



A Conflicts Forum Monograph

**IRANIAN WOMEN AFTER  
THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION**

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## Iranian Women after the Islamic Revolution

Dr Ansia Khaz Ali

More than thirty years have passed since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, yet there remain a number of questions and ambiguities about the way the Islamic Republic and its laws deal with contemporary problems and current circumstances, particularly with regard to women and women's rights.

This short paper will shed light on these issues and study the current position of women in various spheres, comparing this to the situation prior to the Islamic Revolution. Reliable and authenticated data has been used wherever possible. The introduction summarises a number of theoretical and legal studies which provide the basis for the subsequent more practical analysis and are the sources from where the data has been obtained.

The first section considers attitudes of the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards women and women's rights, and then takes a comprehensive look at the laws promulgated since the Islamic Revolution concerning women and their position in society. The second section considers women's cultural and educational developments since the Revolution and compares these to the pre-revolutionary situation. The third section looks at women's political, social and economic participation and considers both quantitative and qualitative aspects of their employment. The fourth section then examines questions of the family, the relationship between women and the family, and the family's role in limiting or increasing women's rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The most important sources used in this study are as follows:

- Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- *Treaty of Women's Rights and Responsibilities in the Islamic Republic of Iran*
- Comprehensive periodic reports of the *Presidential Office of the Islamic Republic*
- Statistics from the *Iranian Centre of Statistics* - the most recent comprehensive statistics in the country up to 2006
- Most recent statistics provided by relevant departments and organisations from social and cultural consultations on women
- *"Women through the Mirror of the Law in the Islamic Republic of Iran"* (official document)
- *"Security and Morals in the Iranian Family"* by Layla Sadat Za'afarani
- *"Trajectory of Women's Development in the Islamic Republic of Iran"* by Zahra Atayi Ashtiyani
- Speeches of the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran

In addition to these sources are the author's own experiences and her meetings with representatives and officials for women's affairs as well as female students, teachers, workers, employees and housewives in different regions of Iran.

First, as an introduction, let us take a quick look at the ground laid before the Iranian Revolution and the background which supports the laws passed by the Iranian government.

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## Women in the ideology of the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Women and the image of women played an important role in the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution and its sequel. Women themselves participated in the uprising and firmly supported the Revolution. The government of the Shah had been determined to westernise Iran, particularly with regards to women. It championed reform on women's issues, particularly in the field of equal rights with men. The largest campaign concentrated on unveiling Iranian women and removing the *hijab*, which the government claimed would liberate women by saving them from the *hijab* which was an instrument of backwardness and regression.

In 1928, the wife of the Shah, Reza Khan, and some of his daughters appeared unveiled on one of the balconies of the *Saida Masuma* shrine in Qom, where a large number of people had gathered to see in the new solar year. This greatly angered the clergy, in particular Ayatollah Bafqi, who shouted at them: "If you are Muslims, you must wear the *hijab*, and if not, you must leave this place". This outburst landed him in prison and then condemned him to exile. In 1934, with the British drawing up detailed plans to take over and control religion in Turkey and Iran, Reza Khan visited Turkey and conceived the intention of adopting the policies of the British, with Ataturk as his role model.

On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1935 Reza Khan announced a ban on the *hijab* during a graduation ceremony for female Higher Institute students, and instructed his forces to remove the chadors of any women wearing them in the street by force. This led to demonstrations by the clergy throughout Iran and to the massacre in the *Kawhar Shah* Mosque, where the blood of many women was spilt. A large number of women refused to go out without a *hijab*, and so remained inside their houses until 1941. It was impossible for them to do anything including meeting with other women and with relatives except via the roofs of their houses.

When Muhammad Reza Pahlavi took over from his father as Shah, he followed the same path using more modern methods. He announced, "My father was determined to fight the *hijab* and to make women remove it by force. Today I do not see this as necessary. The cultural conditions are now right for women to remove their *hijabs* voluntarily and to give them up gradually".

Reza Pahlavi's policy for westernising women met with success. He carried out extensive propaganda campaigns, and women found themselves facing considerable obstacles in entering higher education institutes or certain social circles whilst wearing a *hijab*. Women began to be used as sexual objects in many advertisements and films. The Shah announced to the men of his government: "We must westernise in form and in content". To this end, the Shah's twin sister Ashraf declared that she would exert great efforts to remove the word '*chador*' from the Iranian vocabulary.

On many occasions, the Shah could be seen concentrating on the visual aspect and on the unveiling of women. His sexualised vision of women did not consider their human identity or their particular needs and circumstances. In some of his speeches he announced that the best thing about women was their coquettishness and attractiveness to men.

