

## Educating Iranian Women

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### Abstract

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*In Iran today, more women than men complete a high school and college level education. However, the educational experience of Iranian women has passed through a series of rocky stages. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979), women's higher education has faced many contradictions introduced by the government of Iran at various stages. The data shows that in 2002, approximately 800,000 students were enrolled at various levels in government-run universities, and female students comprised almost half of the entire student population. The total number of students has increased 4.6 times over the past 24 years, which can be explained by two factors: 1) the increase in population, and 2) the need for highly trained and educated people to fill in the demand for new positions requiring knowledge of technology and scientific expertise in addition to traditional jobs. We witness a significant increase in female enrollment 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 enrollment of women. However, as of today, government policies on the banning of the coeducation system, restricting what fields of studies are open to women, gender stereotyping in school textbooks, and emphasizing feminine specializations deemed to be proper and appropriate for Iranian women are on the rise. This study focuses on a general history of Iranian women's education since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and, most importantly, women's higher education since post revolution Iran today as governmental restrictions are implemented restricting women from certain fields of higher education.*

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**Key words:** Iranian women schooling, gender segregation, limiting fields of studies, pre-, and post-revolution schools

### Introduction

Since the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world has witnessed an increase in higher education with a remarkable increase, particularly among women. A common trend among the women in a global scene is that more women than men complete tertiary education.<sup>1</sup> A fascinating aspect of this interest and growth among female higher education is because, by far, more women surpassed men in college attainment

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<sup>1</sup> Gary S. Becker, William H. J. Hubbard, and Kevin M. Murphy. "Explaining the Worldwide Boom in Higher Education of Women." *Journal of Human Capital*. 4 (2010):3, 203-241.

Worldwide, in addition to increased earnings premium from college education. There are many other benefits for those who have gone to college, such as better marriage prospects, better status of health, more effective parenting and more effective readiness for employment risk. There is no doubt that benefits of higher education will rise over time and the tendency of individuals to attend college will follow that trend. However, having the desire to fulfill that college dream is not enough, but also the incentive to attend a college depends on the costs of colleges and financing costs, in addition to being able to perform well while in school. Despite many obstacles that may hinder college attendance for women in many parts of the world, it is amazing to see how well they are doing in comparison to several decades ago. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the government has initiated some progressive efforts to improve Saudi women's education in various disciplines.

The Saudi Government has started instituting a series of initiatives for enhancing access to higher education for women including the establishment of princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman university for women, which is designed to become the world's largest centre of higher education for women worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Similar reports from other Persian Gulf countries and Arab nations testify to the achievements of Muslim women in higher education and to mass education and how it has contributed to some of the recent "Arab Spring" uprisings with women as participants for change, equality, and most of all for freedom within the governments, as noted by Sally Findlow:

Education has long been key to the feminist goal of equal citizenship in term of economic, legal, political and cultural participation in society, although in contested ways.<sup>3</sup>

Findlow further notes that some of the recent uprisings in the Arab Gulf nations are directly connected to the "mass educational access...[because] Many of the youthful protestors in the recent Arab Spring uprisings have been highly educated."<sup>4</sup> The same factors regarding the influence of education in the lives of everyone, particularly the young generation in Iran, affirm what Findlow already noted about the Arab Springs. During 2009:

The uprising since Iran's disputed presidential election is the most important political event in the Islamic republic since the 1979 revolution. The Green Movement has dramatically altered the internal political landscape as well as the diplomatic dynamics for the outside world. It also has the potential to impact other political movements in the 57-nation Islamic world.<sup>5</sup>

The Iranian government made no secret of punishing the youths who actively participated during the demonstrations of Green Movement in Iran. One of the most important measures of success with Iranians is success in their course of their studies during education cycles at every level. To fail carries an ample amount of cultural negativity in a person's life and his family. Among the techniques implemented to punish the Green Movement participants was in the delivery of unfair grades.

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<sup>2</sup> Women in Higher Education, Saudi Initiatives & Achievements. *Ministry of Higher Education*. Deputyship for Planning & Information General Department for Planning & Statistics. 1431 H / 2010 G. P.1

<sup>3</sup> Sally Findlow. "Higher education and feminism in the Arab Gulf." *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. Vol. 34, No. 1, 2013. P.112

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113

<sup>5</sup> Robin Wright. "Iran's Green Movement." *United States Institute of Peace*. <http://www.usip.org/publications/irans-green-movement> December 15, 2009 (Last accessed: December 21, 2013)

Young Iranians have borne a large share of the regime's retributions for unrest in 2009. Thousands were detained in the tumultuous months following the disputed election. Many student activists were also given failing grades or threatened with expulsion from universities.... Despite sanctions, Iran's young are better educated and more worldly than any previous generation. Most are exposed to global media, ideas and culture through satellite television and the internet. Most young Iranians are believed to want to be part of the international community and globalization.<sup>6</sup>

This quotation is revealing about the numerous educated Iranian youth with connections to a larger global community blocked from many opportunities in their own nation by a government that has educated them well.

