful position in society and the first pre-requisite is to increase women's knowledge and education" (Tehran: Ekhdas 1999).

EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC STATUS OF IRANIAN WOMEN

"For women to have full identity and freedom, they must have economic independence. Equality and human dignity are not possible for women if they are not able to earn... Only economic independence can free a woman to marry for love, not for status or financial support, or to leave a loveless, intolerable, humiliating marriage, or to eat, dress, rest and move if she plans not to marry" (Friedan 1974: 370-71).

In the same vein, J.S. Mill writes "The power of earning is essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has no independent property" (Mill 1970: 183-184).

During the *Pahlavi* regime, women education could not flourish in Iran because of governmental and societal apathy. Very few women were employed in some specific avocations like teaching, midwifery and nursing. Women school teachers were more because schools of both the sexes were separate and in girl schools', only female teachers could teach. The traditional families hesitated to allow male nurses, doctors to attend their female patients which as responsible for the growth of women's liking to and opting for nurse/midwife profession.

Even though teaching, nursing and the like were most popular professions among women, they were also found in other professions. Periodicals such as *Alam - e- Nesvan* documented participation of Iranian women in professions like journalism in the early 1930s. They were also writers, editors, and translators (Rostam 2000; Kolaye 2000). Until this time there were few professional options for urban, upper - middle and middle class women. Poor

urban women and girls worked as spinners, weavers, seamstresses, maids, nannies, midwives, healers, preachers, matchmakers, sales women, attendants in public baths and mortuaries, singers, dancers and musicians (Paidar 1995).

Women's entry into the job market in Iran can be traced back to early 20th century when few educated women came forward to manage and teach in private girls schools. Gradually more number of schools for girls were opened and there was shortage of teaching staff. According to a foreign observer, in the early 1920s, "Besides domestic service and teaching in girls' schools (a very limited opportunity at present) there is practically nothing a woman can do to earn here bread, for nearly all work involves contact with men in a way forbidden to Moslem women" (Boyce). The only higher educational institution open to women was the women teachers' training college, a secondary school established in Tehran in 1919. However, a few wealthy families had sent their daughters abroad for their education. Thus, there were a small handful of women holding professional diplomas in Tehran (Kolayi 2003). There were no technical universities to train women in medical sciences or Para medical courses like dentistry or physiotherapy. During the same period, women in Europe and America enjoyed a lot of freedom and subject and work choice. They could enter in stenography, secretarial jobs or could set up their own business.

Many writers and critics envisioned women's work in "respectable professions" as a cure for social evils and as a sign of civilization. Women empowerment is a sign of healthy society and status. In 1930s, leaving aside a minor group of teachers and nurses, a vast number of Iranian women in rural areas worked in agriculture. In urban areas, most of the working women were forced to accept odd jobs in carpet or textile industries. They did not have access to higher education and vocational training. Females from poorer families commonly worked as servants in households.

In 1960s and 1970s, more and more females attended universities both inside Iran and abroad. The educated Iranian women took up executive positions in

government and private sectors. By 1978, 33% of university students were females with two million in the workforce. 1, 90,000 were professionals with university degrees. There were 333 in the local councils, 22 in *Majlis* and 2 in the senate (Price 2006).

Conservative clerical leaders struggled to put women back at home where they belonged, caring for husbands and children and safe from potentially bringing temptation to males, thus disrupting society (Hegland 2003). Certain restrictions were also imposed on the employment of women. But soon this state of affair changed and the Islamic government realized the important role women could play in the development of Iran. The war with Iraq weakened the economy of Iran and many Iranian joined the war which led to the shortage of civilian workforce. Further, due to an attempt to segregate unrelated males from working females, more and more number of female employees were necessary for different services, particularly in education and medicine. The led to rapid expansion in female education and consequently a substantial number of women joined different avocation.

In case in the number of large industries employing more than 10 workers and percentage of female workers in these industries:

Table 2.7

Representation of Female workers in Industries employing more than ten workers

Year	Number of industries employing more than ten workers	Female workforce (%)
1972/3	3972	8
1993/4	5922	6
2001/2	11200	12

Source: www.stateofnature.org/womenandwork2.html

Table 2.8
Share of Female Income in Comparison to Male Income

Year	Male	Female	Increase (%)
1992-3	0.91	0.09	-2.20
2002-3	0.09	0.11	22.22

Source: CWP 2003(28) as cited in

www.stateofnature.org/womenandwork2.html

The census data of 1966, 1976 and 1986 demonstrate an upward trend for the first decade and a rapid fall for the post-revolutionary era. Women's employment levels fell from 13.7% of total employment in 1976 to 8.8% in 1986. It had only increased to 9.4% in 1991, 3.2% lower than 1976. Between 1976 and 1986 the number of employed women came down from 1.2 millions to 975,000. The figure had risen to 1.2 million in 1991, but by then the total female population was well over 25 million as against some 16 million in 1976 (Afshar 1997).

The official statistics on female unemployment show that an increasing proportion of the unemployed and those actively seeking work are educated women or women who are the main or sole family bread winners.

Table 2.9
Female Employment Trends in Iran

	1966	1976	1986
Total female population	12,097,258	16,352,397	24,164,049
Total female employed	909,983	1,212,202	987,103
Civil service	56,883	245,918	407,634
Private sector	429,628	322,146	99,838
Self employed	197,712	130,693	181,186
Managers	5,723	5,358	13,719
Unpaid workers	110,222	495,723	212,850
Unemployed	89,845	236,986	332,602
Not known	9,358	12,182	70,876

Source: Afshar (1997: 760)

Table 2.10
Iran: Male and Female Employment in Major Sectors

Employment Categories	Men %	Women %
Scientific, Technical, Specialists	67.4	32.6
Directors and high ranking officials	96.6	3.4
Clerical and office workers	87.3	12.7
Trading & sales personnel	98.5	1.5
Service personnel	93	7
Agriculturists, dairy farmers, fisheries and hunters	92	9
Production and transport workers	93.7	6.3
Others	96	4
Total	91.1	8.9

Source: Afshar (1997: 762)

Iranian women are a determined group, out performing men on the entrance examinations to Iranian universities. In 2002-03, about 53% of the students admitted to universities were women. Despite great advances in university education, both male and female graduates face high levels of unemployment. Also, the shortage of facilities and teacher at all levels as well as low pay, which led university teachers especially to hold several jobs, means that the quality of education has generally fallen. Ideological indoctrination has been rarely unsuccessful judging from surveys of high school and university students and form student problems (Keddie 2003).

According to the *Quranic* mandate, two female witnesses are equal to one male witness. For this reason, Iranian government clerics denied judgeship to women irrespective of their merit. This gender bias has continued till sufficient pressure was exerted from women leaders and organizations. Now women have entered into virtually every type of work, including taxi cab drivers, air line pilots, although in small minorities in many fields. Women lawyers are now permitted to work in the court system and then to become family court judges.

Taking up jobs by Iranian women is not a luxury. It is a necessity. In the face of inflation and price rise, families needed women's salaries to supplement their domestic economy. Women are now trying to enter into professions which were hitherto been considered as male bastion. In the year 2000, in the holy city of Mashad a major cite of *Shia* pilgrimage, more than a hundred women started working as taxi drivers, one of the most male-dominated professions in the world (Bahramitash 2004). During the shah's regime, westernisation was promoted with a view to improving the fate and condition of Iranian women. The western model, which the Shah ardently followed, offered employment opportunities mainly to an upper and middle class minority. After the Islamic revolution, there was no doubt that women had to face a lot of difficulty due to the traditional, conservative, religious interpretation of the role of women in society which excluded them from playing a meaningful role in social and political activities. Nevertheless, the

very conservative idea was also responsible for a tremendous increase in women's education and employment. "Education shows the way to liberation" seems stand proved in case of Iranian women. The present employment status of Iranian women is that more and more women are joining the labour force and taking part in economic activities, which not only add to their family income but also strengthen the economy of the state.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

As much of the Iranian land is desert or semi-desert, agriculturists have to depend on irrigation. Production depends to a large degree on access to water. As an exception, the Caspian Sea coastal areas receive a great deal of rain and produce rice, tea, citrus fruits as well as many other crops. Until the 1960s, Iranian primarily worked in agriculture, trading and handicraft industries. Since the oil boom of 1960s and even more the 1970s, the economy has relied primarily on the sale of oil and less on exported Persian carpets and fruits and nuts. Hence, the role of agriculture in Iranian economy has shrunk down to a small fraction. Income from agriculture is insufficient for subsistence; hence very few women take part in agricultural activities. 1991 statistics show that only about 8.5% of rural women are economically active. It is believed from research and field observation that the official figures are underestimates. Howard writes, "One of the puzzles about Iran is that officially, women figure very little in the work force, but in many areas, they are very visible. Official statistics suggest that they make up only fourteen per cent of the employees, and even less in rural areas. In rice production almost seventy per cent of the labour is provided by women, but you do not see this in official statistics" (Howard 2002: 64). Rural women have always played a vital role in the economic system even if not reported as economically active in the labour force (Touba 1978: 3). Girls' clubs have been opened where women go and teach farmers the way to increase production by the use of new technique.

WOMEN IN TEA PRODUCTION

Women work force contributes a lot in tea production. The women walk among the knee high, emerald tea bushes, deftly plucking the two newest shoots from each shrub (Howard 2002: 68). Women make a sizable chunk of the staff at the Tea Research Institute in Lahijan. Women basically participate in the thrashing of tea (Das 1991: 29). This activity continues for around six months of the year, with new tea leaves ready for picking every fifteen days (Ibid: 29). The following table explains the participation of women in various stages of tea production.

Table 2.11

Participation of women in various stages of tea production

Participation Stages	Tea Industry	
	Stage I (%)	Stage II (%)
High	2.8	34.3
Medium	50	35.7
Low	30.6	30
Non	16.7	-

Source: Safai (1991: 28)

WOMEN IN RICE PRODUCTION

Women contribute a lot in rice cultivation. The transplanting aspect of rice cultivation is an important part of the whole process and must be accomplished within a limited time (Nikkolgh 1991). In this stage work of women was calculated to be 238 hours of work for one hectare of rice (Ibid: 10). The following Table explains the participation of women in various stages of rice production.

Table – 2.12

Participation of women in various stages of rice production

Participation stages	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV
High	1.4	23.2	29.9	2.9
Medium	1.4	50.7	9	5.8
Low	7.2	10.1	35.8	56.5
Non	89.9	15.9	25.4	34.8

Source: Safai (1991: 28)

Rural women play an active part in food and other crop production, fisheries and livestock especially poultry raising. In forestry, women are involved in the production and transplanting of seedlings. Azam Taleqani, an ex-member of *Majlis* says two third of the women live and work in rural areas and carry a major burden of agricultural activity. Nevertheless, women are not allowed to study agricultural sciences in university (Afshar 1997).

WOMEN IN THE PASTORAL PRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

The pastoral sphere is characterised by a division of labour in which women as milkers and milk and wool processors are the ones who turn most of the available surplus into valuable commodities through hard labour, whereas men control the distribution of the goods and their profit (Friedl 1991: 205). Denied control and autonomy of decision over their products, they cannot turn their activities into sources of power, public or domestic (Ibid: 206). In either case, however, sedentarisation or pastoral affluence, women automatically become more firmly embedded in webs of male control and

dependency than before (Ibid: 206). Needless to say, male control of women's actions and the dependency of women on male services and on resources controlled by men are prominent features in the patriarchal set up (Ibid 206).

There is no hard and fast rule regarding what agricultural activities are to be undertaken by females and what are to be undertaken by males, but certain agricultural operations like planting (particularly of rice), weeding etc. are generally done by females. In some cases, their assistance is also required for harvesting and crop marketing. So, gender has no definitive role in agricultural operation. Presently agriculture is being mechanized slowly, for which the necessity of women labour force in agriculture is gradually reducing. Due to improved method of cultivation, women are now finding employment in new avenues like processing of food and animal product.

Most decision related to food and other crops are made by men, although women sometimes participate in decisions on surplus production and the use of income from crops such as sugar, beets, pulses and garden fruits. Although due to tradition, women have little decision making power at the local level, elderly women have a special status and their opinion carries weight in household decision-making.

From the above analysis, it is clear that at present, the position of Iranian women has gone up and they substantially contribute to the economy of the state by their large-scale participation in agriculture, business and in government and private jobs.

IRANIAN WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

Women are playing increasingly prominent roles in Iran, and business and industry are no exceptions. A sizable female contingent populates the trading desk at the Tehran Exchange (Reed 2004). Women are big players in information technology companies (*Ibid.*). Some are even penetrating the

most traditional male bastions, such as heavy industry. Women as workers are a goldmine because of their honesty, their hard work, and the care they take in their work, says Shahin Khalili, chairman of Butane Industrial Group, a large family conglomerate (Reed 2004).

Table 2.13

Women aged six and above working in the major sectors in cities and villages (%)

URBAN AREAS

Year	Agriculture	Industry	Service	Others
1966	3.1	45.7	45.6	5.6
1968	4.2	42.8	46.9	6.1
1971	1.7	39.6	53	5.7
1986	2.5	12	73.5	12

RURAL AREAS

Year	Agriculture	Industry	Service	Others
1966	32.1	61.2	5	1.7
1968	51.3	42	5.4	1.3
1971	41.1	55.8	2.5	0.6
1986	54.3	33.6	8.1	4

Source: Iran Statistical Centre, Tehran (www.irvi.net/iran35.htm)

Another businesswoman Nazila Neobashari speaks that about two decades back when she entered her fathers shipping business, there were practically very few women in the business world. People were very much curious about the working women. Now the position is different and the industries were full of working women. Work life has also increased according to a lady supervisor of Iran's second largest automobile company, Sapia Corporation. Women are sent to foreign countries for industrial training courses. Trained people (women also) are given career advancements. The percentage of male labour force in 2003 has decreased as compared to the percentage of male labour force in 1990 whereas the female participation has increased during that period (World Development Indicators 2005). As the total female labour force during the period from 1990-2003 has almost increased by more than 33% it speaks of enormous increase in female participation in the industrial sector. Table 2.7 indicates such increase.

WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

The media absorbs many women today. Prior to 1979, there were two women's newspapers and magazines. By 1999, there were atleast ten (Povey 2005). They created employment for many women designers, photographers, journalists and other women media workers (*Ibid.*).

Before 1979, there were only two worker's magazines. However, in the late 1990s, there were over 400. Many women were involved in the publication and distribution of these magazines.

The Iranian women's cinema opened up new vistas for women and women worked as scriptwriters, designers, actors, directors, managers, producers, music composers, make up artists and so on and so forth (*Ibid.*). The number of women directors increased from 2 prior to 1979 to around 10 in the 1990s (*Ibid.*).

Table 2.14
Increase in GDP per capita

Year	GDP per capita (Average Annual Growth Rate)
1960-1990	-3.5
1990-2003	2.4

Source: www.stateofnature.org/womenandwork2.html

WOMEN AND WORK IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Throughout 2003-04, the number of coffee shops has increased in Iran, employing young, female, university graduates (Povey 2005). Earlier, it was completely a male bastion employing men and exclusively for male customers. Many have argued that it is good to have women working in these places because the presence of female waitress makes it easier for young women to sit in the coffee shops without being harassed by men (*Ibid.*).

Women are slowly making inroads into the property market. Being a profitable job, the number of women taking up this job has increased (*Ibid.*).

Table – 2.15

Iran: Participation of women in labour force

Year	Total Labour	Labour force rate	Participation (age group 15-64)	Female percentage of labour laws.
1990	16.5 millions	3.1 %	22.2%	20.3%
2003	24.6 Millions	80.2%	33.8%	29.4%

Source: *Adapted from World Development Indicator 2005: 53*

In general, women receive the same pay as men. In the same positions women employees complain, however, that through overtime and other means of getting extras, men manage to take home much more money than women in the same positions.

WOMEN IN THE SERVICE SECTOR (NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS)

In Iran it is found today that a lot of women are working in myriads of fields such as medicine, nursing, teaching, engineering, defence, maids, midwives and the like. The increasing role of women in the service sector can be assigned to the fact that the income of women serves as an extra income to the family.

Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a number of non-Government women's organisations were instantaneously born and gradually evolved into various organisational structures, emerging as institutes, foundations, societies, groups etc. (*National Report on Women 1997*). These NGOs dealing with different aspects of women's development is increasing rapidly and suitable circumstances have been created for their expansion into the rural society. In Iran, some NGOs provide paid, unpaid and voluntary work for women (Povey 2005).

A number of factors have been responsible for the growth and progressive trend of NGOs in Iran. Much of the NGO's success has been due to the existence of suitable social circumstances, active women's urge for greater participation in political, social and cultural affairs in the framework of professional, non governmental groups, the sense of urgency by authorities to absorb and utilise women's potentials to support military efforts during the imposed war and promote economic development following the war and finally, the existence of appropriate legal support for the formation and registration of non-Government societies and organisations (*National Report on Women 1997*). Women NGOs provide opportunities for fundamental

social change as well as new sources of identity for individuals and groups (Povey 2005). However, the creation of autonomous spheres of social activity for women has been undermined by a patriarchal social order and the multiple sites – the intertwining of civil society, state, religion and family through which social gender is constructed (Povey 2005).

Some of the NGOs which came up after the victory in Islamic revolution are women's section within the Islamic Republic Party and its various branches throughout the country, established in the month of February, 1979. Women's charity organisation in Qom, Women's Religious Schools, *Az Zeynab Society* etc. (*Women and Development 1994*).

The Islamic Republic of Iran's women's society was established in 1986. This is a very active society both inside and outside Iran and work in the field of religion, culture, society and politics. Some of its main objectives are introducing and clarifying the Islamic culture, protecting the rights of the oppressed and under-privileged and fighting imperialistic eastern and Western cultures as well as racism and Zionism. It organises seminars, meetings, publishes books for the sake of creating awareness among people.

The Islamic Medical Association of Iran was established in 1993 with the objectives of restoring the Islamic culture to the medical field and profession and upholding regard for it in the society. One of the most important functions of this association is to make people conscious about health and medical care and about common diseases and their remedy and prevention. Its plans to study the religious problems and issues in different medical fields, especially related to women's illness. It also intends to expand ties between specialists in clinical sciences and basic medical science, especially in regards to women's illness. The women's branch will also be expanded in the next few years (*National Report on the Women's NGOs in Iran 1997*).

The rural women's co-operative centre started functioning in 1994 with a view to augment the social and economic status of rural women. Up to the year 1997 it had 30 co-operatives in eighteen provinces of Iran. These co-

operatives are independent but are under the supervision of the “Rural co-operative Organisation”. These centers make collective activities possible and provide ground to exchange their views and to co-operate with each other in order to solve existing problems.

Community based NGOs were also established to protect and unite specific categories of people. Some such NGOs and their objectives are given under for reference.

Sahid (Martyr) Bent-Ol-Hoda Community

This community started its activities secretly in 1968 under the supervision and guidance of *Martyr Bent-Ol-Hoda* in Iraq. Afterwards, the organisation took steps to develop its activities beyond the frontiers of Iraq as a result of which the *Sahid (Martyr) Bent-Ol-Hoda* community was established in Tehran. It started its activities in other cities and regions of Iran in which the presence of Iraqi sisters was significant and extensive. The main field of activities of this community is to prepare women to participate in political process, to promote Islamic ideas and prevent Western culture coming into Muslim countries.

American Women’s Organisation

The American Women’s Foundation – *Haigin*, The Association of American Women, American Women Charity Club of Tehran etc. were established in Iran to promote women’s interest. The American Women’s Foundation was established in 1987, after the demise of *Imam Khomeini* at the request of a number of Bosnian women through the efforts of several Iranian women. The most important aim of the society is to establish friendly ties between the two nations, bring attention to the Bosnian issue throughout the world and propagate Islam. The Association of American women was established in 1993 by several young American women with charity activities as one of its aims. The American Women Charity Club was established in 1904. Its main activity started in 1930 under the supervision of American Calliphate Council which takes the religious leadership of Americans in Iran. To pursue the

goals of its establishment, it financially supports destitute families or those without custodians, orphans, poor students and those suffering from war, earthquakes or floods (*National report on the Women's NGOs in Iran 1997*). It should be noted that these aids are not confined to only Iranian Americans. They are for every Iranian citizen. It helped establishing primary schools for girls and lent financial assistance to the destitutes.

Jewish Organisations

The first gathering of Jewish women in Iran was formed about 40 years ago, when a group of faithful, charitable and philanthropist women established Iran's Jewish women's organisation in order to help the destitute and the afflicted people of their society. Due to their endeavours, welfare, educational and training institutions such as rest homes (for old people), nurseries and women's training classes of arts and techniques came into existence in the Jewish community of Iran. Subsequently, this organization came to be known as Jewish Girls and Women's Club. Society of Jewish Ladies started its activities independently in 1983. Its main objectives are (i) to shoulder part of the burdens of the society and helping women with their problems, and (ii) to encourage women's presence in social activities by providing favourable grounds for them. To achieve the objectives and in order to promote women's cultural status, particularly that of the Jewish women, the Society organizes scientific, cultural and religious seminars.

Measures Taken for the Employment of Women

1. Selective general policies on the employment of women approved by the Higher Council of Cultural Revolution are as follows (*Iranian Government Report 1994*):
 - a. Working environment of women should be such that helps them to advance their spiritual as well as scientific potentials, while preserving the integrity of their religion, character, moral and intellectual sanity.

- b. Granting special privilege to women in pursuing careers which are suitable to their physiological make up and their desires such as midwifery, laboratory works, pharmacology and the like.
 - c. Encouraging experienced professional women to accept administrative and management jobs.
 - d. Facilitating the utilization of the potential of women in such a way as to guarantee that their family obligations would not interfere with their desire to assume social responsibilities.
2. Employment of 17% of women in handicrafts, mainly in carpet weaving. Out of 3.765 billion rials(Iranian currency) annually produced by women, 2.823 billion rials is from the products in handicrafts.
 3. Encouraging women to assume managerial, technical, and professional positions; the percentage of increase 1986-90 has been 29.4%.

Table 2.16
Women's Employment in 1986

Types of Work	% of Women Compared to Men
Specialized & Scientific work	32.6
Management	3.5
Office works	12.7
Commercial works	1.5
Services	7.0
Agriculture	8.0
Production	6.2
Not know	4.0
Total	8.9

Source: Iranian Government Report 1994

4. Various measures to fight prejudices in order to enhance the situation of women through.
 - a. Equal pay for equal jobs of the same conditions.
 - b. Opportunity for mothers to nurse their babies (sic.), 1.5 hours in everyday work.
 - c. Prohibition of doing heavy jobs and prevention of carrying heavy weight for woman without mechanical devices.
 - d. Retirement law after twenty years of service, without any age restriction.
 - e. Paid (sic.) of ninety days for child bearing.
 - f. Technical and on job training under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. During the period of 1987-90, 22,081 women have been trained on the job.
 - g. Forcing the heads of working agencies to set up a nursery if they employ more than ten workers.
 - h. Increasing the leave of women workers from 12 days to one month.
4. Establishment of centers for the employment of needy and guardian less women.
5. Selecting the best women worker of the year, on the Labour Day, since 1989.
6. Arranging for the workers who have paid 60% of their insurance fee one year before their child birth, to utilize Medicare before, during and after the child birth.
7. Establishing special training course for rural women on carpet weaving, sewing, hygiene, midwifery, and dairy products.

Employment Related Laws and Practices

Iranian constitution does not discriminate in employment of male and female. Article 43 of the constitution undertakes to provide employment opportunities for all and states that full employment is a fundamental aim of the revolution. The post revolutionary constitution, labour laws and the state employment laws makes no distinction between men and women. As Azam Teleqani, a women member of the *Majlis*, has stated:

“Article 28 of our Constitution declares that any one can choose any profession that they wish, provided that they do not contravene Islam and public and social interests. The government must provide equal opportunities for every one in every job according to social needs.”

But these guarantees are violated in practice by erecting impediments in the employment laws and by gender discrimination which is actually in practice in some cases. The patriarchal structure prevents women from participating fully in many important sectors such as judiciary and civil service .Even employed women do not in practice, benefit from equal pay for equal work provisions.

Women were not recognized as breadwinners. Hence, the benefits were calculated for a single person (Povey 2005). A single person received half of a married person’s allowance and subsidies. Married women, thus, received a paltry amount in comparison to men. For the same reason, women’s tax, pension, retirement deductions and allowances were calculated for a single person (*Ibid.*). They spent their whole salary as the household expenditure. Thus, women earned less and saved less. Hence, economically men were in an advantageous position as compared to Iranian women.

Another problem facing Iranian women is that despite reforms, women had to take the male permission to seek employment (*Ibid.*).

Previously, only one-eighth of the husband's possessions belonged to the wife after his death, and she did not have any right to land or immovable assets owned by the spouse (*Ibid.*). This prompted a number of *Majlis* deputies to put forth a proposal, insisting that women should have a share in estates as well (*Ibid.*).

Married women pay higher taxes on their incomes than do married men; and women pay higher child insurance premiums than do men (Afshar 1997).

WOMEN IN TRADE UNIONS

Women fought for their employment rights within workers' *Shoras* and associations. They still do not have a major voice in these organisations despite increase in women workers' activities in these aforesaid institutions. There has been a continuing resistance by male workers to women's participation in these organisations; in most *shoras* and associations women served as treasures, but their participation was limited when important decisions were taken (Povey 2005).

In response, women workers reacted to male dominated *Shoras* and associations by forming women's trade associations- for example, the trade associations for women publishers, teachers, nurses, lawyers and the like (*Ibid.*). In 1998, Jamileh Kadivar, a journalist and MP (2000-04) established the women's journalists, Trade Association and in 2002 published *Sadye Zan* (Women's Voice) (*Ibid.*).

The women's trade unions challenged male dominance and gave women a platform to voice their views. Nevertheless, despite their limited activities they have transformed into an alternate civil society organisation, as they have found it easier to construct their professional rights through women's institutions (*Ibid.*).

APPRAISAL

During the *Pahlavi* era, Iran's all-round development could not take place. Women were backward and there was practically not much progress in terms

of education of women. However, women enjoyed more liberty as there was no Islamic dress code and sex segregation. Co-educational schools were also there.

Traditional Muslims who did not like women's liberation, viewed it as moral turpitude, and did not send their daughters to school. Therefore, female literacy rate was quite low. However, after the revolution, as compulsory veiling, sex segregation were enforced and co-educational schools abolished, the number of female students increased and more girls could get education. During 1999-2000 academic year, for example, 47% of the university students were females. As the level of female education rises, female employment rate has also gone up. It was found that the labour force participation rate was 30 per cent in 1980 which rose slightly to 30.1 per cent in 1997 (*World Employment Report 1980-99*). However, male participation declined during this period from 47 per cent in 1980 to 44.2 per cent in 1997. In case of female participation it was noted that it increased from 12.4 per cent in 1980 to 15.6 per cent in 1997 (*Ibid*).

Hence, it is undeniable that during the post-revolutionary period women's education and employment has increased. This has augmented the financial status of women.

The economic status of unemployed women is however not satisfactory. This is due to a complex laws of inheritance that allow women to inherit some property of her husband provided several conditions are fulfilled. Such inheritance is half of that what a male under similar circumstance may inherit. Women cannot inherit land and were only entitled to a share from the sale of the property and not the property itself (946 & 47 of the Civil Code). Married women, who are not employed, become destitute after divorce due to complex legal problems. At this point, the economic status of women is not satisfactory and the position ought to change to bring equality among men and women.

Women in agricultural sector particularly in Northern Iran (south of Caspian sea) are highly involved in field work for production of paddy. It is the irony of the fact that women being the larger partner in agricultural production, have no say in the produce. Single handedly she cannot take any decision over the distribution and control of the product. The vast fleets of women workers are dependent on their male partners economically.