Meanwhile, the first signs of the Revolution began to emerge in 1963. Day after day, right up to the final triumph of the Revolution in February 1979, there appeared signs of a return to the self and the reawakening of an identity kept hidden during the period of violence and American control over Iran. The phenomenon of women wearing the *hijab* in public spread and was a shining example of resistance. In the words of a 1978 Iranian secret police (SAVAK) report:

“In recent times a new trend has emerged among the people of Iran. A number of adolescent girls and young women want to wear the chador and hijab. This phenomenon is noticeable in public places and in the streets. There is no doubt that it signifies a new religious trend”.<sup>1</sup>

Imam Khomeini correctly identified the country’s sensitive spot when he called on the Iranian people to revolt against the Fascist corruption of society at that time:

“Only God knows what has befallen the Iranian people in these times, when women have been ordered to remove their *hijabs*. This rips apart their humanity. Can a Muslim possibly be pleased with what has happened and with this insolent order for women to unveil? No! The Iranian woman is also not pleased with this. She has dealt her opponent many blows and has revolted against this recklessness which calls unveiling a form of freedom. What kind of freedom is this?!”

There is no doubt that women played a very important role in the triumph of the Islamic Revolution and that they offered unparalleled support to its leaders, as declared by the Revolutionary Leader. Ayatollah Khomeini also later praised women’s pioneering and leading role in the Revolution:

Our uprising is indebted to women. Men took the example of the women into the streets. Women encouraged the men to revolt, and sometimes even led the way. Woman is a wonderful creature. She possesses fiendish, strong [and] passionate capabilities (Imam Khomeini, 6/5/1980)

Iranian society was transformed by the Revolution, and women were the pioneers of this transformation (Ayatollah Khomeini, 30/3/1982)

We must not forget the activities which women performed, particularly direct confrontations. Iranian women were able to turn into a revolutionary, political, conscious fighting element through their conscious faith ... Truly, women never lagged behind in any area or on any battleground (Ayatollah Khomeini, 6/3/1987)

Imam Khomeini confirmed women’s constructive role in a meeting with them when he said:

A woman is not a thing, but a great human being who raises and cares for society. Her embrace is the creator of men. She is the nursemaid of humankind, and the source of the people’s compassion and happiness. (From the Imam’s speech to the people to mark Women’s Day, 16/5/1979)

A special week was declared for the celebration of women, and the birthday of the Prophet’s daughter Fatima was announced as Mother’s Day, to reflect the great importance accorded to women:

If we want to announce a special day for women, the best day is the birthday of a-Zahra (Fatima), as she is the glory of prophethood and the Family of the Prophet, and she is the sun that shines in the skies of glorious Islam. (Imam Khomeini’s speech to mark Women’s Day, 6/5/1980)

Imam Khomeini’s successor Ayatollah Khomeini emphasised the freedom of women using a completely different conception to that of the Shah prior to the Islamic Revolution. Based on this conception, the Islamic Republic of Iran promulgated protective laws which were intended to protect society and to remove everything that prevented the effective participation and employment of women and which took away their rights on the basis of their sex and charms:

Islam mandates the *hijab* so that women may take on their social responsibilities in a pure and safe environment. The discussion of women's freedoms in the West today is a continuation of nineteenth century discourse. The injustice done to women in Western culture and literature has no comparison and no equal in any period of history. Women have been oppressed in all periods of history, but Western culture has sorely wronged them and subjected them to the greatest oppression by making them a plaything for men. Women must liberate themselves from the erroneous conception that they were created for men and for their amusement. However, it seems that freeing women from this conception is no less difficult than freeing men. This erroneous conception has taken root in their minds as the result of a long project of insinuation and suggestion (Ayatollah Khamenei, 1992)

It is said that a cleric went to Imam Khomeini after the triumph of the Revolution and asked him to order women to return to their homes and not to go out to their administrative jobs or into the streets, and not to get involved in social issues. The Imam answered that the time had come for women to leave their homes and participate in society as the environment had become cleansed of all the decay of the Pahlavis and the perversion spread by Western governments. Alongside this view, the Imam also confirmed the role of women within the family and their obligation to care for it. These opinions and theories about women are reflected in laws and legislation, both at the elevated level of the Constitution and the lower level of local consultations.

### **Legislation and protection of women's rights**

There is not enough time to examine all the laws introduced concerning women, which have been collected together to form large compilations within the publications of the Iranian Council (this is the most important religious authority in Iran -- also known as the Islamic Consultative Assembly). We can only offer a quick glance here at the general legislation within the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. Subsequent studies can offer an examination of the laws suitable for comprehensive study.

The introduction of the Constitution, which was approved by 98% of the Iranian people in 1979, contains the following statement:<sup>2</sup> "The family is the cornerstone of society, and the essential structure for mankind's growth and fulfilment". Therefore, agreement over beliefs and values is essential for the formation of the family which provides human undertakings with suitable conditions for achieving fulfilment and elevation. The Islamic government must provide opportunities to achieve this aim. In light of this understanding of the family, women can reject the worldview in which they are seen as inanimate things or tools used to promote consumerist and exploitative habits. While realising their vital responsibilities as mothers, they can assume their pioneering role of raising true believers, and participate alongside men in the spheres of active life so that they can ultimately bear greater responsibilities. This Islamic view grants women increased dignity and a greater value.