The stereotypical image of women in the Muslim world is that "Islam prohibits women's education." Most people in the West associate Islam with the Taliban and their behavior towards women, that is, with a style of militancy and restriction imposed on the lives and education of Afghan men and women. Or they believe that Saudi Arabia is the role model for all Muslims. However, Islam is not opposed to education, and most particularly, Islam does not forbid women from seeking and attaining knowledge. In fact, one of the Islamic tenets is that the pursuit of knowledge is an obligation of every Muslim, regardless of gender. For example, the following selected verses in the Qur'an clearly address the importance of seeking knowledge:

"Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created man from a clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous Who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not." (Qur'an, 96:1-5)

"And they shall say had we but listened or used reason, we would not be among the inmates of the burning fire." (Qur'an, 67:10)

"Are those who have knowledge and those who have no knowledge alike? Only the men of understanding are mindful." (Qur'an, 39:9)

"And whoso brings the truth and believes therein such are the dutiful." (Qur'an, 39:33)

"My Lord! Enrich me with knowledge." (Qur'an, 20:114)<sup>7</sup>

Thus the pursuit of knowledge and the use of reason, based on sense and observation, are made obligatory on all the believers in Islam as indicated in the Qur'an. However, we must take into consideration that we cannot overlook the negative impact of other factors when it comes to educating women, such as poverty and the absence of political will toward educational attainment in the region. It should also be kept in mind that no two Muslim nations are alike, and that Islam is interpreted differently according to the cultural heritage and political agendas set forth by each respected nation. Hence, what the Taliban or Saudi Arabia may justify as "Islamic," such as banning women to participate as equal citizens, may actually be a facet of a patriarchal culture rather than the practice of the religion in accordance to Islam. Therefore, it is obvious that such stereotyping of Islam based on one group or politics of one nation cannot explain the Iranian case, where female educational attainment peaked in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution and the establishment of an Islamic government.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Omid Memarian and Tara Nesvaderan . " Iran Primer: The Youth."

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/irans-youth.html> October 27, 2010 (Last accessed: December 21, 2013)

The same source indicates that Iran is one of the most tech-savvy societies in the developing world with an estimated 28 million Internet users led by youth. Iran boasts between 60,000 and 110,000 active blogs, one of the highest numbers in the Middle East led by youth.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.islamicity.com/articles/articles.asp?ref=ic0601-2883>

<sup>8</sup> Golnar Mehran. "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Comparative Education Review*. 47 (August 2003):3, 269-286.

## Women's Education in Iran: A Brief History

There is no doubt that gaining an education in most cases [WHEN IS IT NOT?] is a means of improving the lives of women. It is argued that equal access to educational opportunities, as well as the attainment of educational qualifications, can possibly open the road to women's participation in the decision-making process, which leads to an improvement in overall equality. However, it should be noted that many highly educated women are ignorant of the problems or hardly show any interest in understanding the issues related to less fortunate women in terms of opportunity and privilege vis a vis the economic handicap of the labor class, which hinders and deprives them of gaining basic education.<sup>9</sup>

Since the official religion of Iran is Islam (Shi'a), religious study is part of public-school education at all grade levels. In Iran, girls and boys are educated separately until the university level. In addition, in primary and high school, girls typically (but not always) have only female teachers, and boys typically have only male teachers until the end of high school. At the university level, classes are co-ed and professors can be of any gender.

As one of the numerous modernization movements in Iran, female education helped to improve personal health and increased life expectancy, which contributed to the reduction of infant mortality (Caldwell 1989; Cleland 1990) and changes in family structure. Female education also led to increased participation in public affairs, which gave an increasingly visible role to women in society, a role that they could not play before. We can trace the beginning of women's education in Iran much earlier than the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Official records of educating Iranian women can be traced back to the Timurid dynasty (1370- 1507 C.E.). The primary purpose of education was for religious instruction, and it was made available to the poor by way of elite members of society acting as private tutors. Private tutors were common sources used to educate women in Iran historical documents from the Safavid dynasty (1500-1722 C.E.) document royal ladies of the court who hired private tutors to enrich their lives through education.

One fallacy about Muslim women is that due to their seclusion, they were unable to pursue an education, contributing to their ignorance. Travelogues and diplomatic accounts of the various foreign embassies point to various learned ladies during the time of the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925 C.E.). For example, Lady Sheil, wife of the British minister who served in Iran during the early part of the 1850s (despite her own ignorance about the lives of Iranian women) wrote:

Women of the higher classes frequently acquire a knowledge of reading and writing, and of the choice poetical works in their native language, as well as the art of reading, though perhaps not understanding, the Koran.<sup>10</sup>

The women in the Qajar royal family and the women of the Qajar tribe were educated and literate, handling their own correspondences without help from the house secretary, who often assisted in writing letters. Educating young girls and boys was common among the upper class, merchant families, the ruling class, high officials, the *ulama* (religious class) and even middle class families. A typical education included studying religious texts first followed by classical Persian literature. Some of the girls were talented as poets and were encouraged to pursue further study. Iranian women became familiar with Western education through meeting the wives of members in the diplomatic community of Iran. Foreign women mostly had contact with Iranian women who were either royal ladies in the harem (ladies' quarter of the household) or from wealthy and prominent Iranian families who would invite foreigners to their homes. Other exposure to Western women was through missionaries who were teachers or worked or were married to medical assistants.