However, the aforesaid analysis does not mean that the lives of Iranian women are not changing for the better. At present, Iranian women have been significantly contributing to the economy of the state by their large scale participation in agriculture, business and in government and private jobs. Things have changed for the better and high council has declared that it would provide job security, unemployment benefits and welfare provisions (Article 10 cited in Afshar 1988). In addition, it stated that women who are heads of household should be entitled to special retaining programmes to enable them to return to the labour market and the government is urged to provide cooperative type organization to facilitate home working for women who wish to combine their paid and unpaid jobs (Article 11 and 12 as cited in Afshar 1988). Women have become very vocal as responsible members of civil society. More women have been enrolled in the universities as compared to men and they are playing a prominent role in the IT sector. As a country facing sanctions, three Iranian experts –two of them women, have developed Iranian software. The contribution of women to the Iranian economy is undeniable and immeasurable.

CHAPTER – III

POLITICAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN IRAN

The chapter deals with the participation of women in the three branches of the Iranian government – the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. It also tries to analyse the changes and the progressive laws that have come about over the years. Another facet which focused in this chapter is how Iran is seeing a resurgence of feminism and how have women been hitting back when not given their due in the public sphere. The results of the movement can be clearly seen as women can reach to the top political echelons except being the *Wali Faquih* or the President.

POLITICAL HISTORY OF IRAN

Iran, called Persia until 1935, was formerly a monarchy, ruled by a Shah (Emperor). In 1927, Reza Khan, a Cossack officer seized power in a military coup and was subsequently elected Shah, adopting the title Reza Shah Pahlavi (*Europa Year Book 2005*). During the World War II, British and Soviet forces captured Iran and the Shah was forced to abdicate in favour of his son Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shah gradually increased his personal control of Government assuming dictatorial powers in 1963 with the so-called “White revolution” (*Ibid: 2203*). To appease the common people the Shah redistributed large estates to small farmers and women were granted the right to vote in elections. With the right to vote, Iranian women found a place in the political sphere of Iran.

Between 1965 and 1977 Iran enjoyed political stability and considerable economic growth based on substantial petroleum revenues as Iran was a giant oil exporting country and the *Majlis* (National Consultative Assembly as it was then) nationalized Petroleum Industry in 1951. Towards the end of 1977,

public opposition to Shah's regime increased because of his repressive rule as well as the economic downfall of the country. By the end of 1978, anti-Government protest was at its peak. The growing unrest forced the Shah to leave Iran in January 1979 and the Revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was deported to France in 1964, arrived in Iran in February that year and assumed power. A 15 member Islamic Revolutionary Council was formed to govern the country and on 1st April 1979, Iran was declared an Islamic Republic. The Supreme authority was vested in *Wali Faquih*, a religious leader, initially Khomeini. However, executive power was to be vested in a President to be elected.

A 270 member *Majlis* (Islamic Consultative Assembly) was formed to which election was held in January, 1980. This is how Iran entered into the process of election and the people of Iran who were hitherto not acquainted with the democratic style of functioning of the Government, became part and parcel of the process of election and political life.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL RIGHTS

During Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign women as well as men were able to vote, which, of course, carried no meaning in the sense that only one political party, which was the Shah's party namely *Rastakheez* Party, was allowed to operate (Hegland 2003). The Shah's Government approved all candidates who fought election. No dissent against Shah's Government was allowed and any voice of dissent was crushed by putting such person in jail.

Islam supposedly relegated women to the household and care of the family. There was opposition to women's role in activities which were not related to family, child rearing and the like by clerics. According to the Holy *Quran*, men and women are both supplementary and complimentary to each other like the two wings of a bird which cannot fly or reach its destination with one wing only. It was the backwardness of women which prompted them to actively support the Islamic revolution with the expectation that the post-

revolutionary state will offer them all the rights and opportunities that the *Quran* and the Prophet of Islam had promised them several centuries ago. But this was not an easy task. To attain these rights that is the right to vote and contest election, women had to toil a lot.

In 1959, the issue of women's enfranchisement was brought before the *Majlis*. The clergy vehemently opposed the idea and the result was that the issue of women's political rights was dropped from the *Majlis* debate but it did not go away for long. During the 1960-63 period of relative political liberalisation, the issue of women's votes became once again a point of contention as the matter was pushed forward time and again by women's organisation. Granting women the right to participate in the election process was somewhat not very objectionable to the Shah but he faced strong objection from the Prime Minister. During Amini's premiership, women's interest could not find patronage. After Amini, the new Prime Minister Asadollah Alam took over office in July 1962 and announced that local election would be held under the new law which did not ban women from taking part. This announcement raised hue and cry and a lot of objections followed from different corners. But, finally, in a referendum which took place on 26, January, 1963 women were allowed to take part in voting.

To many extents the post revolutionary Iran endowed very important rights on women. The following analysis will make clear about women's right in existing legal instruments.

(i) The Constitution

The preamble to the Constitution states, "Family is the fundamental unit of society and the focal point of human growth and elevation. Ideological and idealistic concurrence in the formation of the family, which is the major determinant of human progression and development, is a fundamental principle, and it is the responsibility of the Islamic Government to facilitate the attainment of this objective. It is in this context of this definition of the family unit that woman ceases to be an object and merely a tool in the service

of exploitation and propagation of consumerism; and while regaining her significant and worthy role of motherhood in bringing up children with ideological beliefs and attitudes, she alongside men, pioneers and strives for achievement in the active fields of life. Consequently, she will assume greater responsibilities and attain greater respect from the view point of Islam” (*National Report on Women 1979: 19*).

Section 14 of Article 3 speaks of various rights of both men and women and equality of all citizens before the law. Article 20 of the Constitution reads: “All members of the nation, whether man or woman, shall receive equal protection of law and shall enjoy human, political, economic, social and cultural rights with due reference to and observance of the principles of Islam”. Article 21 short titled as women’s rights confers a bundle of rights and prescribes certain social security measures for women. Apart from the above rights, Articles 28, 29 and 30 also grants various rights to both male and females for their all round development.

(ii) Civil and Other Laws

Besides the constitutional rights, women are endowed with several civil, judicial and economic rights.

FEMINISTS MOVEMENTS VIS-À-VIS POLITICAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

During the later part of *Pahlavi* rule and more particularly during the 1970s Iran was marked by rapid westernisation and the so-called modernisation. During that period, despite the reform of family law, the persistence of patriarchal norms in many cases did not allow the majority of working class women and middle class religious women to benefit from the reforms (Povey 2001).

After 1979 revolution, that is in the 1980s the period of Islamisation of the state and society began. In the process of Islamisation of state and

institutions, the women's movement was defeated by the autocratic state. The disassociation of Muslim feminists from secular feminists and their strong association with the Islamic state and institutions led to the rise of state sponsored religious women's institutions (Paider 1995). Muslim feminism became popular and the majority of women were involved in it. Muslim feminists represented stable patterns, norms and behaviour which were recognised and valued by the society.

Within the framework of Islam, Iranian women started refusing to accept the traditional role assigned to them by patriarchal norms that women should perform their duty in family environment only and had insisted on their right to participate fully in the political destiny of the nation. After the revolution despite fierce opposition by men who viewed their presence in Parliament (the *Majlis*) as unislamic, they stood as candidates, though initially, only four out of the 270 members elected were women (Afshar 1980).

In the summer of 1980, Rajai, the Prime Minister introduced the law of compulsory veiling in *Majlis*. Soon all political parties were banned, members were arrested and mass executions of the 1980s put an end to all independent political activities. Two important factors had a great impact on gender consciousness. First, the policy and practice of *hejab* and gender segregation opened opportunities for many religious women to have access to education and employment. Second, during the Iran-Iraq war, a large number of women were politicised. This was because of their active participation in street demonstrations and also in the mosques to produce food communally and provide medical aid for the soldiers. For example, according to the *Shari'a* law when a husband/father dies the custody rights and the financial rights of the children go to their male kin and not to their mother. The war widows, although they supported the Islamic statute, demanded the right to keep and raise their children and to be entitled to their husband's wage, salary or any living expenses payable out of Government budget without interference of male kin (Paider 1997: 237-242).

During the 1980s, the process of women empowerment was accelerated as women started entering into different avenues and the same trend continued in the 1990s. The following table is self explanatory.

Table 3.1
Representation of women in education and civil society

	1976-77 %	1986-87 %	1996-97 %
% of female literacy rate from total female population	35	52	74
% of female higher education graduates from total male/female graduates	30	31	34
% of females employed in the state enterprises	29	29	32
% of female members of <i>Majlis</i> (The Parliament)	7	1.5	5
	Number	Number	Number
Number of women's newspapers and magazines	2	2	10
Number of female Journals	50	Not available	400
Number of women Publishers	0	0	398
Number of Women NGOs	13	Not available	137

Sources: *Iran Statistical Year Books* (1978: 66, 101, 1998: 86, 89, 2000: 120, 601, 655); Naushin Ahmadi Khoragani (2000) *Women's Calendar 1999-2000 and 2000-01*, Communication network of Women's NGOs in I.R. of Iran (2000); UNDP Iran cited from (Povey 2001:47).

Thus the material effect of the process of Islamisation produced educated and empowered women who were attracted to take up different career

opportunities including politics. After the Islamic revolution and due to constant efforts to gain the rightful position in the society, women could gradually tread on the path of success. This victory brought many gifts and blessings with it, and one of these gifts was the social and political activities of women in all fields, including governmental affairs. During the Islamic revolution, Iran's political activities became very sound and healthy. Women, who had suffered the utmost pains during the previous cruel, tyrant, imperialistic royal regime, and international imperialism also had a vested interest in her oppression due to her sensitive role in society (sic.), played a shining role before and after the Islamic revolution in protecting its values (Bakhsh 1989). Imam Khomeini (Khomeini 1982) once said, "The greatest thing which occurred in Iran, after the revolution was the change among our women. The women of Iran have a greater share in this movement and revolution than men. It is very important that after the revolution women worked to restore their modesty and Islamic values, and they not only cooperated with the Government, but they were also pioneers in many internal affairs". Women participated in all the affairs of Iran, particularly in the elections of legislative and National Assembly and one woman was also elected to the legislative Assembly. The Constitution of Iran was also able to bring brilliant progress to women folk in a very short time (*Government Report* 1994).

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

According to *Women and Development: A Report on Important Measures Taken for Women since the Victory of the Islamic Revolution* published in February, 1994, the following points are shown as important areas of women's political participation:

1. Selecting women supervisors for voting.

2. Increase in the number of women representatives in the Parliament by 120% reaching the total of women representative to nine.
3. Increase in the number of women candidates for the fourth term of the Islamic consultative Assembly to 82, showing an increase of 125%.
4. Active participation of women during the war whether in the field or in the support division.
5. Active presence of women in the presidential election; in the Sixth Presidential election, 44% of women participated.
6. Active participation of women in Friday prayers and demonstrations.
7. Appointment of women specialists as consultant by the governors of the provinces and on the suggestions of interior ministry.
8. Forming governmental and non-governmental social and political association of women for elevating the self awareness of women toward their rights. Such organisations include mobilising section of women. The society of women of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the society of *Zeynab* and the like.
9. Appointment of women of ideas as consultant by ministers.
10. Appointment of one woman as the deputy to the Minister of Education. (*Government Report 1994*)

WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

After the revolution, four women candidates came out successful in the election to the *Majlis* out of 270 elected members. Even though their presence is insignificant, from the very out set they opposed the new laws which barred them from serving in the judiciary, abrogated family protection legislation and denied them equal entitlement to education or employment. It took over twenty years to make a real impact, but throughout they have

fought for and succeeded in improving women's political, economic and judicial rights (Afshar 2002).

Women's active participation within different institutions highlighted and challenged the existing unequal gender relations and forced the Islamic state to respond. The *Majlis* in particular, became an important institution for women to struggle and change the laws or reform the laws in favour of women. Women's active participation in politics – in the 1990s presidential election, parliamentary election, local elections and the Parliamentary election in 2000 and the presidential election in 2001 – played an important role in preparing the ground for changing the gender balance.

In the first *Majlis* that is from 1979 to 1983 only four women were elected and all of them were from Tehran. It spoke about the arena in which Iranian women have been most successful are those where voters have had the option to elect them. In this election, the only one not to be re-elected was Azam Teleqani. Her outspoken approach to politics and insistence on the fulfilment of women's demand found no support from the conservative populi. Maryam Behruzi was equally committed to regain women's rights which were lost to them due to some societal factors. She came to lime light by her ardent participation in the revolution but she had no academic background except primary education. She was one of the most effective parliamentarians in the post-revolutionary decade. Re-elected to the second and the fourth *Majlis*, she remained an effective voice for women until 1996 when, inexplicably she lost her seat in the election where Iranian women obtained their highest number of parliamentarians. The general opinion was that the theocrats feared her more than any other female parliamentarian and so ensured that her votes were not counted (Afshar; 2002).

The Tehran electorate returned four women to the second *Majlis* in addition to Behruzi, Dastqueb and Rajayi. Some women parliamentarian of the second *Majlis* were not well educated or remained quiet in the *Majlis*. The third *Majlis* of 1987 was least effective as political parties were banned that time

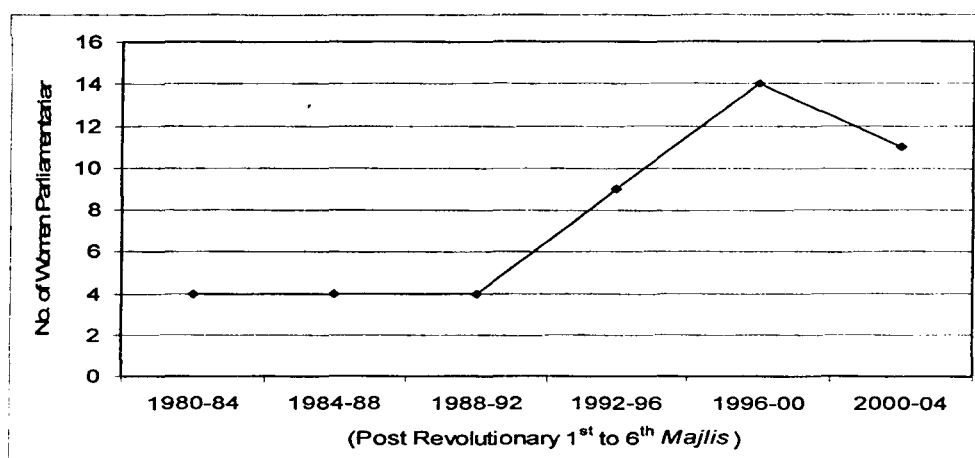
and it could not place women's right in the fore. The three most conservative and quiet representatives viz. Dastqueb, Rajayi and Dabay kept a low profile and did not initiate any major pro-women bills (Afshar 2002).