The laws contained in the legal code of the Supreme Council reveal its most important aims to be as follows<sup>3</sup>:

1. Increasing cultural sensitivities, deepening religious beliefs and encouraging a culture of decency and moral virtues
2. Providing equal opportunities for graduates from both sexes.
3. Quantitative and qualitative development of different areas of higher education
4. Increasing the participation of qualified women assuming senior posts of responsibility.

## Iranian Women in the Sphere of Education and Culture

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic ensures the provision of free education for all Iranians to the end of the intermediate stage and commits to developing the provision of free higher education in order to make the country self-reliant.<sup>4</sup>

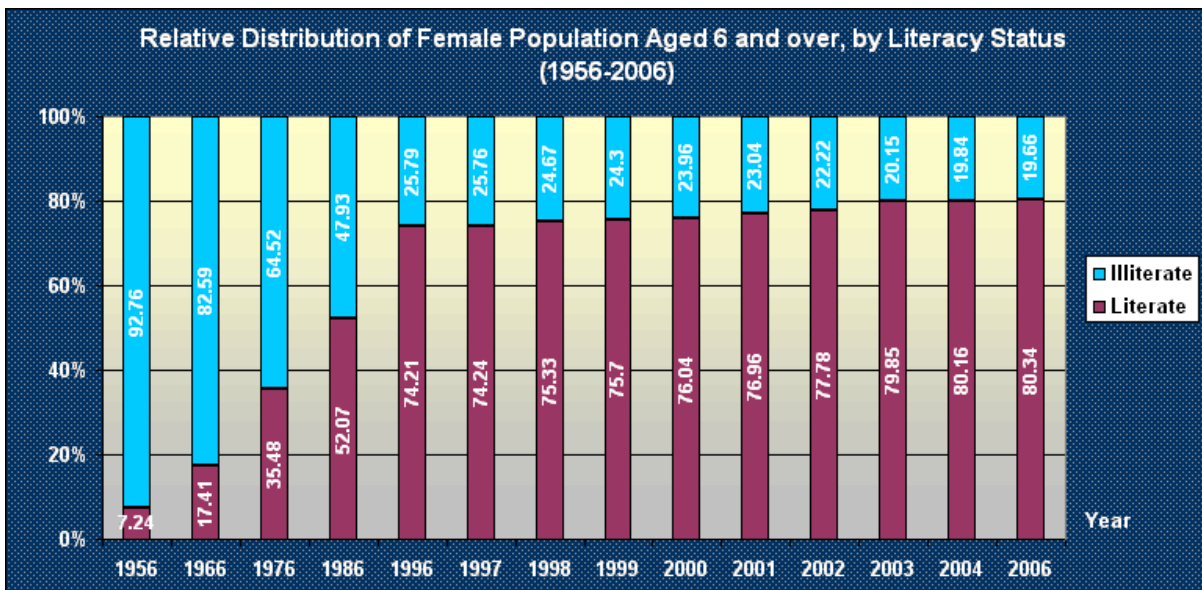
The *Treaty of Women's Rights and Responsibilities* also ensures women's rights to a high standard of learning and higher education through to the highest academic levels. It also recognises their right to gain the highest qualitative and quantitative levels of specialist skills.<sup>5</sup>

This educational revival began after the Islamic Revolution with a campaign fervently promoted by Imam Khomeini to wipe out illiteracy, and then with a call for higher standards of education. Imam Khomeini announced the struggle during the beginning of the triumphant revolutionary period in a speech, saying: "Illiterate men and women must begin their education, and the literate must teach them. Education and learning are forms of worship which Allah has called us to perform" (Imam Khomeini, 27/12/1980).

During the last twenty-five years, the Islamic Revolution has been able to realise significant levels of equality. It has achieved major successes with its struggle against illiteracy, which have caught the attention of international organisations including UNESCO which proclaimed Iran the most successful country in tackling this problem.

Iran has been able to raise the literacy rate of those over the age of six. The literacy rate in 1976 (two years before the Revolution) was 28.7% which rose to 85% by 2005.

Iranian women in particular have taken great strides in this area during the past thirty years, which is clear proof of successful educational and cultural planning after the Revolution.



The percentage of literate men and women in both urban and rural areas rose noticeably between 1986 and 2006, with the rate amongst women in urban areas rising by 30.7% and amongst women in rural areas by a considerable rate of nearly 90%. The overall female literacy rate rose from 35.5% in 1976 to 80.34% in 2006 (Report No. 8).