<sup>9</sup> Sally Findlow. *Ibid.*, p.113

<sup>10</sup> Guity Nashat. "Introduction." in: *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*. Edited by Lois Beck and Guity Nashat. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 2004),14.

The American, French, and British missionaries were present in Iran during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although they were not able to convert many people to Christianity, their way of living and their influence on Iranian women became evident through the schools they helped to establish. "In 1835 Americans established an elementary four grade school in Urumia [north west of Iran] for Iranian Armenian girls and boys. Eventually they established schools in other towns including one in Tehran to which girls were admitted in 1875 with Nasir al-Din Shaha's permission."<sup>11</sup> The Catholic French sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul also opened up a school for girls "...which some Muslim girls attended on the condition that the sisters refrain from interfering with religious beliefs."<sup>12</sup>

Historical documents contain invaluable records of the Iranian reformist and women's press during the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from 1905-1911 C.E., a period known in the Iranian history as the constitutional period. This is the era that modern Iranian nationalism was forming (Paidar 1995; Afary 1996; Najmabadi 1998; Amin 1999, 2002; Rostam-Kolayi 2003; Kashani-Sabet 2005).

...periodical press sources document the role of early Iranian Muslim private girls' schools that predated state sponsorship of female education by almost two decades, from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1920s.<sup>13</sup>

Rostam-Kolayi provides a good history of the "Religious Minority Girl's Schools" in Iran starting in the 1900s. These new schools started to replace private tutors for girls. According to Rostam Kolayi, an American Presbyterian Mission in 1936 reported:

The Armenians had a school of their own near the Kazvin Gate, but as no pupils were received without tuition the poor were altogether excluded. Three of the ten Tehran synagogues had schools, the course consisting in reading the Hebrew Scriptures and traditions, and writing the rabbinical character. The Zoroastrians, though by far the smallest of the minority groups, had the best organized school. It was coeducational and was under the management of an agent of the Parsees from Bombay, supported from funds from India. (Board 1936)<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, Christian missionaries of various denominations were present at the same time in Iran competing with each other and were rivals not only to attract Iranian girls for education but also to convert them. Also, among the religio-ethnic minority communities of Iran, Armenians were the first to open girls' schools in Iran. It seems that all the religio-ethnic minority schools in Iran had similar motivations. The foreign organizations were working to educate girls to better their lives and their "community through modernization and Westernization." The American Protestant missionaries opened schools for Armenian, Assyrian, and Jewish children in the 1870s. The Armenian community grew suspicious of the real intentions of French Catholic and American Protestant missionaries because of a fear of the loss of cultural and religious heritage.<sup>15</sup> It is very possible that all the missionaries were working hard towards conversion of the students and their communities.

Both the Baha'i and Jewish schools in Iran pioneered modern education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the Armenian, Jewish, and Baha'i religious minorities in Iran, the Zoroastrian community, with the help and financial support of the Parsees (Zoroastrian communities of India) from India, managed to build their own schools.

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<sup>11</sup> Shireen Mahdavi. "Reflectons in the Mirror —How Each Saw the Other: Women in the Nineteenth Century." In: *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*. Edited by Lois Beck and Guity Nashat. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 2004), pp. 65-66.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi. "Origins of Iran's Modern Girls' Schools: From Private/National to Public/State." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. 4 (Fall 2008): 3, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Quoted in Rostam- Kolayi on page 63.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

The curricula of the Iranian Jewish, Armenian, and Baha'i schools indicate that religious minority community schools conceived of female education as preparation for modern domesticity and housewifery.<sup>16</sup> In comparison to the religio-ethnic minority schools for girls, it is obvious that the Muslim majority schools in Iran were not at the same level.

### ***Mili (Meli) Private Schools for Muslim Girls***

During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new kind of school was founded privately by Iranian Muslims (men and women) called *Mili (Meli)* national, or *jadid*, new. These schools were built to educate girls and boys from different social strata (well-to-do and middle income families). *Meli* schools were independent from any missionary and religio-ethnic schools in Iran. These schools were not part of the government *Dawlat* (state) initiative schools, commonly known as *Dawlati* schools (government-supported schools). The early twentieth-century Iranian girls' schools were run by women who were not only the founders, but also were principals, as well as teachers who had been educated at home, either by tutors, parents, or husbands. These women had a vision about the value of educated women.

The model for the private girl's school was the early private schools for boys. Both schools shared a new "...form of curriculum and texts, made use of classroom space separate from religious venues, and saw as their mission to educate students in order to serve the nation."<sup>17</sup> Although the purpose of *meli* schools was to educate new generations of boys and girls to be ready to serve their nation, the program for girls was based on educating future mothers and wives with significant emphasis placed on home sciences. In 1906 during the Qajar dynasty, elementary schooling became compulsory for both girls and boys between the ages of 7 and 13. Article 33 of the Fundamental Law for the Advancement of Education in the Iranian Constitution also indicated that schools would be free of charge. Another article in the Constitution indicated that government run schools must be regulated by "the Ministry of Sciences and Arts, and all schools and colleges must be under the supreme control and supervision of the Ministry."<sup>18</sup> By the early 1920s, the state assumed more control over education through the Ministry of Education by hiring inspectors of curriculum to help standardize girls' schools. Inspectors also had the duty to make sure that the founders of these schools had obtained permission from the government to run the schools.