Throughout the 1990s women's active participation within different institutions highlighted and challenged the existing unequal gender relations and forced the Islamic state to respond. The *Majlis* in particular became an important institution for women to struggle and change the laws or reform the laws in favour of women (Povey 2001).

The campaign to the sixth *Majlis* focused on certain domestic issues and social reform. It mainly concentrated on issues like economic, social and political life of people, freedom of press, certain judicial reforms and limitations on the role of clergy in politics. A larger percentage of population participated in this election compared to the 1996 elections. The result of the election went in favour of the reformists and the support of youth and women guaranteed the victory for the reformers.

The following graph shows women representation in *Majlis* from 1980-84 to 2000-2004.

Figure 3.1: Women representation in *Majlis*, 1980-84 to 2000-2004



The graph shows that maximum numbers of women were elected in the fifth *Majlis*. The number was three and half times more in that election than in the first three *Majlis*. There is however a small decrease in the number of women parliamentarians in the sixth *Majlis*, but it was interesting to note that in 1996, out of 5,359 candidates; only 6% that is 305 were women whereas in 2000, 7% women contested election.

Despite their difficulties over the past two decades, women parliamentarians have systematically pressed for measures that would help the cause of women. The fifth *Majlis* had the highest number of women elected since the revolution. Faezeh Rafsanjani, daughter of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani was pleased to inform in an interview that in the initial two years, they managed to get twenty two pro-women laws through (Afshar 2002).

Some women *Majlis* deputies used their unique position to voice women's legal and social problems. Despite their tokenistic presence they played an important role in initiating legislation on women. Their overall achievement however was very limited. They lacked power and influence and seemed lost in the male-dominated and authoritative atmosphere of the *Majlis* (Paider 1995). Homa Omid (1994) writes that getting elected is only the first step, women members of *Majlis* are severely constrained by the ideological views that designate them as inferior, demand that they be modest, silent and invisible, and define them as interlopers in the public domain. Maryam Behrouzi, a veteran representative who had served a prison sentence before the revolution and whose 16 year old son was "martyred", still found herself firmly discriminated against in *Majlis*. She pointed out that women are never elected to high powered committees. Nor did they become chair of affairs of other parliamentary committee (Moghissi 1996).

Table 3.2
Female Workforce in Selected Ministries, 1974-75 to 2001-01

Ministry	1974-75	1986-87	1996-97	2001-02
Education	41	43	46	45
Trade	27	8	9	7
Health	26	41	42	45
Culture/Islamic Guidance	-	17	18	19
Justice	6	10	27	15
Higher education	39	19	20	20

Source: Elaheh Rostam Povey (2005) "Women and Work in Iran", *State of Nature*

WOMEN IN THE EXECUTIVE

The presence of women in the executive branch of the state was even more limited. Women were barred from becoming President, and Post-revolutionary cabinets did not produce any women ministers (Paider 1995). The only role women perform in government is to advise on matters on which they are consulted. Women in the past were allocated seats in consultative committees set out by various ministries. Women were not given proper representation in different pillars of Government, in spite of their large scale participation in the revolution. It was their consistent effort which is responsible for their present advancement. After the appointment of a woman as the President's Advisor for Women's Affairs and the establishment of the Bureau of Women's Affairs in 1991, the movement for women's advancement gathered momentum and resulted in the establishment of women's units in different government institutions (*Ibid.*).

WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Prominent governmental organizations of women needs brief discussion:

1. *Women's Social and Cultural Council (WSCC)*

The women's social and cultural council was established as one of the satellite councils of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR) in June 1984. This Council is responsible for formulating policy guidelines on women's social and cultural requirements and coordinating activities to ensure achievement of its objectives (*National Report on Woman 1997*). It includes representatives from women of all classes, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, ministries, Government organizations and revolutionary institutions. The objectives of the Council are numerous. Some important objectives and achievement of the Council are discussed below:

- (i) Drawing up necessary guidelines for the creation of suitable circumstances to enhance women's profile, reclaim their moral values and secure their rights and privileges based on the genuine principle of Islam.
- (ii) Presenting policies designed to recognize, analyse and eradicate the influence of foreign cultural decadence and moral corruption, eliminate the remnants of erroneous beliefs which, in the name of religion, still persist in society, and remove all discriminating and oppressive practices which have been historically imposed on women.
- (iii) Investigating means for increasing women's participation in political, social, cultural and economic activities, and the removal of obstacles and barriers that impede their progress in such activities.

The WSCC has studied, verified and proposed a number of schemes to the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution for its approval. Certain policies which were approved by the Supreme Council are establishment of an International Affairs Committee at WSCC, Investigation of problems confronting women workers, survey of the position, employment and status of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran etc (*National Report on Women 1997*).

2. Bureau of Women's Affairs (BWA)

The Bureau of Women's Affairs, set up at the office of the President in accordance with the Presidential Executive Order issued on 1st December 1991, is vested with the primary objective and responsibility to familiarise women with their human and Islamic rights, and within the framework of a well coordinated system, facilitate their access to what they are legally entitled to in all aspects of life including cultural, social and economic matters. BWA constitutes three departments in the areas of planning, research and domestic and foreign relations (*National Report on Women 1997: 31*). BWA's organizational structure embraces several units including one unit at the Islamic Consultative Assembly. The establishment of this unit at the nation's legislative branch brings women's legal demands and issues within close proximity to the law making institution. It expedites the progress of legislative procedure on matters concerning women, especially in areas of legal inadequacies. BWA is headed by a lady Advisor to the President.

3. Women's Units in Government Organisations

Immediately upon its creation in 1991, the BWA demanded full representation at all executive organizations in the country. BWA's representatives in government offices and organisations are engaged in activities that are in line with BWA's general objectives. At present there are 40 women's units in various government institutions (*National Report on Women 1997: 36*).

4. Women's Affairs Commission

The Women's Affairs Commission with its central office in the Ministry of Interior has established branches in all provinces. Women's provincial commission has been set up at the social councils of different province to facilitate the advancement of women, to identify their problems and to promote their participation in social and political activities throughout the country.

5. International Women's Bureau

It is a part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to coordinate the International activities of Iranian women. The experts from this bureau participate actively in International meetings and are also entrusted with the duty of coordination of International activities in the country (*National Report on Women 1997*).

6. Rural Women's Development and Extension Office

This office was created in the Department of Extension of the Ministry of Agriculture in order to plan rural women's activities and to meet their needs for training programmes. The purpose of this office is to help improve the economic and social situation of rural women through programmes for increased awareness, practical technical training, creation of employment opportunities and assistance in establishing their own special organizations as rural women. Some 160 women specialists are working in this field in Tehran and the provinces (*National Report on Women 1997: 37*).

7. Rural Women's Co-operative Office

This office was set up in the central organization for rural co-operatives of the Ministry of Agriculture in order to support the establishment of co-operatives by rural women. This office encourages group-income generating activities and the provision of credit to them (*National Report on Women 1997: 37*).

8. Women's Affairs Office in the Judiciary Branch

This office was initially setup as the representative of the judiciary branch in the Bureau of Women's Affairs of the office of the President. It was later turned into an independent office in the judiciary branch with the objective of supporting women's cases in Court (*National Report on Women 1997: 37*).

Women who were involved with the executive branch of the state were more inclined to be specialists in one field or another and less likely to be hardliners. Although Islamic credentials had to be present, most women representatives in international women (sic.) were also called upon for expert report on various topics. These women drew their support from a small but vocal oppositional faction within the Islamic women's movement (Paider 1995: 310).

M. Kar (1995) writes, "Women are not generally seen in high positions". This lack of presence is caused by the stipulation about "distinguished personalities" in the conditions for the election of the President which has naturally been impediment for the assignment of women to high positions. An exception is the position specified as the advisor for women's affairs which does not noticeably change the rate of women's participation. She concluded that "on the whole, it must be accepted that women's participation in the high positions of the executive branch is negative" (Kar 1995).

In the middle executive positions, few women are seen (Kar 1995, Omid 1994). However, in administrative positions women's presence is quite evident and a noticeable percentage of administrative positions are in their control. "Furthermore, there has been the appointment of four women as deputy ministers, women advisors to ministers and governors, of women as governor generals and Mayors and governors of districts and townships and middle managers, managing directors, managers. In addition to these important measures taken by the Government in this area, 630 women were appointed in decision making positions in the Provincial Planning and Development Councils as the highest decision making institutions in the

provinces. On the whole, according to existing statistics, the growth in women managers from 1989 to 2004 shows a 63% increase” (Phoenix 2005).

WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN IRAN

Post constitutional era started with an unprecedented flourishing of political parties and the rapid expansion of an independent women’s movement (Paider 1995: 88). This was possible due to the existence of a weak Government and more freedom of speech and expression.

It was also due to the influence of post-World War-I developments in the position of women in Britain and Soviet Union wherein the latter, the success of the Bolshevik Revolution enhanced the prospect of women’s emancipation (Sansarian 1982: 38).

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had radical impact on Iran and the socialistic ideals gained acceptance by the general public and reformers. In 1920, the Communist and Socialist parties of Iran were established. The Communist Party in its first Congress demanded “Compulsory free education for all children until the age of fifteen”, but did not mention women specifically” (*Historical Documents 1976*). The Socialist Party of Iran, asked for the ‘emancipation of women’, ‘equality of rights before the law for male and female Iranians irrespective of race, religion, and ethnicity’ and the right to elect and be elected for all Iranians without any restrictions’ (*Ibid*). Some political parties during that time also strictly followed core Marxist ideals and did not hesitate to take up arms to reach their goal. It was locally known as *jangali* movement and there was evidence of women participation in it. During the constitutional period there was no clear separation between the women’s movement and political parties (Paider 1995). However, women’s movement concretised during post-constitutional period and their mission acquired supports from different political parties and organisations.

POST-PAHLAVI POLITICAL ORDER

The Post-*Pahlavi* political order which came into being in February 1979 went through more than two years of revolutionary transition (Bakhash 1984; Milani 1988). It finally settled into an Islamic theocracy in 1981 after the annihilation of internal political opposition was complete (Paider 1995).

After the collapse of *Pahlavi* regime, the revolutionary coalition of revolution took over the legislative function temporarily until there is elected *Majlis*. The old officers of Shah Regime were persecuted and punished by the revolutionary Court.

Election for the Assembly of expert took place in August, 1979 under the hardliner clergy's tight control over the mass media. The *Mojahedin*, the *Fadaiyan* and *Tudeh* party put up candidates but did not stand a chance in the face of the massive mobilisation of votes by the Islamic alliance. Around 50 members were elected from people associated with Islamic Republican Party (the party founded on the views of *Ayatollah* Khomeini) one of whom was the only woman representative in the Assembly of expert. The rest of the members were candidates of minorities and representatives from other Islamic and nationalist leadership factions. The opposition's demand for an elected Constituent Assembly to revise and ratify the Constitution was rejected by Khomeini. He wanted an Assembly of Experts to draft the Constitution and accordingly a Constitution was drafted. It was approved in December, 1979 by the public. The Constitution accepted the political doctrine of *Ayatollah* Khomeini and established the divine authority of the "*faquih*" over the state and society.

RAPID ISLAMISATION AND GENDER BIAS

Rapid Islamisation was another strategy adopted by the hardline clergy to consolidate their political position (Paider 1995). The pre-revolutionary

secular concept was given a good bye by the hard line clergy who turned a deaf ear to any argument against Islamisation.

Ayatollah Khomeini's islamisation policy got off the ground with gender relations as one of its first and foremost targets (Bakhash 1984). The subjugation of women has been paraded as the public endorsement and evidence of the continuing supremacy of Islamic law; Laws that have no room for women. A month after his return to Iran, in March 1979, Khomeini sacked all female judges and ordered compulsory veiling of all women. In May, co-education was banned, in June married women were barred from attending schools, and the government began to close down work-place, nurseries. In July, sea resorts were sexually segregated and women flogged in public for transgression of these rules. Morality codes were declared and for the first time women were executed on charges of prostitution and moral degradation (Omid 1994; Paider 1995). Different degree of Islamisation was navigated into the position of women in relation family, education, employment, segregation, *hejab*, sexual relations and penal laws. Thus the question of women's position was brought into the political agenda.

WOMEN'S RESPONSE TO ISLAMISATION

The strongest response to the forcible Islamisation process came from secular women on the eve of International Women's Day celebrations on 8th March. The protest was spontaneous and the celebration turned into a protest against abrogation of the Family Protection Laws, denial of judgeship to women and compulsory *hejab* at work place. Observance of International Women's Day being a small function became a massive protest movement wherein rich, poor, young, old, veiled, unveiled, students, professionals, employed, housewives participated and raised voices against usurpation of women's right in the name of Islamisation. The thrust of the women power was such that Khomeini had to retreat and the Government spokesman Mr. Amir

Entezam announced that the Family Protection Law would remain in force until a new law was drafted to replace it (Keddie 1983).

Women's demonstrations presented an opportunity for the hard line clergy to draw the boundary of legitimate protests by the secular forces. It became illegal to stage mass demonstration in protest against the Government in post-revolutionary society. Women's spontaneous protests, therefore, lost momentum and their diverse mass participation ended. Women's right activism became much more confined and politically divided thereafter (Paider 1995).