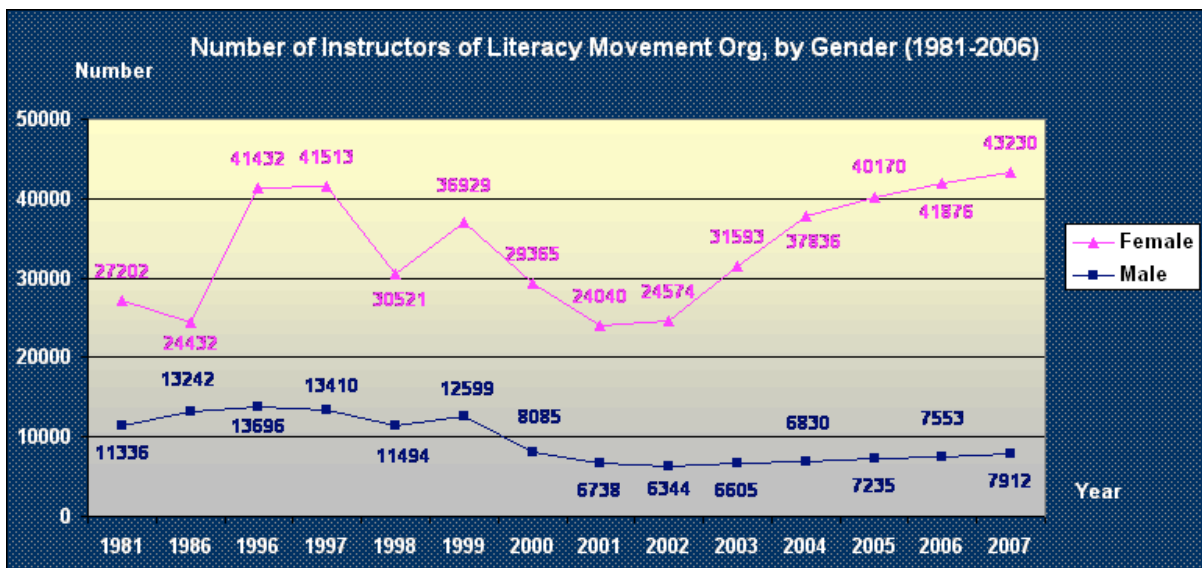
**Literacy rates for those aged over 6:**

1976 – Men 58.9% - Women 35.5%  
1986 – Men 71.4% - Women 51.9%  
2006 – Men 88.74% - Women 80.34%

**Youth literacy rate (15 – 24 years old):**

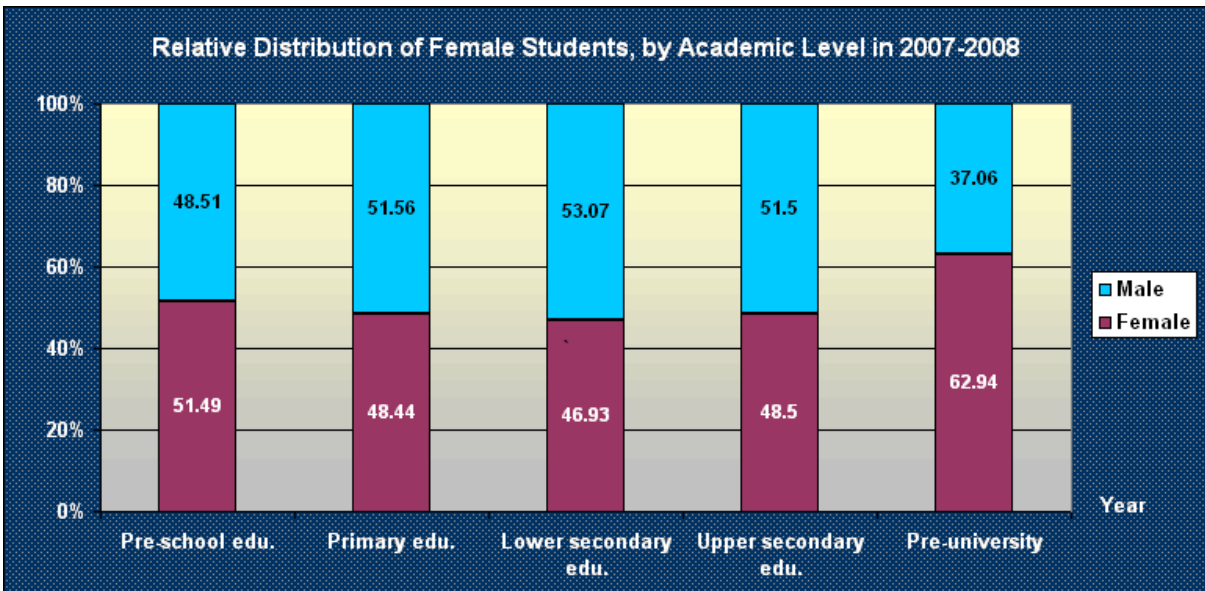
1976 – Men 71.05% - Women 42.67%  
1986 – Men 84.85% - Women 65.52%  
2001 – Men 97.3% - Women 94.1%  
2006 – Men 97.14% - Women 96.13%

The number of female teachers also rose considerably<sup>6</sup>:

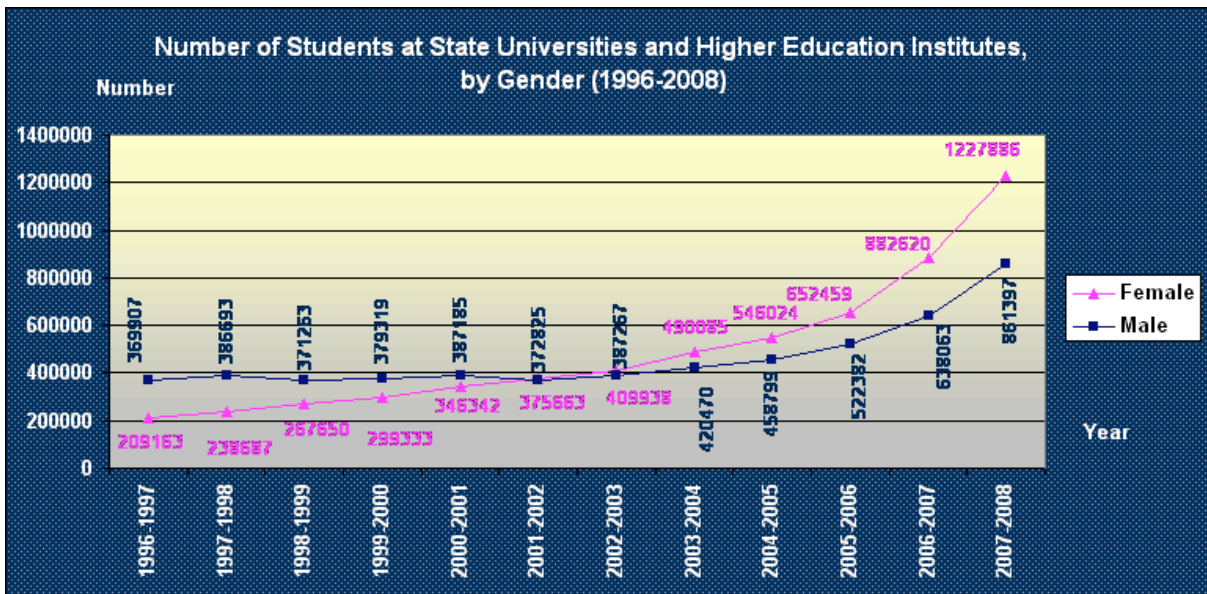


Secondary education also achieved truly impressive results, with many girls winning international prizes in various international competitions.

Statistics for the period 1986 to 2001 clearly show increasing progress in secondary education. Girls and boys achieved parity in 2007.<sup>7</sup>

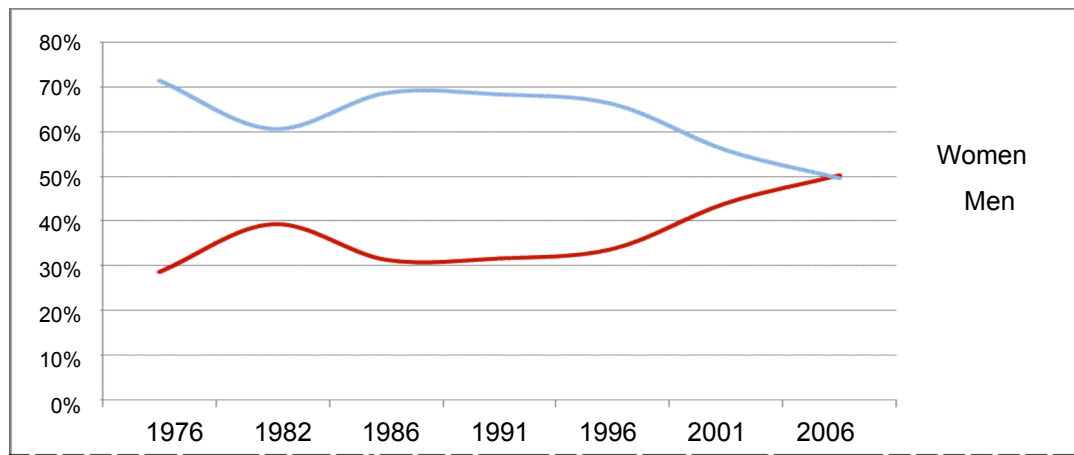


In higher educational institutions, Iranian women occupied 60% of the seats within an extraordinary short space of time and made unprecedented progress in all academic, specialist and technical fields. This is clear proof of successful academic planning for higher education in Iran after the Revolution. It also positively indicates that equal opportunities were provided to the two sexes.