Girls' schools were facing a shortage of female-qualified teachers. The problem had to do with the requirement of gender-segregated schools, which was required by social protocol and religious demand. Due to scarcity of qualified female teachers, some of the schools hired male teachers. However, an all-female teaching staff was a good selling point to the girl's parents, who wanted to make sure not "...to risk loss of respectability or honor by sending their daughter to a "den of inequity," a label given to girls' schools by their clerical opponents."<sup>19</sup> Sometimes, to remedy the male teacher's issues, male elderly scholars were hired to teach the girls. Unfortunately, there was opposition to girls' education, because the religious opposition feared that if women could read and write, they might use this knowledge to correspond with lovers, which would lead to moral decay, adultery, and loss of chastity. Sexual decency and preserving men's honor by remaining pure on the woman's part was the argument that mullas (the clerics) were worried about. Religious opposition to girls' schooling and education even denounced women's schools as *haram* (not permissible by Islam) despite all the Qur'anic evidence (presented earlier). The basis of such "religious" arguments was in fact non-religious, reflecting rather male cultural attitudes towards women threatening the status quo by becoming equal in knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Jasmin Rostam- Kolayi. Ibid. p. 69.

for a list of various schools for girls during this period of time see Jasmin Rostam –Kolayi

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 74.

Because of all these problems, girls' schools lagged behind boys' schools, and they faced constant harassment, even from the landlords who refused to lease their land to be used for schools because they believed they would then be associated with the corruption of girls, an idea that was reinforced by influential individuals or organized religious clerics opposed to girls' education under the guise of "Islamic sinfulness." The local people were also part of the opposition to the girls' schools. One should not underestimate the power of religious clerics, who were responsible for the persistent opposition to girls' education. Opposition towards female education continues to be prevalent today not only in Iran but in many other parts of the world. For example, Irvani notes that "fear of education [e] affects on thought's independence of women and more practical [e] affects, was one of consideration in Saudi Arabia in 1980s."<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the history of education in Iran, poverty has been a hurdle, causing children of the poor and lower strata to lag behind. However, other creative and admirable attempts to educate girls and boys from poor family backgrounds include private schools that would charge elite wealthy students full tuition in order to subsidize the education of poorer students during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Middle and upper classes were encouraged to pay according to their means. Some of the schools would also waive tuition for poor families in addition to providing charitable donations from individuals who would agree to pay for the schooling of a certain number of students per year. Sometimes the provider of the tuition would stop the funding if the student(s) did not pass the exams to be promoted to a higher level.

Another way to help poor families send their daughters to school was to charge two siblings for the price of one. Vocational training for girls also existed in addition to regular academic subjects taught to girls. According to Rostam- Kolayi, this form of education existed but is rarely discussed in the literature. These types of schools were unique for their time, as the founders correctly recognized that having a professional skill in addition to basic education were crucial for poor girls. However, the main objective of the vocational schools was literacy training for adult women. Those who attended vocational schools did not have the wealthy families who could provide and support them. Vocational schools were a good way to prepare poor girls to be self-supportive.

Obviously, the girls coming from wealthy families did not need to work to support themselves, thus their talents and interests were mostly focused on literature, poetry, the arts and learning foreign languages.

Many private (*mili*) schools and private citizens tried to include and integrate poor and economically deprived students into the education system because they envisioned that better educated children, particularly better educated girls, would improve family life and help fulfill their duties as contributing citizens to their nation.

During the years 1890-1936, the concept of the modern Iranian changed due to the Iranian press by both male and female editors, and the 'Women's Awakening' rhetoric was used a lot in the print media. This Women's Awakening included the idea that women would be employed and would enjoy a greater civic presence.<sup>21</sup> Between the years 1925-1941, which is known for its advances in modernization under the reign of Reza Shah (known also as Reza Khan), the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925 -1979) of Iran, the ulama were resisting modernization. Of course, the modernization brought numerous changes in social stratification including girls' education.

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<sup>20</sup> Mohammad Reza Irvani. "A Social Work Study of Promoting Women Education and Participation in Iran." *Journal of Educational and Social Research*. 2. (May 2012):2, 288.

<sup>21</sup> Camron Michael Amin. "Propaganda and Remembrance: Gender, Education, and "The Women's Awakening" of 1936." *Iranian Studies*. 32 (Summer 1999):3, 351-386

Reza Shah's vision of a modern Iran naturally made education one of his main concerns, and the modernization was intended to diminish the role of religion in society.<sup>22</sup> On this specific issue Faghfoory notes how the state government blocked the power of the ulama, either physically by eliminating them or otherwise by isolating them, if they opposed the state modernization program. While some of the ulama waited for the state to collapse, others accepted the modernization policies enforced by the government.