WOMEN IN JUDICIARY

Soon after the success of the Revolution in 1979, the hard line Islamic leaders wanted to go ahead with their policy of Islamisation. It was intended to strengthen the Islamic features of their society. On 3rd March 1979 that is after about three weeks after the victory of the revolution, *Ayatollah* Khomeini's office announced that women would be barred from becoming judges (Paider 1995). Two years after the revolution, *hejab* was in full force; women had lost the right to initiate divorce and have child custody; they had been barred from becoming a judge or a President; they could not attend school if they were married; they could not study and work in a range of subjects and jobs; and they had been totally subjugated to male power (*Ibid*: 232).

The High Council of Cultural Revolution released a document on female employment on 11 August, 1992. It was the first statement issued after the revolution which believed that it was men who were suitable for holding the judicial posts. The requirement of virility demanded unanimously of judges by the *Shia* theologians' bar women's access to the post (Omid 1994: 194). However, women could be employed as advisors to family Courts dealing with child care and protection of minors (Howard 2002: 74; Bahramiash 2004: 166). Women are no longer admitted to law schools (*Ibid*: 195). Even

those who qualified before the revolution have to face the prejudices of the head of judiciary (Omid 1994: 194). But, before the revolution, several high powered judges had been appointed like Shirin Ebadi who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. She qualified in 1969 and within a year was appointed as a judge (Howard 2002: 76). Shirin Ebadi was the topper in the law exams and came from a law background. Hence, she was awaiting a bright career ahead. But, the revolution shattered her dreams and she was sacked after the revolution. She had supported the revolution wholeheartedly but lost her job after it got over. The ordeal began when the regime offered her to work as a clerk in an office where she once presided but she refused and took early retirement (*Ibid: 76*). She opened an NGO (Non-governmental organisation) that fought for human rights of children. As she asserted her rights, she got many death threats from the regime but she remained undeterred. Ebadi was also suspended from practicing law for five years for having slandered senior Government officials (*Ibid: 77*).

Women are effectively, absent from the management positions at the higher level of the judicial branch (Kar 1994: 671). In addition to legal impediments the basis for this absence, religious limitations within the atmosphere of the judiciary prevent women from being accepted in sensitive positions despite certain legal openings (*Ibid: 77*).

Though not as judges, women have an extensive and increasing presence as attorneys as it involves no legal hurdles (*Ibid: 77*). Kar (1994) states “of course, in some cases, their legal services are less in demand in the governmental sector. This is because legal advice requires a private space for discussion and dialogue with managers and since these managers are generally men, such co-existence is in conflict with current traditions”. However, it was feminist pressure on the state that finally forced the judiciary to allow women to become lawyer and judges.

APPRAISAL

Since 1979, a combination of circumstances and design has initiated a quiet revolution in women's right in Iran. It was because the Islamic Republic in Iran has created two classes of citizens; the male who benefits from the provisions of Islamic law and justice and the female who does not (Afshar 1987: 83). With the sole exception of the right to vote, Iranian women are in all other respects formally recognised as second class citizens who have no place in the public arena and no security in the domestic sphere (*Ibid*: 83).

Although men have held public leadership position in Iran and have played roles in public, political participation, women have exerted influence behind the scenes and during some periods have taken publicly recognised steps and crucial roles in political competition and conflict (Hegland 2003). The involvement of women during constitutional revolution of early twentieth century was unique. They have demonstrated in the public, gave slogans and fully participated in the revolution. Women also actively participated and continued their struggle during the Islamic Revolution. After the revolution, male dominance increased over women. Women were humiliated in public for certain things like compulsory veiling etc. which were imposed on them after the revolution in the name of religion.

Azam Teleghani a woman member of the first *Majlis*, is of the view that, "Women have common fate. It is historically and specifically true that marginalized groups including women have revolted against their oppression. The *Quran* approves of our movement. The problem is not Islam, the problem is men.... I believe we women can change our society, we have the power but we have to understand how to exercise that power, taking into consideration the cultural issues" (Povey 2001).

After the revolution, in spite of certain religious hurdles women have advanced in education and employment. There is practically no field left where women have not treaded. They have also excelled in the political field.

Women Parliamentarians have constantly tried to improve the condition of women by suitable legislations. Their presence as representatives to the *Majlis* has been and continues to be very small. Their overall contribution to ameliorate the plight of women has so far been very limited. It was because they had to work in a male dominated society with firm religious beliefs.

During the period from 1979 till date women have politically advanced but to achieve their true position in society, they have to do a lot more. Time may come when there will be no bar for women to become judges and to be the executive head or the political head of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

CHAPTER – IV

SOCIO-CULTURAL STATUS OF IRANIAN WOMEN

This chapter examines the position of women within the confines of the family. It will throw light on the Iranian society as a whole. It will also focus on the various aspects of the family like marriage, divorce, inheritance, maintenance and the like vis-à-vis women. How does an Iranian family treat its womenfolk? Are the family laws favourable or unfavourable to Iranian women? The chapter gives a comprehensive analysis of the status of women in the socio-cultural sphere.

IRANIAN FAMILY

Family is the smallest and most important social institution. The very health of every society depends on the health of the family in that society (Mahrouzadeh 2006). Iranian families are patriarchal families and sons are regarded as economic assets. Iranian families are large families with as many male children as possible. Recently, Iran has seen a spurt in its birth rate and almost half of its population is under 15 years. Families are joint families with two or three generations living under one roof. Emotionally, these families are close knit families. Depending on their affluence, these families have a lot of servants. To know about the socio-cultural status of Iranian women, one has to study about the family and familial dynamics. In this context, various aspects of family including marriage, divorce, inheritance, maintenance etc. are to be analysed.

Marriage

The Iranian clergy see marriage as a desirable institution which enables father to transfer the control of their alluring daughters to strong husbands. This process is said to prevent both corruption and to stave off all threats to

“revolutionary morality” (Afshar 1987). The state policy on marriage focused on the construction of marriage as the only legitimate site of sexual pleasure and reproduction and its universalisation (Paidar 1995).

Marriage in Iran was traditionally a religious contract, pronounced by the clerical judge until 1926 when the civil code was adopted by the Government. The civil code accepted the religious contract with few amendments but emphasized that it should be registered in the Government registration offices (Nassehy 1991).

In Islam, marriage is considered to be a contract between two consenting adults rather than a religious sacrament, a vow of love, loyalty, and fidelity. Traditionally, parents arranged the marriages of their children. The prospective bridegroom’s parents looked for a pretty, modest, obedient and hard working girl from a good family (Hegland 2003). The bride’s parents give importance to the earning capacity, educational attainment, and good family background of the bride groom. The prime consideration is whether their prospective son-in-law can keep their daughter and grand children (if any) happy or not.

As a Muslim marriage per takes the character of a “civil contract”, there is always a proposal by either party and acceptance (*Qubul*) by the other party. If the parties to the intending marriage are not competent to contract their own marriage then the proposal and acceptance can be made by their respective marriage guardians.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, unlimited polygamy was prevailing. After the advent of Islam, the prophet introduced limited polygamy which fixed the limit of few wives (Reddy 1998). However, a Muslim woman is not allowed to have at a time more than one husband that is even if polygamy was permitted, polyandry was not allowed. A Muslim wife is entitled to a consummation price “*Meher*” which they are entitled to receive at marriage though usually this is paid to women on divorce (Afshar 1987).

A Moslem man could take up to four wives (*Aghde*) and as many “*Sigheh*” as he wished (Nessehy 1991). ‘*Sigheh*’ is a form of temporary marriage in Moslem societies. For example, a woman becomes the ‘*Sigheh*’ of a man for a limited time for a determined sum of money or equivalent for the “*Mahr*” (*Ibid.*).

STATE POLICY ON THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

For the protection of family and public morality the state adopts certain policies on marriage as under:

(i) Lowering the Age of Marriage

The civil code of 1926 stipulated the minimum age for marriage as fifteen completed years for girls and eighteen completed years for boys (Nassehy 1991). However, Paidar(1995) writes it is 13 for women. She writes, “Although the civil code specified the minimum age of thirteen for women, in practice, it is left to the judge to decide whether a woman was mature enough to marry (*Ibid: 277*). Apart from age stipulation a woman had to obtain paternal consent (for the first marriage only) and the couple should not be related by blood. Minorities such as Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians had their own religious ceremonies but had to register officially (Nassehy 1991).

(ii) The Practice of Polygamy

The abolition of the Family Protection Act removed the existing restrictions on polygamy which required a man to obtain permission from his first wife or from the Court before embarking on the second marriage (Paidar 1995: 278). Removal of this restriction means according legal sanction to desiring males to go up to four wives without legal barrier. Besides the civil code permitted ‘*Sigheh*’ which is still in practice even if in a very limited number of cases. Polygamy undermines the dignity of women who cannot help than to tolerate it.

(iii) The State Campaign on Marriage

It is peculiar to note that marriage finds a place in the political agenda of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Former President Rafsanjani (cited in Paider 1995) points out that it is the duty of every individual and family as well as the state to encourage and felicitate marriage. The leaders believed that marriage can save society from corruption and prostitution. Banks offered special marriage loans to professionals. The *Emami* Aid Committee announced that three per cent of all household goods produced in the country will be allocated to this committee by the Ministry of Trade exclusively for sale as dowries to couples who were to be married (Paider 1995: 279).

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN MARRIAGE

The following rights accrue to a woman after her marriage.

- (i) She has a share to receive "*mehrieh*" (in cash or kind) which she could claim at any moment.
- (ii) She is entitled to receive maintenance within her husband means.
- (iii) She has a right to her personal wealth and can dispose it off at her sweet will.

However, in the contract of marriage, women are always at the losing end. Man is always the head of the family and has exclusive right and control over sexual intercourse with his wife. He is to be obeyed, fed and looked after by his wife. The offsprings are named by him and are kept under his guardianship. He can inherit his wife's wealth under certain conditions. If the wife disobeys her husband, she is not entitled to maintenance. Men always stay in a commanding position and the fear of being divorced or otherwise disadvantaged keeps her in bad marital bargaining position. Further, the practice of polygamy has a demoralising effect on women and on the family.

A major aspect of marriage in Iran is that it is universal – that is all people marry and they marry young. The value system influenced by the social philosophy of *Shilite* Islam has always encouraged marriage (Aghajanian 1987). Table 4.1 indicates that in the year 1976 about 65.6% of girls got married within the age group of 15 to 19 and after reaching the age of 25 almost all acquired marital status. Similar patterns of marriage can be seen for men, though it starts from age 20.

Table 4.1

Age of marriage in Iran for the year 1981

Age	Men	Women
15-19	6.4	65.6
20-24	39.5	78.6
25-29	77.6	99.2
30-34	92.3	99.2
35-39	96.8	98.6
40-44	98.2	99.0
45-49	98.7	99.1
50-54	98.9	99.2
55-59	99.1	99.2
60-64	98.9	99.2
65+	98.9	99.2

Source: *Statistical Year Book*, Ministry of Plan and Budget, Iran Statistical Centre, Tehran, 1981 cited in Aghajanian 1988: 156.

The number of marriage and the crude rate of marriage, indicate that a significant increase has occurred in the post-revolutionary era.

Table 4.2

Crude marriage rate 1976-83

Year	Numbers (in thousands)	Crude marriage rate
1976	170	4.9
1977	170	5.2
1978	184	5.1
1979	302	8.1
1980	337	8.8
1981	294	8.4
1982	353	8.7
1983	410	8.9

Source: *Statistical Year Book*, cited in Aghajanian 1988: 157.

There are several reasons for the increase of number of marriage in the post-revolutionary era. The most important reason is that after the revolution the previous legal minimum age of 15 years for female and 18 years for males was revised and lowered and the Islamic law allowed marriage at 9 and 14 years for females and males respectively.

DIVORCE

Ayatollah Khomeini insisted that divorce belonged to men by right. So the question was to reconcile man's absolute right to divorce with that of the family needs and to prevent destitution. Legal history had in the part registered the catastrophic results of men's absolute right to divorce (Paider 1995). A massive campaign against this unilateral and (most of the times) arbitrary male decision was, launched by some Islamic leaders and women's organisations to improve women's right to divorce within the limits of *shariat*. The demand was to transfer the right to divorce from the individual man to the Court of law.

The establishment of special civil Courts limited men's right to register divorce in Notary public offices on mutual consent. However, this practice was regarded as unIslamic and the proper Islamic course was to let it solved through Islamic judges who know and can decide on Islamic rights and responsibilities of husband and wife. The recognised grounds of divorce by woman partner to the marriage were insanity, impotency, desertion, imprisonment of the husband etc. (*Mohaqeq-Damad* 1986: 379-415). Besides these, the protagonists of women's rights demanded few more grounds of divorce which were later included in the civil code. In 1985, a standard marriage contract was introduced, to be signed by both man and woman which included twelve conditions under which a woman could initiate divorce.

Iranian women have won the right to divorce on the following courts: (i) If the husband does not pay her maintenance for more than six months and if there is no possibility that he will pay and similarly his inability to fulfil the obligations of married life and ensuring the rights of his wife for that period; (ii) misbehaviour and mistreating wife and if wife is unable to bear this misbehaviour she can claim divorce; (iii) if the husband is suffering from addiction to alcohol or drugs; (iv) if the husband neglects wife or family life without any reasonable ground continuously for more than six months; (v)

and if the husband takes another wife without permission of first wife or unjust behaviour towards her (Engineer 2000).

DIVORCE AND FAMILY INSTABILITY

The rate of divorce was 94 per 1,000 marriages in 1977, the year preceding the revolutionary protests. It fell to 81 in 1978 and to 64 in 1980.

Table 4.3

Crude divorce rate 1976-83

Year	Numbers (in thousands)	Crude Divorce rate
1976	18	107
1977	17	94
1978	15	81
1979	21	74
1980	23	64
1981	24	81
1982	32	87
1983	33	89

Source: Adapted from *Statistical Year Books*, cited in Aghajanian 1988:

159.