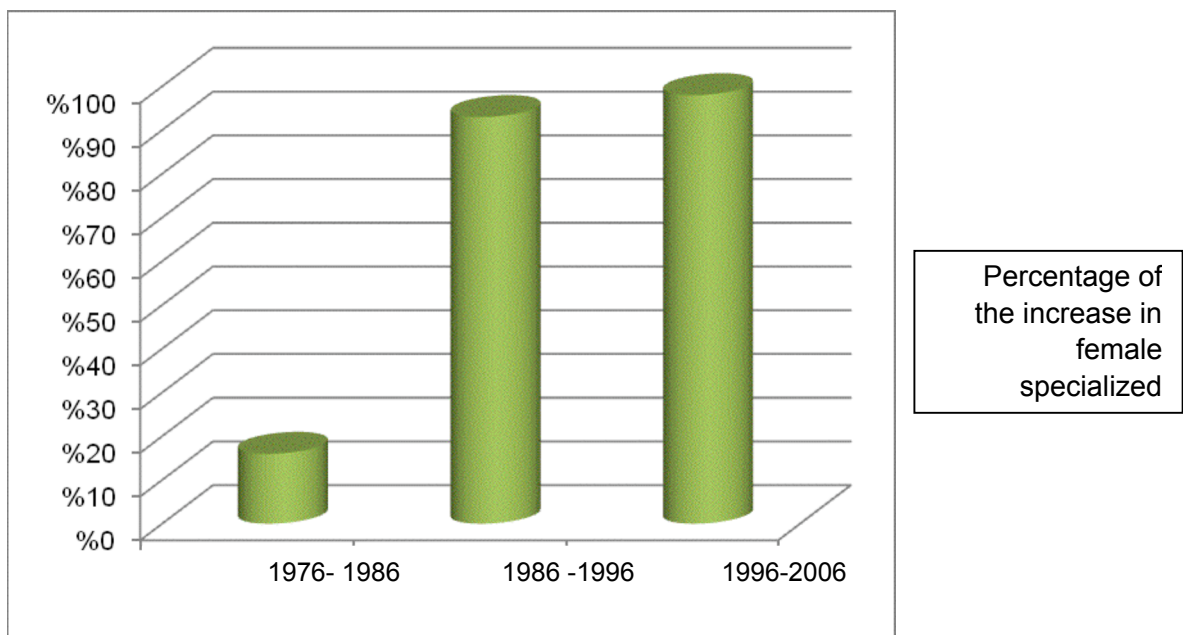
Percentage of university graduates by gender, 1976 to 2005





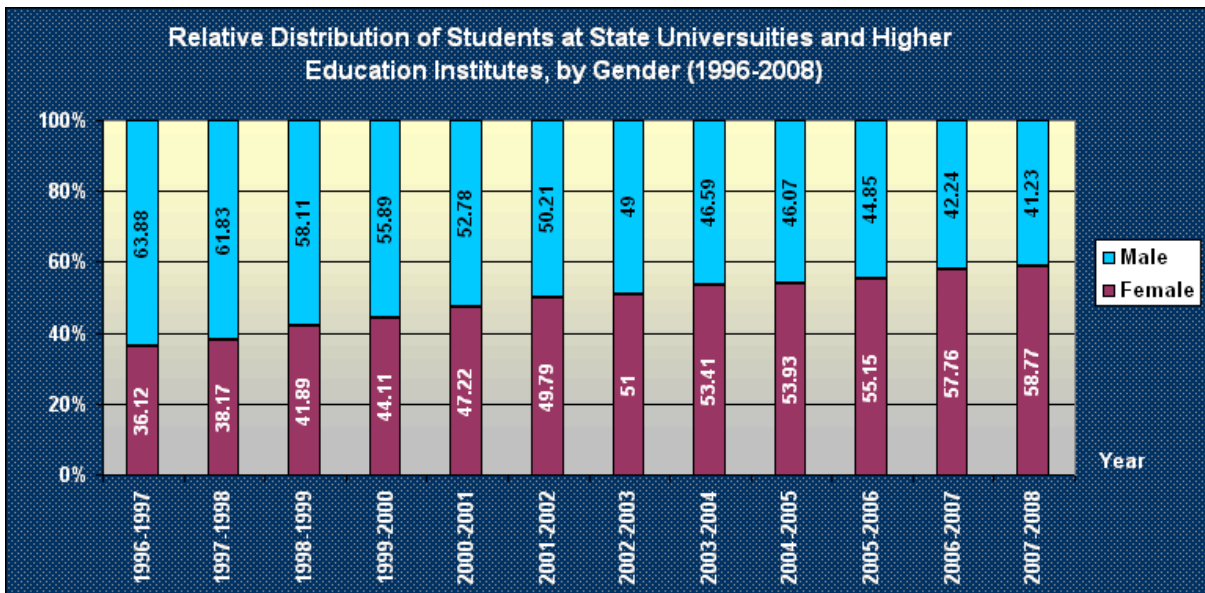
The percentage of female university graduates rose from 28.6% in 1976 to 50.3% in 2006 -- an increase of 75.9%. There was a noticeable decline of 30% in the percentage of men during the same period. The percentage of male and female university students was approximately equal in 2005.

Successes in the educational field, particularly medicine, have been astonishing. In 1977 Iran hosted a large number of doctors from neighbouring countries, at a time when its population was no more than 33 million. Today the population has doubled, and the country has also witnessed a copious increase in the number of national doctors.