...they recognized both the state's power and determination to carry on the reforms and their own inability to resist the government. They tended to adapt themselves to the changing environment by abandoning the clerical garb and entering in to new professions and government service."<sup>23</sup>

The educational policies continued during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (the second Pahlavi king ruled 1941 -1979). The government supported advancements made by women against polygamy and child marriage, female exclusion from public life, and education segregation. However, it must be noted that while the government was supporting women with their agenda, at the same time various feminist political groups all were shut down and eventually integrated into a state-created institution. One of the problematic issues with the government's policies was the cultural paternalistic nature of the government, supporting the cultural practices of giving much higher status to men than women, while at the same time also not admitting women to the prestigious male-dominated higher institutions such as The Technical Petroleum Institute of Abadan (*Daneshkadeh San`ati Naft e Abadan*), now known as the Oil Industry University and which later accepted female students. However, during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, female applicants were rejected altogether. Meanwhile, at the same time, opposition against the Iranian feminist movement by the religious jurists was increasing. Some women such as Shirin Ebadi<sup>24</sup> and Farokhroo Parsa<sup>25</sup> rose to the rank of ministers despite the religious opposition towards the women's feminist movement. Rural women in Iran gained little from the modernizing policies during Pahlavi's rule. Many measures and provisions that were planned for rural women were not implemented or were not enforced by the government. For example,

“...measures such as family planning met with overt resistance by men, and sometimes by women; many other measures, such as the koranic [Islamic religious] rights to inheritance and independent incomes and the rights granted by the Family protection laws were simply ignored.”<sup>26</sup>

It is obvious that the patriarchal nature of the culture overrides the tenants of Islam or at least gets lost when it deals with gender power and the rights of women. To a great degree the same attitude towards women still exists in today's Iran, manifested in a different rhetoric according to the political and social climate of the time, but still the same.

<sup>22</sup> Rudi Matthee. “Transforming Dangerous Nomads into Useful Artisans, Technicians, Agriculturists: Education in the Reza Shah Period.” *Iranian Studies*.26,(Summer /Autumn, 1993):3/4 313-336

<sup>23</sup> Mohammad H. Faghfoory. “The Impact of Modernization on the Ulama in Iran, 1925-1941.” *Iranian Studies*.26 (Summer/Fall 1993): 3/4, 277

<sup>24</sup> Shirin Ebadi is a campaigner working towards issues related to children and women's rights in Iran and is author of many books on this subject. She worked hard on the subject of child custody in Iranian laws. She is the first and only female judge in Iran (1969) and winner of many awards in recognition of her fight, over many years, for human rights and democracy in Iran (2001). In 2003, she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work fighting for democracy and the rights of women and children.

<sup>25</sup> Farokhroo Pārsā, (22 March 1922 – 8 May 1980), was an Iranian physician, educator and parliamentarian in pre Islamic Revolution era. She served as Minister of Education of Iran in the last pre –Islamic Revolution government and was the first female cabinet minister of an Iranian government.

Pārsā was an outspoken supporter of Women's rights in Iran, and was executed by firing squad on 8 May 1980 after the Islamists came to power in Iran.

<sup>26</sup> Haleh Afshar. “The position of women in Iranian village.” *Feminist Review*.(Autumn1981): 9, P.77.



Prior to 1978, around the time that the Islamic Revolution of Iran occurred, school systems in Iran followed a French school system model with 6 years of primary followed by 6 years of high school. The same model was followed in all the private (*mili*) schools. In fact, no schools in Iran can operate without the supervision of the Ministry of Education for not only accreditation but also for uniformity with the policies and academic curriculum set with standards for each level. In the pre-Islamic revolutionary period, 12 years of education were required for a high school diploma in 4 different subject areas: mathematics, natural sciences, literature, and business economics. Depending on the interest and the GPA, each student would select one of the majors to study at the end of ninth grade. In other words, the last three years of high school education in Iran could determine the outcome of which major one could study at the university or college if they successfully passed the final national examination for high school diploma and the *konkoor*,<sup>27</sup> the entrance exam for college and university admission. Because of better schooling, almost 70 to 80 percent of university entrants came from large urban cities. In prerevolutionary Iran, the exam was—as currently—a comprehensive test of knowledge and assessment of academic achievement for admissions. This system of education was set equally across all the schools (private and government run) for both boys and girls with the same textbooks published by the government for each grade in various subjects.

However, there were numerous problems with women's rate of literacy and prospects for jobs. Women's opportunities to enter into higher education were also much more limited than men's. In 1976 women constituted only 30 per cent of students in higher education. Moreover, women were encouraged by state policies to take up so-called feminine professions and faced discrimination and lower pay when they attempted to enter traditionally male-dominated professions.

#### **Post-Revolutionary Education Programs (Since 1979)**

Today, politicized Islam governs both the private and public lives of individuals in Iranian society. The strict enforcement of religious laws in all spheres of life and the rule of the theocratic political system in Iran are one of the distinguishing characteristics of Iranian society. The 1979 Islamic revolution allowed previously sheltered religious women, who generally would shy away from higher education because attending a university might require relocation, to challenge themselves by relying upon an interpretation of Islam that facilitated women's participation in public spaces, which today is often called Islamic feminism. It is true to say that the Islamic Republic of Iran opened up avenues for many traditional veiled women from various social strata, who would not otherwise have thought of getting jobs or attending a university level of education due to their families' fear of the non-Islamic environment of the Shah's westernized policies. Now, this group of women could do what the rest of the girls from more secular backgrounds could do. Iranian women have used the post-revolutionary educational system to empower themselves by taking advantage of the opportunities created by the interplay of tradition and modernity. Since the university and the workplace are officially "Islamic," then it is much harder for conservative parents, university administrators, or government officials to tell a woman she cannot study or work. The early years of the Islamic government saw a rigorous governmental quota system barring women from certain fields of studies such as veterinary science, agriculture, and areas of engineering such as petroleum and construction.