Table 4.3 indicates that decline in the rate of divorce has stopped during the post-revolutionary era. It has been in the ascending order since then. By 1983 the rate of divorce per thousand marriages has reached up to 89.

How can the decline and the increase in divorce rate be explained? During the revolutionary fervour of 1978, the Family Protection Court, like many other public institutions, was not functioning regularly and was disbanded after the revolution. As a result many applications for divorce were not processed. It is also possible that the excitement of the revolutionary situation had a favourable impact on family problems, leading to temporary relief of tensions (Aghajanian 1988).

After the revolution special civil Courts were established to decide matrimonial cases on Islamic principles. The new laws allowed the couples who have mutually agreed to divorce to go to the office of a notary public and register their divorce before two male witnesses. Divorce by mutual consent is mainly responsible for the steep increase in the rate of divorce after 1980. Another demographic reason of increased rate of divorce may be attributed to more number of marriages after the revolution; hence more number of couples are exposed to the risk of divorce.

The more the development, the more the empowerment of women and more empowerment of women lead to more number of divorces. This holds true even for the Iranian women who were earlier subdued and could not speak for themselves even in the face of adversities. Statistics show that more than a quarter of the number of divorces recorded are entirely connected with the area around Tehran, that is, around 20 per cent of the divorces recorded occurred in Tehran, in spite of the population of Tehran being 10 per cent of the total population of the country (Iran Daily 2006). It is higher than the percentage of marriages (*Ibid.*). The divorce rate averaged 16 per cent during 1986-2006.

The table below shows that the rate of divorce has seen a steady increase over the years.

Table 4.4

Number of marriages and divorces in Iran

Year	Number of Marriages	Number of Divorces
1986	66000	11000
1993	81000	8600
2005	1,18,552	22493

Source: Adapted from Iran Daily 2006,
<http://www.irandaily.ir/1385/2572/html/panorama.htm>.

The Iran Daily reports that the year 2005 was the worst year in terms of marriage/divorce ratio. However, the year 1993 noticed the lowest rates of marriage and divorce.

The psychological impact of a ruinous marriage finally ending in divorce can be enormous. There have been many instances of women suffering from depression and psychological breakdown. Even, financially, women are not able to satisfy their basic necessities of life.

CHILD CUSTODY

The concept of custody has a double meaning in “*shii Shariat*”. The first meaning refers to legal guardianship (*Velayat*). This is a right which naturally and automatically belongs to the father and paternal grand-father in his absence. The second meaning refers to fostering (*Hezanat*) that is caring for offspring for a fixed period of time without possessing legal guardianship (Paider 1995). *Hezanat* is a natural right of the mother to take care of her offspring which is in case of a girl child upto the age of seven years and in case of a male child upto the age of two years.

During Iran Iraq war the custody law was challenged. Darhghalib, a Deputy in the *Majlis* pointed out that, "Many of the children of our martyrs not only loose their father but also become victims of a custody law which separates them from their mothers" (Paider 1995). The campaign to liberalise the custody right was granted by the Council of Guardians and accordingly a bill was introduced which was passed by the *Majlis*.

The fostering of children whose fathers have reached the high status of martyrdom or have died (from other causes) is with their mother and their customary living expenses should be paid by the legal guardian. If these were paid out of the Government budget or by the Martyrs Foundation, the money should go to the mother unless the unsuitability of the mother is established by the Court (Ghorbani 1989).

ISLAMIC POLICY ON WOMEN'S INHERITANCE

Concerning the right to inheritance, the Holy *Quran* has allotted a share for the woman in the inheritance of her parents and kinsmen. Her share is guaranteed by law and it is completely hers. No one can have a claim on it (Rehman 2003). The conventional Islamic rules on women's inheritance were extremely complicated. Whether or not and how much a woman inherited from her husband depended on whether sexual intercourse had taken place during the marriage, whether there were any offspring from the marriage, and many other detailed factors (Mehrpour 1989). On the whole, as a daughter or as a wife, women inherited half of what men did. They also did not inherit everything that men could. Women could not inherit land and were only entitled to a share from the sale of property and not the property itself (Art. 946 and 947 of the Civil Code).

After the revolution, some clerics criticized the traditional interpretation of inheritance rights of women and suggested that *Shariat* can be interpreted more usefully so that women's right to inheritance can be at par with men's inheritance right. However, the situation is yet unsatisfactory.

BRIDE PRICE

The question of women's '*mehrieh*' is also far from being satisfactory. Bride price or '*mehrieh*' is a contractual amount to be paid after consummation of marriage but generally, it is paid by the men on divorce. One of the common problems, therefore, was its depreciating value. Another problem was that since the value of '*mehrieh*' had to be within the means of the husband and in accordance with the previous living standards of the wife, may be poor women who married poor men could only ask for a modest sum (Ghorbani 1989).

Despite their right to claim '*mehrieh*' upon divorce, it is subject to withdrawal and abuse. It can be lawfully withdrawn if the woman willingly gave it up in return for her husband's agreement to divorce. It is a very common ground to negate the right to *mehrieh*. Divorce statistics demonstrated that a large number of divorces were due to social problems such as poverty, crime and addiction. In these circumstances, even if a woman had a worthy '*mehrieh*', its extraction from the husband at the time of divorce was an unreasonable expectation (Paider 1995).

ALIMONY ON DIVORCE

Iranian women are entitled to alimony or '*nafagheh*' upon divorce according to *Shii-shariat* under two circumstances: the first within the period of '*eddeh*' or the waiting period after divorce which is around three months and second when a woman is in lawful custody of her children out of the wedlock. This can also be withheld on the ground of woman's immorality or refusal to have sex with her husband (*Mohaqeq-Damad* 1986: 314-315). Women who were above child bearing age did not receive anything from their husbands. The sorry state of affairs of women on divorce was brought to the fore several times by women activists and moderate clerics but the idea of marriage compensation did not become law. However, the state has come forward with

the Security of Unprotected Women and Children Law for the benefit of destitute women and children.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence means any act of violence which harms, injures or endangers the health, safety, life, limb or well-being of the aggrieved person (who are mostly women) within a family (Adapted from Vienna Accord 1994). Family refers to a group of people whose members have spousal and parental relationship between and among them. It is the smallest and yet, the most important social institution (Mahrouzadeh 2005: 122). The foundation and continuity of every society totally depends on the family situation where the society is the first factor shaping man's personality. In a liberal family, the rights of the individuals are protected and members share the decisions made and cooperate in all affairs. But, in dictatorial and anarchical families, there is no love and affection between the members and the chance of the use of violence is more than the normal families. Such families cannot provide a healthy environment for their growing children.

Religious conservatives defend domestic violence by pointing to men's obligation as stated in the *Quran*, to guide disobedient wives. If they do not listen to admonishment or improve when they are denied access to the marital bed, husbands may physically punish them but must not be so severe that they leave any mark on the body. Many husbands beat their wives for disobedience, in frustration or because of family dynamics. To some extent a woman's safety from battering depends on her own family's relative status and power (Hegland 1999).

Violent paternal behaviour is the main cause of delinquency and non-conformity of children. Separation of children from parents, especially from the mother paves the ground for unhealthy emotional relation in puberty. Heuyer has shown in a research launched in ten European countries that 86 per cent of children involved in sinful acts were from broken families. Also

80-90 per cent of deviated or criminal children come from such families (Mohouzadeh 2005).

THE LAW OF RETRIBUTION

The appearance of retribution law on the statute book ... rationalised the Islamic treatment of sex related offences (Paider 1995). It was passed by the *Majlis* in 1982. The second part of this law dealt with sex crimes. It aims to guard Islamic family against the evil influence of illegitimate sex. What this resulted in was the creation of a horrifying atmosphere of violence and revenge which claimed many female victims (*Ibid*: 352).

Newspaper accounts of domestic violence also demonstrated the extent to which men were taking the law into their own hands to decide and administer Islamic justice on women. According to a research conducted in Tehran on divorce and its causes, 75 per cent of women who were involved in divorce disputes said that they had been physically attacked by their husbands (Keyhan: 5 cited in Paider). The rate of divorce was reported to be as high as 72 per cent (*Ibid.*).

SOCIAL SECURITY AND WELFARE MEASURES

In order to enhance women's social activities, many governmental and non-governmental organisations have been established throughout the country since the victory of the Islamic revolution. They constantly act to enhance the status of women in society and try to combat destitution of women. Imam's Relief Committee and the Red Crescent take care of the deprived family's elder and drug addict women.

Table 4.5
Iran: Women Helped by Imam's Relief Committee, 1988

Types	Number
Women without families	4,85,853
Shahid Rajae'e's scheme	2,48,624
Soldier scheme	1,27,570
Elementary school girls	74,871
Middle school girls	24,855
High school girls	9,611
Religious school girls	140
University students	3650
Medical care	5,85,630
Help with Marriage	18,500

Source: *Iranian Government Report 1994: 16.*

The Islamic Republic of Iran's Women's Society is active both domestically and internationally in the fields of religion, culture, society and politics. In the social sphere, it works for exultation of women in (sic) Islamic guidelines in mental, cultural, scientific and behavioural roles. It also aims to raise the social status of women by stabilising her position in family and society.

Farvardin Welfare Institute, established in the year in 1979, is a non-profit charitable institute engaged in the welfare activities for the destitute. It provides food, cloth and shelter to the needy.

WOMEN AND ISLAM: GENDER BIASES

a) The Dress code

Another controversial policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the compulsory veiling of women. It is interesting and important to note at the outset that this code of dress is not exclusive to women. Men are not allowed to dress anyway they like to either. Indeed, the Government officials are given specific instructions as to the way in which they should get dressed (Givechian 1991: 526).

After the revolution, on 7 March 1979, *Ayatollah* Khomeini ordered working women to wear the *chador* in their work place. This led to the first massive wave of protest by women. The idea of veiling women springs from a traditional belief that women can entice men which may bring disaster to the society. In such cases, the family honour and moral downfall of the society are in question.

Ayatollah Taleghani opines – “human beings have a number of instincts, of hunger, of sex, etc. Some are false ones, beyond all limits. What Islam wants to do is to put a stop to such limitless excitations that damage the morality, the body, the will power and the faith of human beings. It wants to block these” (Taleghani 1982: 106). In the same vein, Bani Sadr says “We want to have that kind of clothing in which sexual attraction between a boy and a girl does not have a political role. So, if we expect these types of clothes from you, we do mean to liberate you or to enslave you?” (Bani Sadr 1982: 108).

To understand the meaning of veiling in Iran, one should discover the “internal logic” at work in this issue. Anthropologists specialised on the West Asia consider the notion of honour as the dominant trait of their culture. This notion is pervasive in many aspects: kinship, social structure, and mores and even in politics (Rivers 1997: 1).

Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes but also in the eyes of his society. But when it comes to a man’s honour with regard to his family, it is

mainly the women who are the custodian of that honour, at the same time this gives the woman the power to damage a man's honour (Givechian 1991). Iranian man does not mind unveiling so long as it lies beyond his own circles of honour. Iranian women are aware of this and in fact observe it quite carefully. A daughter may behave with more care when she knows her father is around (*Ibid*: 529).

In brief, it can be stated that the *hejab* or the Islamic cover has had deep cultural roots in Iranian society and does not constitute an innovation in Iranian cultural life. In fact, the compulsory veiling caused a great degree of relief and comfort among the majority of Iranian families. It satisfied many men who longed for more covering of their women and it was pleasing for many working women who would have preferred a fashionless cover so as to materialise their ability and potential without too much worry about their cloth or their appearance (*Ibid*: 530).

b) Sex Segregation

Sex segregation symbolises men's dominance and control over female independence. It is the result of patriarchal air in the culture of Iran.

During the *Pahlavis*, the tendency of the regime was more towards the policy of sex desegregation. The people of Tehran and some big cities either responded to it positively or did not object to it (Givechian 1991). Instances of the trend towards desegregation during the last part of the *Pahlavi* regime are the male tailors sewing women's clothing, male hairstylist for women, male teachers for girl's schools and so on. The tendency of the Islamic Republic of Iran is more towards sex segregation (*Ibid*: 523).

After the revolution, the education system was Islamised. For the education system to become Islamic it had to observe and reinforce Islamic gender relations. This was achieved through sexual segregation in the education system, imposition of *hejab* on women, reinforcement of gender division of subjects and adaptation of women's education to the requirements of the

Islamic family and the preservation of male dominance in education (Paider 1995: 314).

The policy of sex segregation according to the leaders of the post-revolutionary period was to be introduced in every sphere of life. So, they started it very rigidly but it faced resistance as well as inconvenience in certain fields. The areas where the policy did not achieve a great degree of headway are in medicine, discouraging male gynaecologist to practice, separating male and female students in university class-rooms by trying to insert curtain in the middle of the class-room and similar practice in the Parliament (Givechian 1991). Paider states “Educational institutions were threatened with prosecution and closure if they did not enforce *hejab* on their female students. Islamic uniform became compulsory for school girls over nine years of age many female students were constantly in trouble at school over their appearance and many were dismissed since their lack of interest in *hejab* was interpreted as a political action against the regime. The extra educational pressures on female pupils and students sometimes acted as an incentive for them to give up education in favour of marriage. There was even a report of suicide by school girls as a result of psychological pressure and humiliation at school over unislamic behaviour” (Paider 1995: 315).

FAMILY PLANNING AND POPULATION POLICY

Access to health care has increased a lot. All urban people and 85 per cent or more of rural residents have access to primary health care. The decentralized health network of urban and rural health centres and health houses serve people locally and mobile units go out into more remote areas (Hegland 2003). The Bureau of Women’s Affairs has set up a health, medical care and nutrition commission which works on the objectives of:

- i) Surveying the nursing and midwifery situations throughout the country and offering proposals on the improvement of the work and skills involved.