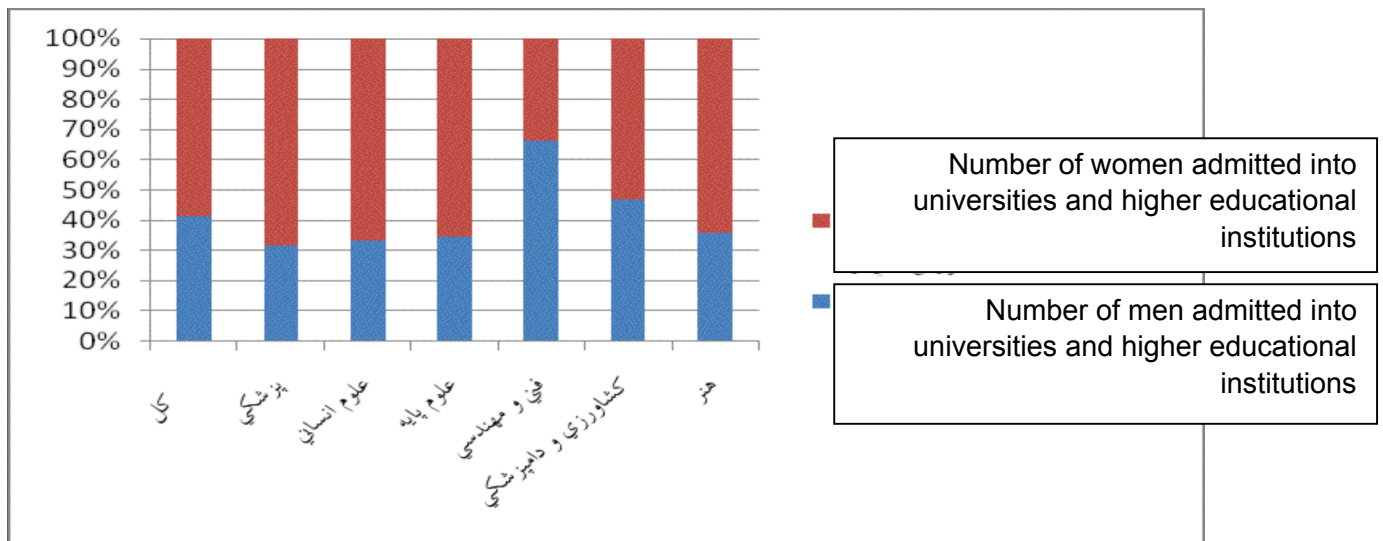


A number of Iran's female doctors have developed new innovations and achieved great scientific success. In recent years, for example, the world has witnessed the success of Dr. Fairouzi in treating spinal paralysis. Dr. Fairouzi, who laid the foundations for Schwann cell transplantation to repair spinal damage, said, "If a person has a sincere intent to cure the children of their people, then Allah will continually lavish upon them his kindness and care. I do everything in my power to assist those afflicted by war or struck with paralysis, so they will be granted a cure and their pain will end" (statement dated 29/8/2006).

Moving on to consider the provision of equal academic and teaching opportunities between the two sexes, statistics show that women have obtained 58% of the teaching jobs in higher education establishments nationwide and 60% of the teaching positions in universities.<sup>8</sup>



The percentage of women accepted into universities and higher education institutions rose from 32.5% in 1976 to 59.9% in 2007 -- a rise of more than 80%. The percentage amongst men fell during the same period by more than 38%.



The above graph shows that the percentage of women admitted into universities and higher educational institutions for the academic year 2006 – 2007 was greater than the percentage of men across all academic fields except technical studies and engineering. A total of 58.6% of those admitted were women. The highest university acceptance rate for women was 68.3% in the medical field.<sup>9</sup>

The policy implemented by the Islamic state has been one of female self-sufficiency in specialities relating to women, including childbirth. The ratio of women to men working in these fields has thus risen noticeably, as demonstrated by the statistics.

Figures for specialists in gynaecology and obstetrics (speciality and subspeciality) by gender over the last thirty years are:

Year	Gender	Male specialists	Female specialists
1976 – 1986		84%	16%
1986 – 1996		7%	93%
1996 - 2006		2%	98%

As the table above shows, the percentage of male specialists working in gynaecology and obstetrics (as a speciality or subspeciality) has declined significantly over the last three decades. It has fallen from 84% to just 2% -- a fall of 97.6%. At the same time, there has been an explosion in the percentage of female specialists working in gynaecology and obstetrics (as a general or sub-speciality). This figure has risen from 16% to 98% -- an increase of 512.5%.