“The justification for not accepting female students in such fields was given as ‘religious’ due to the fact in ...[those] areas of studies women and men end up to work in the field together and that deemed to be improper.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The Iranian University Entrance Exam known as Konkoor, Konkour, and Konkur are transliterations of the Persian the Concours [from French] is a standardized test used as one of the means to gain admission to Higher Education in Iran. Concours in French means a public contest or competition.

<sup>28</sup> Valentine Moghadam. “The Islamic Republic of Iran: The End of Ideology? Women's Employment Issues.” *Women, Work, and Economic Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers. 1998), P.158.

However, such earlier restriction on women's higher education eventually was lifted, and the women could freely choose their preferred field of studies. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there have been many contradictions regarding the education of Iranian women. For example, although there has been a significant increase in female enrollment with a successful rate of completion, reduced gender gap in primary and secondary schools, and a much higher rate of university acceptance and enrollment among women, at the same time the post-revolutionary educational policy has started to focus on the compulsory veiling of female students beginning at age 6, gender stereotyping in school textbooks, and guiding female students toward "feminine" specializations. One of the reasons for the increase ratio of women to men attending higher education institutions and the higher rate of completing their programs is due to this phenomenon-- traditional parents feel that the Islamic environment is safe for their daughters. In other words, families do not have to worry as much about sheltering their own daughters since they believe that Khomeini's society is taking care of them.

### Value Systems in Universities

There are two most obvious value systems in the Iranian universities of the pre- and post-revolution era: 1) during the Pahlavi era (pre-revolution), the education system was used as a means to secularize and "modernize" the Iranian nation, and 2) during the Khomeini and post-revolution era, the education system has used the universities and higher education to enforce Islamic values and Islamize the educational campuses. One of the most obvious differences between pre- and post-revolution Iran is the power of religion in the political arena. The revolution era witnessed the clergy that emerged as a spiritual power, opposed to the power of the state, and able to mobilize the crowd to protest and demand reforms. The clergy engaged itself in an active opposition to the Pahlavi government. For example, the religious powers blamed the Shah's policies for the enactment of the Family Protection laws. Khomeini strongly believed that the West was influencing the traditional Islamic ways of life, and that such Family Protection laws deprived men of automatic custody of their children, and additionally, this law empowered women in the case of polygamy to sue her husband in court. Khomeini denounced all the women empowerment policies of the Pahlavi time as anti-Islamic and a direct

...attack on the family which would 'break-up Muslim homes and family lives'; he condemned those who voted for it and those who made use of its provisions as 'guilty before the law of God and the law of the land'. In post revolutionary Iran the family has been designated as 'the fundamental unit of Islamic society' and women have been appointed by Khomeini to act as the pillars of the nation by being strong forts of virtue and chastity and by raising brave and enlightened men and meek and united women.<sup>29</sup>

Khomeini always emphasized the high status of women based on his interpretation of the religious law. He pointed out that Islam has given women a special value in terms of motherhood and should be a good wife to her husband. Thus, the best of the women are those who are good daughters to their parents, compassionate wife to the husband, and the best of mothers to their children. He also overtly emphasized that the first and most important education for woman is to be well educated in the religion of Islam.

The Islamic Republic changed the curriculum in the Iranian schools and the higher education institutions. The textbooks for schools were Islamized and made to have ample connection to Khomeini's revolution, reminding the children that the former Shah's ways of doing things were not necessarily the right choice for Islamic Iran. The pictures and the illustrations in the textbooks all took on a new look. All the female characters wore the hijab and optimal efforts were made in portraying the male characters. The interior and exterior scenes in the illustrations reflected the traditional Iranian and peasant realities. The aim was to appeal to the mass population and not to the elite.

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<sup>29</sup> Haleh Afshar. "Khomeini's Teachings and Their Implications for Women." *Feminist Review*.12 (1982), P.61.

School subjects focus on religion in addition to the teachings of Khomeini's, which continue to the university level in undergraduate and graduate school.<sup>30</sup> High school is six days a week and more homework is assigned. Also, Iran requires 200 school days each year, while, by contrast, California requires only 175. Iran's GPA system is based on a 20-point scale with anything lower than a 10 resulting in a failing grade.<sup>31</sup> A recent study regarding the validity of the *konkooor* (the entrance exam for college and university admission) as an indicator for the academic performance of Iranian medical school students indicated that

The Konkoor alone, and even in combination with the GPA, is a relatively poor predictor of medical students' academic performance, and its predictive validity declines over the academic years of medical school. Care should be taken to develop comprehensive admissions criteria, covering both cognitive and non-cognitive factors, to identify the best applicants to become "good doctors" in the future. The findings of this study can be helpful for policy makers in the medical education field.<sup>32</sup>

To enter higher education, the student should have a high school diploma and pass the *konkooor*, the entrance exam that is a comprehensive, 4.5-hour multiple-choice exam that covers all subjects taught in Iranian high schools. Those who fail are allowed to repeat the test in the following years until they pass it. There are three versions of the *konkooor*, each corresponding to one of the three high school paths: math/science, humanities, and the arts. The Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology has established the Education Evaluation Organization to oversee all aspects of the test. Only 10 percent of all applicants are accepted. Approximately 60 percent of accepted applicants were women, as the participation of women in higher education has almost doubled over the last two decades.