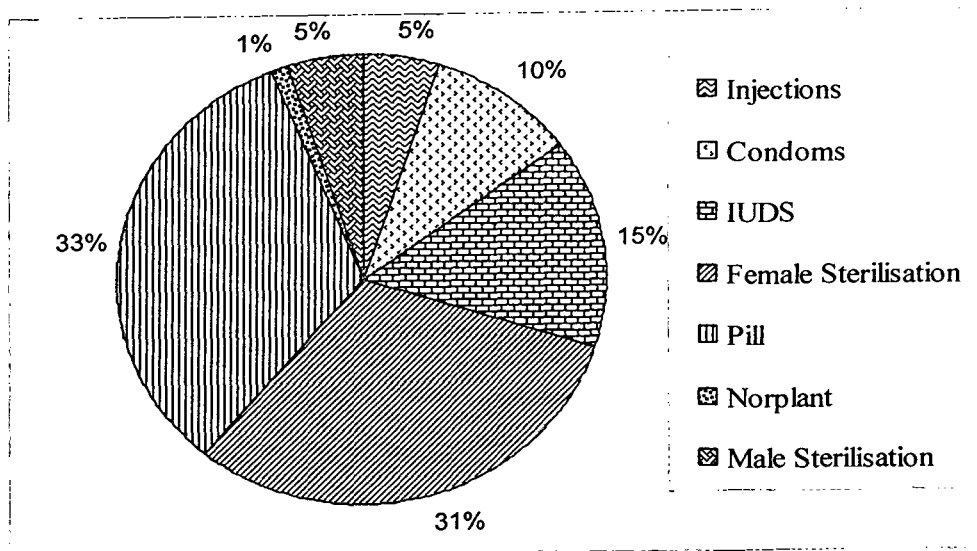
- ii) Proposing terms of cooperation between bureau of women's affairs and the population fund.
- iii) Establishing a population Committee (National Report on Women 1997: 35).

The development of family planning policy in the Islamic Republic followed the typical pattern. The family planning programme of the previous regime was scrapped immediately after the revolution and the position of Islam on family planning was constructed in opposition to that of the *Pahlavi* state. However, the new Islamic policy created enormous problems and resulted in an uncontrollable rate of population growth (Paider 1995: 286).

After the takeover of state power by the hard line clergy, population control and family planning were condemned as unislamic. *Hojatoleslam* Rafsanjani argued that birth control was against women's Islamic duty to bear children and that in Islam "Women do not have the right to avoid pregnancy and feeding of their infants. He added however that situation may come when the state may support birth control" (Keddie and Beth 1991). *Ayatolla* Khomeini had emphasised that women's control of their fertility without their husband's permission was against Islam (Paider 1995).

Presently Iran's population is under control. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Asefi also confirmed that the family planning measures have yielded good results. The growth rate has dramatically reduced according to him" (Shankar 2005). The population growth rate which was 4.2 per cent a decade ago has fallen to 1.4 per cent mainly due to awareness among people. The following figure shows use of contraceptive of different types to advance family planning.

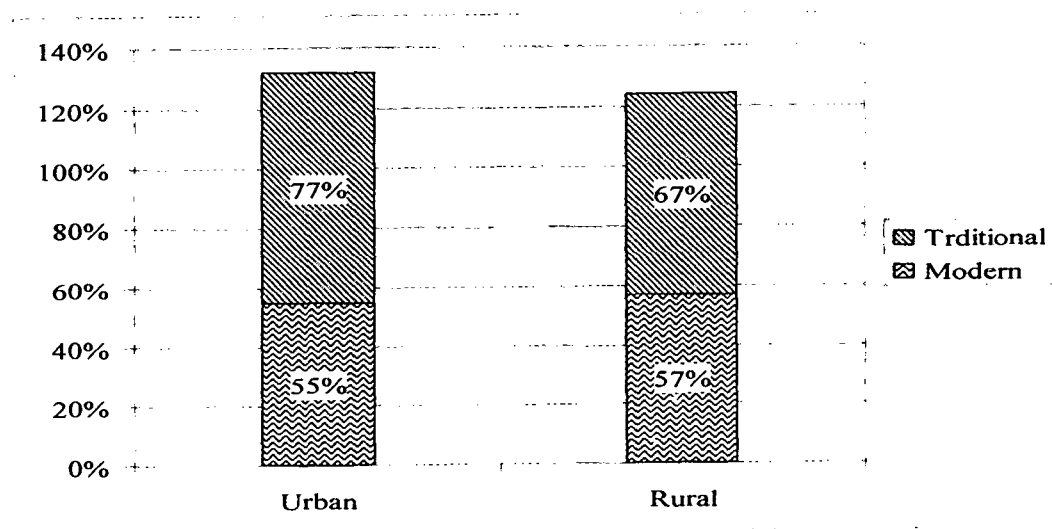
Figure - 4.1: Use of contraceptive of different types to advance family planning



Source: *Phoenix 2005:21.*

Family planning posters in Iran display posters which read “Fewer children, better education, less population, more opportunities, prosperous future”, “Better life with fewer children. Girl or boy, two is enough” and the like.

Figure - 4.2: Percentage of married women who reported using different type of contraception by region, 2000



Source: *Phoenix 2005:21.*

WOMEN IN THE CULTURAL SPHERE IN IRAN

Very famous women singers like Pari Zanganeh belong to Iran. Even if Iranian women are proficient singers, they can not sing in public concert which is attended by both males and females. The traditionalists consider women's voices to be dangerously arousing (Howard 2002: 157). This is the reason why women cannot sing publicly.

Jane Howard narrates the experience of a British lady who had married an Iranian man. The sister of the British lady had sent a package to her which was confiscated. The objectionable Article which was found in the package was a cassette containing nursery rhymes sung by a woman singer. It seems that the restrictions are sometimes taken to the extremes.

With the election of President Khatami, things became easier and the Government began to invite singers at selected all women events. Several singers like Pop singer Gagoosh, who had declined to sing after women's public concert was banned after the Islamic revolution, came back to the stage twenty years after (Howard 2002: 160).

Iranian films also depict the condition that is prevalent in the contemporary Iranian society. Film maker Takanineh Milani went back and forth to the guidance ministry for seven years before she finally managed to get permission to shoot her controversial film "*Do Zan*" or "Two Women". The movie tells the story of two bright and intelligent university students, one from the city, one from the provinces (*Ibid.*). The universities are closed down after the revolution, and the girl from the traditional, provincial background loses her chance for an education (*Ibid.*). She is forced into marriage with an insanely jealous husband who will not let her leave the house and locks away the telephone (*Ibid.*). When he dies, she gets back in touch with her friend, from university, now by contrast, a happily married architect (*Ibid.*). The story of the film gives us a vivid picture of domestic violence that was perpetrated on a village girl by her husband.

The early revolutionary rulers put strict limit on the arts, outlawing some forms of music and artistic representations of uncovered bodies and censoring printed works and the media. These limits, like the prohibition of alcohol and dress rules, were widely flouted in private homes, and increasingly in more public places (Keddie 2003: 297). There were also distinctions among them; printed works could and still can often publish ideas that would not be tolerated elsewhere, and many varied foreign books were allowed in and even translated. Mohammed Khatami, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance from 1984 to 1992, encouraged the easing of censorship rules and the expansion of Iranian cinema (*Ibid.*).

Iran has produced some world class movies and Iranian women artists have played very important roles in cinemas. Samireh Makmalbaf's movie "The Apple" got international recognition and was shown in over thirty countries and was presented in over 100 film festivals within a period of two years. In 1999, her second feature film "The Blackboard" an equally widely acclaimed film won the jury prize in Cannes film festival.

WOMEN AND LEISURE TIME

Sociologists have viewed leisure as a part of culture and have noted that the creativity of the individual can be best developed during one's free time (Ardalaan 1991; Toubia 1991). Since leisure is a part of the quality of life in every society, basic information about lifestyles in general can be seen through studying leisure time activity. Thus, leisure time is one of the aspects of human life that has a major role to play in present day social life (*Ibid.*).

Leisure time activities are different in male and females. In general, women have always had less free time than men especially those who must play a dual role of housewife, mother and worker.

History of Iran reveals that women did not value at all in Iranian society (Ardalaan 1991). When a girl was born, a household was upset about it rather than happy and never celebrated such an event (*Ibid.*). In fact, a father could even kill his daughter if she bothered him and legal action could not be taken against him (*Reneda Alemage* 1956: 308 cited in Ardalaan 1991).

Women of the upper classes were practically slaves to their husbands and had no right to complain about anything (Ardalaan 1991: 68). As they were married and engaged domestic servants to attend domestic chores, they found ample leisure time. They passed their leisure time with other women by gossiping, visiting relatives and friends, craft activities like embroidery or some religious activities.

During the late twentieth century, women were accepted to a point in urban areas and regarded as companions. Both educational and occupational opportunities as well as some legal changes have helped to establish such a situation. However, technological advances have lessened the burden of the housewives, the change to apartment living in urban areas, the availability of lunches being served in place of work and school and changes in houses of work which keep a husband and children away from home until evening, have also had an important impact on the amount of women's free time (Ardalaan 1991: 70).

There is a drastic change in post revolutionary pastime activities of women because many outdoor activities for the educated youth of the cities in Iran which took women out of the home like visiting cinema theatres, restaurants or sports activities have been eliminated as activities for women. Watching TV, reading books and journals or religious activities are new leisure pursuits.

Women have taken up the pen. Women writers have not only become the *avant garde* of Persian literature but have also changed society's view of them as writers (*The New York Times* 2005). The number of women writers who have published novels has reached 370 (*Ibid.*). However, the books

written by women are outselling that of men because women, being the sufferers, give a better insight into their own psychology and society. The *New York Times* says that the novels are “Simplistic in language and compelling personal narratives often delving into taboo subjects like romance and sex” which is responsible for its high demand and saleability.

Joining political parties by women have now come up as a new pastime activity of educated Iranian women.

WOMEN AND SPORTS

Soon after the revolution as a part of sex segregation policy women’s sports were separated and to some extent discouraged by the Government. After the separation of women’s sports organisation from that of men in 1986, a growing number of girls and women pursued team and individual sports. Sports are “Islamically” legitimised by allowing sports that involved showing of the body only before women spectators. Of late, women are also pursuing sports where they are seen by men, like skiing, waterskiing and bicycling but they have to observe the dress code.

Women, barred from being spectators at man’s soccer matches, broke into a stadium in a politically significant 1997 event, and in early 2003 one soccer club announced it would admit female spectators (Keddie 2003).

Presently, Iranian Government is propagating women’s sports through publication and distribution of bulletins and posters on various sports activities for women. Mrs. Robab Shahrian, the present head of the Bureau for promoting women’s sports and Executive Member National Olympics Committee thinks that sports help people to develop a healthy character. Sports and physical education is an inevitable need for women since they serve as both mothers and educators of the next generation (Jamshidian 2006). Due to state promotion of sports now women are excelling in different national and International sports. On 30th May, 2005 Farkhondeh Sadegh, a

graphic designer and Laleh Kashar, a dentist became the first Muslim women to make a successful ascent to the Mount Everest. Iranian women also bagged the 2005 Asian Women's canoe polo prize.

APPRAISAL

Taking into consideration the volatile nature of Muslim marriage, it can be stated that the position of women in their families is not very good. Women, having no independent incomes become destitute when divorced by their husband.

The existence of polygamy is another core factor which lowers the esteem of women in society. When Muslim people believe that women are the honour of the family and should be veiled so that they cannot be seen in public and they abhor polyandry, a pertinent question arises as to where from they derive the right to polygamy? It gives a presumption that Iran is a society characterized by male chauvinism.

Gender segregation is another retrograde step that is being constantly cherished in the Iranian society. Separation of fields of study on the basis of gender, abolition of co-educational schools, separation of beaches, Islamic dress code, etc. are steps based on gender segregation. All these practices are forced upon women by men which Iranian women think in terms of infraction on their human rights.

In the cultural sphere, women find several restrictions. For example, women cannot sing or perform before male audience. They cannot play before male spectators. All these are thrust upon women in the name of religion or Islam. There is a silver lining in every cloud and so also in Iran where women are making rapid strides in all spheres of life. In sports, women have scaled new heights and have also won many prizes for their country. As film makers, directors like Samireh Makmalbaf have won accolades across the globe. Women have become writers and expressed their pent up feelings on a myriad

of taboo subjects. In fact, the books published by women sell like hot cakes. No doubt, women have come a long way in Iran. Women are trying their most to snatch their rights by hook or by crook. They are determined to see that equality must prevail in their society.

CHAPTER – V

CONCLUSION

The situation of women's rights in Iran during the past three decades can be best described by this statement: that the change in the situation of women has been one step forward and two steps back or two steps forward and one step back (www.tharwaproject.com). Iranian women have been very daring in defying the government ban time and again and asserting their rights. The government reports and documents harp that they have been bringing in pro-women reforms. But, there are myriads of fields where women are laggards. In the present political scenario, when a graduate of law is all set to become India's first woman President, Iran does not allow its women to become either President or a lawyer. All the rights that they were enjoying beforehand were struck at one go after the 1979 Islamic revolution. One is the Presidency, where the Constitution specifies that candidates must be among religious and political *rejal*, Arabic for "men" (Howards 2002: 75).

After having the right to vote in 1963, women have even contested the Presidential elections. Women are a strong constituency in Iran and need to be satisfied in order to garner votes. In June 2001 Presidential elections, President Khatami said "we have to try to increase the role of women in decision making in politics and society. Women are not second class, they are no less than men" (*Ibid*: 235). Forty seven women contested against him. The bubble did burst as one of the strongest woman contenders in the fray Farah Khosrani withdrew her candidature without any explanation four days before the Guardian Council was due to give its decision on whether she was eligible to run (*Ibid*.). All other women contestants were disqualified. Though women can become civil servants and can contest in all the provincial posts, their position remains precarious. Shirin Ebadi was sacked despite her being the topper in the judges' examination. How can one say that she was inferior to her male counterparts? But, the events

that ensued stand in conflict with reason. Is this the rule of law? When Weber describes the modern bureaucracy as legal-rational, is the Iranian system free of systemic biases and prejudices against women? The statement might seem very pessimistic but there have been cases of sexism even in a modern, Western country like Britain. Equal pay legislation has been passed three decades back but women are still paid less than their male colleagues for the same work (Saroor 2007). There are clubs where women are either banned or treated as second class citizens with restricted rights (*Ibid*). And, being the mother of Parliamentary democracy, women are still underrepresented in the British Parliament. There are only 50 women members in the 600 odd strong house.

On the question of *hejab* the Iranian men give a Rousseauvean explanation to keep women under check. Rousseau says that women are weak and passive, modest, retiring, controlled by what people think coquettish, docile, good at practical thinking, willing to suffer wrongs without complaint and obedient (Sterba 1998: 213). A girl has to start wearing it at the age of six.

In this context, it is necessary to invoke Mill. Mill talks of “self regarding” and “other regarding” actions in his massive work “On Liberty”. A man is a master of himself with regard to the functions which concern him but in case his action has repercussions for the society as a whole, he is bound to act within the limits of the society. Mill has been vehemently criticized for his theory no doubt but Mill stands for the Western notions of individuality, liberty and privacy. Are Iranian women free with regard to their own dressing? If men can roam around free without a headscarf on, why should women be compulsorily asked to put on a *hejab*? Does *hejab* ensure that women are not subject to rape or prostitution? The answer is in negative. Prostitution, which clearly should have no place in the utopia envisioned by the republic, became a major public issue (Howard 2002: 234). Two thousand prostitutes were there in Iran! There have been instances where women have been beaten up in the roads even if they were covered up from head to heel.

Iran is not yet a signatory to the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women) but proclaims that its laws are in consonance with the Articles of the CEDAW.

Yet, the women in Iran have been fighting in their own, unique style. It is an indigenous style where they have not been copying any Western women but rather carving a niche for themselves within their own Islamic margins. Women have started learning theology and have reinterpreted the *Quran* in their own way. Fighting from the same religious plane, they have defeated the conservatives, thus, paving the way for much progressive legislations. In 1997, a law was passed requiring the *mahr*, dower, to be revalued in line with inflation, thus increasing the obstacles for men wishing to exercise their right to divorce (Hosseini 2000: 275). In April 1998, more women were appointed judges, and in September the police officially recruited women (*Ibid*).

The press in Iran has been playing a proactive role in the women's movement. The women editors break the norms to discuss issues which were earlier discussed only by the clergy (Povey 2001: 58). Faezeh Hashemi, through her newspaper *Rouznameh Zan* did challenge the patriarchy in Iran and elsewhere. But, she did concede: "This change will only come about through long term planning and educational and cultural activities which may take a generation or two because it is such a deeply rooted ideology" (*Ibid*). Currently, of the 550 regular publications in Iran, ten publications belonging to women and specifically addressing women's issues are: *Al Mahjoobah*, *Al Tahereh*, *Zam-e-Rouz*, *Payam e Haar*, *Shahad-e-Banovan*, *women*, *Neda-Payam-e-Zan*, *Nesa* and *Farzaneh* (*National Report on Women* 1997: 23). Results of a recent survey show that 13 per cent of Iranian journalists are female (*Ibid*). As such, the women's press and those Islamist feminists associated with it are playing an important role in broadening the discursive universe of the Islamic Republic and in expanding legal literacy and gender consciousness among their readership (Majid 2002: 35). The popularity of the *Zanan* magazine can be guessed from the fact that the editors receive a lot of phone calls and letters. Women discuss their problems with the

writers and reflect on the published articles (Povey 2001). Women's visibility in the media proves that women are economically active in Iran.

The internet has also been playing an important role in bringing together women. Women discuss issues relating to themselves and their problems on the internet with the help of social networking. A recent European Union survey found that only 1.5 percent of European open source coders are female. Not so in Iran, where, by some estimates, half of all software engineers coming out of the country's universities are women (*Foreign Policy* 2007). Of the three coders who developed Iran's first official open source project, two were women (*Ibid.*)

Women directors have championed the cause of women in their films. One of them is Rakhsah Bani Etemad who has changed the perception of Iranian women on the screen (Povey 2001: 60). They are not passive, ineffectual or marginal characters restricted to the kitchen or constantly seeking attention from their husbands (*Ibid.*). They are active participants in social, economic and political issues. The protagonists of Etemad's films are the women prostitutes, drug addicts and petty criminals. She personally hears them and weaves the film around their lives. Many movies became very controversial like *Do Zan* (Two women) which represent modern Iranian movie. It narrates the story of two women who are in two contrasting situations. One gets higher education and is well settled in life while the other suffers at the hand of her jealous husband. The latter becomes a widow and finally ends up finding her friend as an immensely successful architect.

There have been instances of women committing suicide and burning themselves. Suicide basically happens when the society fails the individual. Durkheim in his theory on suicide says that it might happen when there is the breakdown of social norms and sudden social changes that are characteristics of modern times. Without the social backing to which one is accustomed, life is judged to be not worth continuing (Rao 2000: 673). The Islamic revolution drastically changed the lives of women in contemporary Iran.

A few women were happy to return back to their tradition but many found it tough coping with the situation. The formal consent of the husband became necessary for any married woman to join an employment (Tajuddin 2001: 19). Women were barred from singing or giving recreational programmes on radio or television (*Ibid*). Mothers of young children were forbidden from full time work. All the Government funded nurseries for working women were closed after the revolution (*Ibid*). The whole bunch of restrictions came at one go and many women could not take it. Emotionally shattered and mentally ruined to see their legally inferior position, they either joined the women's movement or burnt themselves to escape the unwarranted situation.

The *Qassas* law (Islamic laws of retribution) has been the most discriminatory of all provisions. A BBC report of 28 April 2006 states that two women witnesses are equal to one man in a Court of law (Quran 2: 82 as cited in Afshar 1994). Similarly, killing a woman entails half of the blood money what they pay for man. This provision is a serious breach of the human rights of women in Iran. In the social sphere, the practice of *Mutta* marriage severely hampers the status of women in Iran. The Vienna Declaration (1993) states: "Emphasising the responsibilities of all states, in conformity with the character of the UN, to develop and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion". However, the Iranian Government has been flagrantly violating the human rights of women. The difference between most of the developed countries and the Islamic Republic of Iran is that while the West has egalitarian rules at least on paper, the Islamic Republic does not have equal provisions even on paper, forget its practice!

To correct the discrepancy, Anouar Majid (2002) has suggested some remedies like:

- a) Religious doctrine should not be the basis of laws, policies or institutions.
- b) Family law should not derive from religious texts, whether in Iran or Israel.

- c) All citizens should be equal before the law, with equal rights and obligations.
- d) Civil, political and social rights of citizens should be protected by the state and by the institutions of civil society.

Majid also points out that Islam does have a humane, compassionate and egalitarian aspect and these should inspire civil codes, political process, social policies and economic institutions (Majid 2002).

However, there is a silver lining in the cloud too. Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi concedes that it was only because of state oppression that she could touch the crescendo of success. She fought for her rights and that made her brave. Over the last three years, the status of women in Iran has considerably improved. Sixty per cent of university students and 38 per cent of the Government administration is female (Hill 2005). A third of all the physicians are women (*Ibid*). Women's literacy has increased manifold from 5 per cent during the revolution to 55 per cent now. Women members are there, though few, in Iranian Parliament. In the executive branch, there are a number of women deputies. In the period 1999-2001, the number of women who have occupied high positions within formal politics has increased: three women are advisors to the President, sixteen women are advisors to different ministries; there are 106 women in the position of directorship.

In the spiritual sphere, there have been women like Zohreh Sefati who rose to astounding heights to become the *Ayatallah*. The irony is that she is a conservative and would not change the anti-women's laws even though she has the power to influence the decision-making (*Ibid*).

Women have made rapid strides in sports though they have to be dressed Islamically even while participating in international matches. On 30th May, 2005, Farkhondeh Sadegh, a graphic designer and Laleh Keshavarg, a dentist became the first Muslim women to make a successful ascent on the Mt. Everest (Wikipedia). Iran also has a woman car racer named Laleh Seddigh who is skilled in both circuit and rally driving (*Ibid*). Iranian women's first attempt was at

Asian games held in Beijing, which paved the way for them to further participation in international games (Shahrian 2006: 19). Afterwards, some women took part in target shooting which was followed by chess and mountain climbing (*Ibid*). Iranian women's national team athlete, Elham Sadequi, won three golds in *Taolu* events (Wikipedia).

Over the years, many women are playing an important role in the economy of Iran. Women are playing an important role in Information Technology companies and a sizable female contingent populates the trading desks at the Tehran Exchange (Reed 2004). Over the years, their economic status has seen a sea change and more women have started working. Women entrepreneurs also give loans to help their less fortunate sisters. A woman named Simin Rezaeifar supervises the paint quality at Saipa Corporation, Iran's second largest automaker (*Ibid*).

In such fields as photography, painting, sculpture, literary production and publishing, women have established themselves on an unprecedented scale in recent years (Najmabadi 1998).

In the countryside, women are very active economically. They are engaged in the various stages of production of rice and tea. The high strata in the villages hire agricultural labourers and hence, women of the high class do not work as much as women in the lower strata who work to help their husbands. Since sex segregation forced women to take up jobs at home, carpet making has become a very popular cottage industry. One of the biggest hurdles that women face is regarding the inheritance laws (Howard 2002).

The land that they owned is not taken into account when the wife is to inherit her dead husband's farm. Instead various other factors come into play like the number of fruit trees on the land and the value of the farmhouse (*Ibid*).

The crux of the problem is that women in Iran are not autonomous individuals to decide about their own lives. The state, the parents and the society decides about the jobs that they should take up. To take an example, a woman does not have a choice regarding *hejab*. Many women say that it should not be forced on them

rather they should wear what they want (Harrison 2007). In April 2007, thousands of Iranian women were cautioned over their poor Islamic dress sense from the Islamic point of view and several arrested in Tehran in the most fierce crackdown on what is known as “bad *hejab*” (*Ibid*; Paider 1995: 35). As rational and matured human beings, Iranian women should be given the right to decide their fate. Only increased autonomy will go a long way in empowering them. To further explain the point, the case of male permission regarding employment can be elaborated. Despite reforms, it is a convention according to *sharia* that women must obtain permission from their respective male head of the family to seek employment or to be employed (Povey 2005).

Another interesting finding of the research is that the Iranian women diaspora has been playing a very important role in publicizing women’s issues in Iran and abroad. These intellectuals are engaged in serious study of women’s issues in Iran and abroad and struggle to overcome obstacles to women’s growth (Najmabadi 1998). For their part, most of the secular, Iranian women abroad consider those inside as either supporters of the regime or as those who have subsequently compromised themselves to survive, or as silenced victims who need a voice outside (*Ibid*).

The role of women NGOs in giving a boost to the image of Iranian women cannot be ignored. In 2000, there were 137 indigenous women’s NGOs (Povey 2001). These NGOs have been giving small loans to poor women. They are also engaged in poverty alleviation and income generating activities, in particular among female headed households (*Ibid*).

The worst problem that many feminists in Iran face is that many female members of the *Majlis* do not work in the interest of women (*Ibid*). Women have actually not revolted against their situation and have accepted the discriminations silently. Restrictions are fewer for the elite women who do not understand the hardships of middle class women. Bound by the boundaries of culture and tradition and being the bearers of their honour, the middle class women silently face the problems without revealing things or going to the court of law. If one reads Mahnaz

Kousha intently, one gets to know that lots of women are not satisfied in their lives.

The government needs to be more tolerant to diverse views. It can go a long way in boosting Iran's image. Jaleh Shad Talab, a sociology lecturer puts it in this way "they have disqualified me because in a number of interviews with *Zanan* magazine and with the media outside the country, I have criticized the economic policies of the conservatives and I have also been critical of Khatami's Government. But, this is my individual and civil right to express my views and as a teacher it is my responsibility to develop this skill in my students" (Povey 2001). When women gathered to celebrate international women's day in Iran on 8th March, they were beaten up. A septuagenarian sand blind poet named Simin Behbahani was one among those gathered to celebrate international women's day. She was beaten with baton, sticks and fists. The security forces took several journalists into custody confiscated their cameras and finally took away the video footages before releasing them. Amnesty international exclaimed in an angry outburst "Iranian authorities should respect the right to freedom of Assembly and expression in accordance with Iran's obligations under international law". The state and society should accept "the other" rather than forcing everybody to be conformists. As Mill rightly says "mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest" (Johari 1995: 706). It is such conformist pressures that have so far inhibited established scholars, such as Ayotallah Ebrahim Jannati and others known for their radical ideas, from publishing their views on gender relations (Hossein 1999). He had stated in an interview that all restrictions imposed on interaction between the sexes were due to certain mentalities and people's worldview, not Islami (*Ibid*). Perhaps they are also the reason why scholars in *al-Zahra*, the most famous theological college will not co-operate with *Payam-e-Zan* (*Ibid*). The use of pseudonyms must also be seen as a way of dealing with such pressures, indicating the emergence of a public space in which the focus is on the argument, not on its advocates (*Ibid*).

All these changes after the revolution should however be seen within the ambit of the larger process of Islamisation. Changes took place in almost all spheres of life and so also regarding the gender issues. Khomeini declared “*na sharqi, na gharbi*” (neither east, nor west). So, the trajectory that the Iranian modernisation process took was basically in contradiction with what had taken place in the other developed countries of the east and the west. Hence, the conceptualisation of women as the main beneficiaries of modernisation did not stand up challenges presented by other discourses (Paider 1995). Therefore, the movement did not move in the anticipated direction but instead, took an indigenous route to modernisation. To defeat the Western forces, women became the standard bearers of revolution and change was to begin from the womenfolk. The Government reversed the modernisation process and an indigenous process of Islamisation began. In the name of family honour, women were at the receiving end. Change is definitely sweeping Iran. In this fast changing world, a society can only be static at its own peril. Hence, a bright future awaits Iranian women. The clouds on the horizon will soon fly away because the strong gusts of wind are pushing it to let the sun shine brightly in the Iranian sky.

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