Most often the top ranking scores in the *konkooor* are also female students. For example, in 2009, 20 out of 36 top successful qualifiers in five fields consisting of mathematics, natural sciences, humanities, arts, and foreign languages were females.<sup>33</sup>

The aim and purpose of the *konkooor* underwent a change between the pre- and post-revolutionary era. This change follows the same path of Islamization of the entire education system mentioned earlier and still is in practice:

The purpose of testing shifted from being just a mere test of knowledge to an instrument to ensure the "Islamization of universities," aimed at admitting students committed to the ideology of the revolution. The university entrance exam judged admissions candidates not only by their academic test score but also by their social and political background and loyalty to the Islamic government."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The following Iranian government websites provide various curriculums for various school levels and the university programs.

[http://elementary.talif.sch.ir/?page\\_id=53&menu\\_id=1&menu\\_item\\_id=99](http://elementary.talif.sch.ir/?page_id=53&menu_id=1&menu_item_id=99) (In Persian, Last accessed

<http://nasir-amoozesh.mihanblog.com/post/17> (In Persian, Last accessed: December 21, 2013)

<http://raae.blogfa.com/post-33.aspx> (In Persian, Last accessed: December 21, 201

<sup>31</sup>Dylan Jew. "Iran's Konkoor: the SAT on steroids."

<http://www.saratogafalcon.org/content/iran%E2%80%99s-konkooor-sat-steroids> November 21, 2012 (Last accessed: December 21, 2013).

<sup>32</sup>Farrokhi-Khajeh-Pasha, et. al. "The validity of Iran's national university entrance examination (Konkooor) for predicting medical students' academic performance." <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22840211> (Last accessed: December 21, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> [http://forums.iransportspress.com/showthread.php?51087-Females-rank-1st-in Konkooor](http://forums.iransportspress.com/showthread.php?51087-Females-rank-1st-in-Konkooor)

<sup>34</sup> Shahrzad Kamyab. "Konkooor." *International Higher Education*, (Spring 2008): 51.

According to Dr. Shahrzad Kamyab, the *konkoor*, especially in recent years, has further contributed to the massive brain drain from Iran and has created psychological and social problems such as anxiety, boredom, and hopelessness among the youth who fail the test.<sup>35</sup> Sakurai also notes that the *konkoor* entrance exam has been used by the Islamic government as a process of selecting students who are committed to the ideology of the revolution and excluding students who do not support the government.<sup>36</sup> Khomeini was aware of the influence and power of university students in terms of demonstrations that could support or oppose the newly formed Islamic government. On a sermon that Khomeini delivered on April 26, 1980, titled “The Meaning of Cultural Revolution,” he emphasized the concept of “purification” of any anti-Islamic elements from all higher education institutions. Any student or faculty identified as *gharbzadeh*, or Westoxification, were to be expelled based on Khomeini's statement: “We want our young people to be truly independent and to perceive their own real needs instead of following the East or the West.”<sup>37</sup> Prior to Islamization of the entire Iranian education system, the organization called *setad-e enqelab-e eslami* (Headquarters of Cultural Revolution) was established and assigned to reorganize and oversee the study subjects based on Islamic ideology. This is known as the Iranian Cultural Revolution. The universities were closed down for a year and in that year the militant students and all left-wingers were expelled. The Islamization of the education in Iran took place between the years 1980-1983. The universities remained co-ed, but the classrooms seating arrangements changed so that men sat on one side of the class and women sat on the other--thus within the same space they remained segregated. This form of seating arrangement still is followed in all the higher institutions in Iran.

Although women in Iran are subject to many cultural restrictions such as segregation in the public sector and adhering to strict clothing laws, in the classroom girls have had the upper hand and have been successful in securing university degrees. In 2009 the U.N.'s Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that in Iran in the field of sciences, female contributions were even more pronounced, with women making up 68 percent of all graduates when compared with the same category of men. After graduation, Iranian women are more willing to enter governmental organizations in spite of their higher education, and yet they experience inequality, particularly in the governmental organizations and managerial posts. The bonds of patriarchy are hard to break free.<sup>38</sup> The educated Iranian woman still has to deal with the paradox of tradition and modernity in the female educational experience. She is encouraged to fulfill her traditional domestic role, while at the same time she is encouraged to be modern by going out in the public and entering the work force where, as previously mentioned, she faces discrimination by the society and the government.

### Women's Higher Education: Ups and Downs

On August 6, 2012, the *Mehr News Agency* in Iran “posted a bulletin that 36 universities in the country had excluded women from 77 fields of study,”<sup>39</sup> a shocking news for both those who live inside or outside Iran, a step backward for the Iranian women in higher education. In recent years the *Majlis*, the parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran, discussed this issue (number of females at higher education) seriously.

<sup>35</sup> Dr. Shahrzad Kamyab has been a professor of Comparative and International Education at Chapman University <http://www.internationaleducationconsultancy.com/> (Last accessed: December 21, 2013)

<sup>36</sup> Keiko Sakurai. “University Entrance Examination and the Making of an Islamic Society in Iran: A Study of the Post-Revolutionary Iranian Approach to ‘Konkur.’” *Iranian Studies*.37(September 2004): 3, pp. 385-406.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.389.

<sup>38</sup> Mohammad Reza Irvani. *Ibid.*, P.280

<sup>39</sup> Nazanin Shahrokni , Parastou Dokouhaki. “A Separation at Iranian Universities.” <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero101812> October 18, 2012 (Last accessed: December 21, 2013).

The discussion, which included employment opportunities for college-educated boys and girls, revealed that the majority of college-educated women are not absorbed into the labor market economy. The reality is that about 25 percent of college-educated women join the work force. Some authorities argue that giving women a college education is a waste of the nation's resources, because they do not intend to work.<sup>40</sup> For example, Oil Industry University, which has several campuses across Iran, announced that they no longer accept female students, justifying their decision by stating the lack of employer demand for their female graduates. Similarly, Isfahan University provided the same reason regarding its mining engineering degree for women claiming that 98 percent of female graduates ended up jobless. We hear the institutions also presenting different reasons for their decision to limit to stop accepting female applicants. Some of the reasons given are that certain fields do not suit women's nature or because working conditions may be too difficult. Conservatives portray these attempts to enforce a gendered division of labor as natural and desirable, describing the widening of the gender gap in favor of women as a social dilemma, restricting men's access to the job market in addition to creating social and family problems by having more educated women than men. Media headlines describe men as losing their masculinity, becoming effeminate, and university seats ambushed by women. These headlines may seem amusing, but at the same time they plant ideas in the minds of the public that women's education should be secondary to men's education.

With the public announcement by the Iranian government of the decision to introduce a quota to control the number of female applicants for various majors at the higher institutions, Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi of Iran stated that the real agenda behind such regulations was to reduce the proportion of female students to below 50 percent. While sociologists believe that "women's growing academic success to the increased willingness of religiously-conservative families to send their daughters to university after the 1979 Islamic revolution."<sup>41</sup> At the same time some suggest that the relative decline in the male student population has been attributed to the desire of young Iranian men to "get rich quick" without going to university.<sup>42</sup>

There are probably a multiple number of reasons why women in Iran increasingly choose to go to higher education compared to Iranian men. One reason might be due to the Islamic "packaging" of higher education or that these higher education institutions become the only means through which young women can alter their public role and status. Other possible reasons are that higher education offers hope for a brighter future for women, or the university is one of the limited social arenas open to women to meet men, or the means in which to escape a restrictive, overly sheltered family life. However, let us not forget that many of these young women are ambitious and have the drive for learning and educating themselves. No one can say with certainty what are the complex of reasons why Iranian women have a high record of passing the *konkooor* and maintaining a much higher rate of graduation from universities than Iranian men. The gender gap has continued to widen every year with the new *konkooor* season, and the trend favors women over men.

## Conclusion

Education and democracy are directly linked. At the individual level, education is a determinant of political participation, and as educational levels increase, individuals tend to develop a stronger sense of civic duty and a greater interest in politics. Sometimes suppressive governments have a good reason to fear educated citizens. At the same time, higher education is not necessarily a sufficient reason for democratization, but it creates a greater awareness of democratic rights.

<sup>40</sup> Mitra K. Shavarini. "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education." *Review of Education*. 51(2005) 329-347

<sup>41</sup>Robert Tait. "Anger as Iran bans women from universities"

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9487761/Anger-as-Iran-bans-women-from-universities.html>

August 20, 2012 (Last accessed: December 21, 2013)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Iranian women have used the contradictory mix of tradition and modernity to empower themselves. The Iranian state policies on education and employment improved the relative position of women but did little to affect the balance of power between women and men--patriarchy persists and is promoted by the Islamic Republic of Iran in many ways. According to a global report published in the journal *Partner Abuse Worldwide*, in the category measuring Middle Eastern nations and gender inequality, Iran scored in the 72<sup>nd</sup> percentile (on a scale of increasing inequality).<sup>43</sup> Although the level of education for the general population has increased, some women may have retained aspects of their cultural beliefs about high fertility rather than adopting the more scientific views of their newly acquired education. It is safe to say that the Islamic Republic has failed to create its ideal female citizen—the New Iranian Muslim Woman who is more pious and obedient than her predecessor prior to the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Instead, Iranian women, combining aspects from both traditional and modern Iran, have empowered themselves in a society that favors male over female. The Islamic Republic of Iran's new move towards banning female students from certain areas of studies can be explained from several perspectives: the patriarchal culture, religious interpretation/ justification, fear of female domination or loss of masculinity, and international economic sanctions, while some internal political observers “read the gender segregation [using quotas for female university admission] measures as a political maneuver in advance of the 2013 presidential election.”<sup>44</sup> With the new president of Iran Hassan Ruhani in office, only time will tell us what new changes may again transpire that impact women's education.

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<sup>43</sup> Esteban Eugenio Esquivel-Santovena, Teri L. Lambert, John Hamel, “Partner Abuse Worldwide.” *Partner Abuse*, 4 (2013): 1,22.

<sup>44</sup>Nazanin Shahrokni , Parastou Dokouhaki. *Ibid*.

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