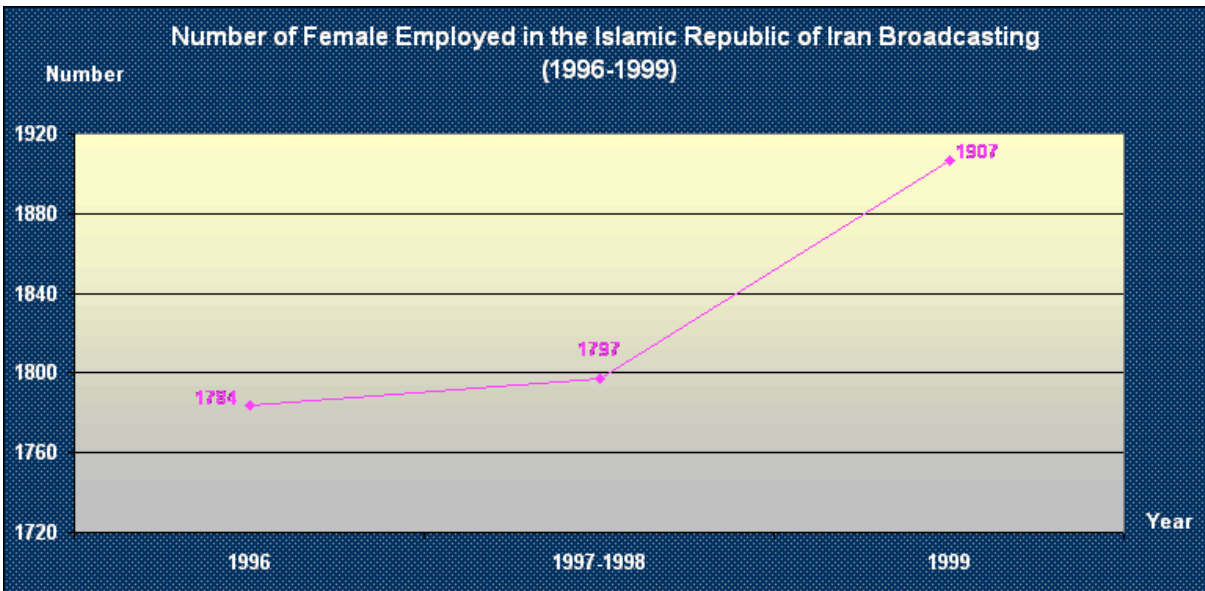
Top-level women also occupy an elevated position amongst pre-eminent practitioners within the country and abroad, as illustrated by statistics. 20 top-level women have made new discoveries and innovations on the international stage, and 877 female students were selected for the international Olympiad. A total of 114 top-level women in the field of medicine have been singled out for implementing outstanding projects and making new discoveries. The *Iranian Centre of Statistics* reports that there are 22,117 exemplary women working in education, academic, innovation and implementation.

In the cultural field, many leaders and managers place a particular emphasis on not letting women become involved in issues where they could be exploited as ‘sexual objects’. Many laws derive from this idea, as stated by the *Centre for Women’s Affairs in the Presidential Office*. For example, a law enacted in 1988 which prohibited the abuse of individuals, including disrespect towards women or the abuse of a woman’s body either through image or text.<sup>10</sup>

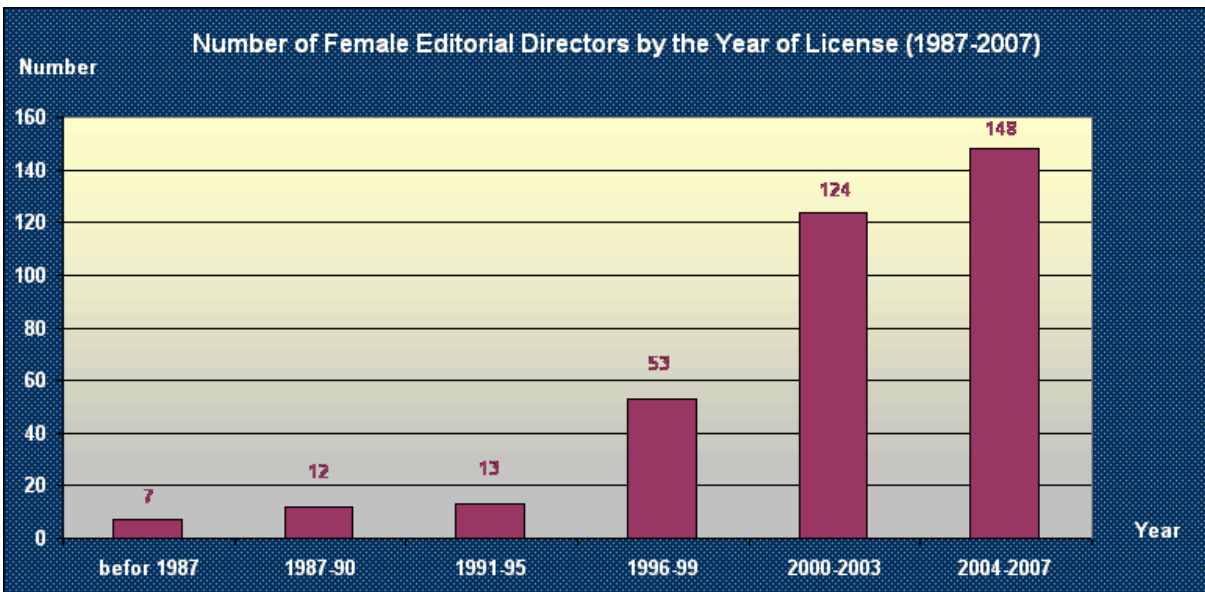
After the Revolution and in light of the decision to make the Islamic *hijab* obligatory in the media, particularly in the visual media, notions like “visual enjoyment”, “sexual exploitation” and “exploitation of women” have been totally eliminated from media production. Women’s presence in public spaces has become based on the principles of decency and purity.

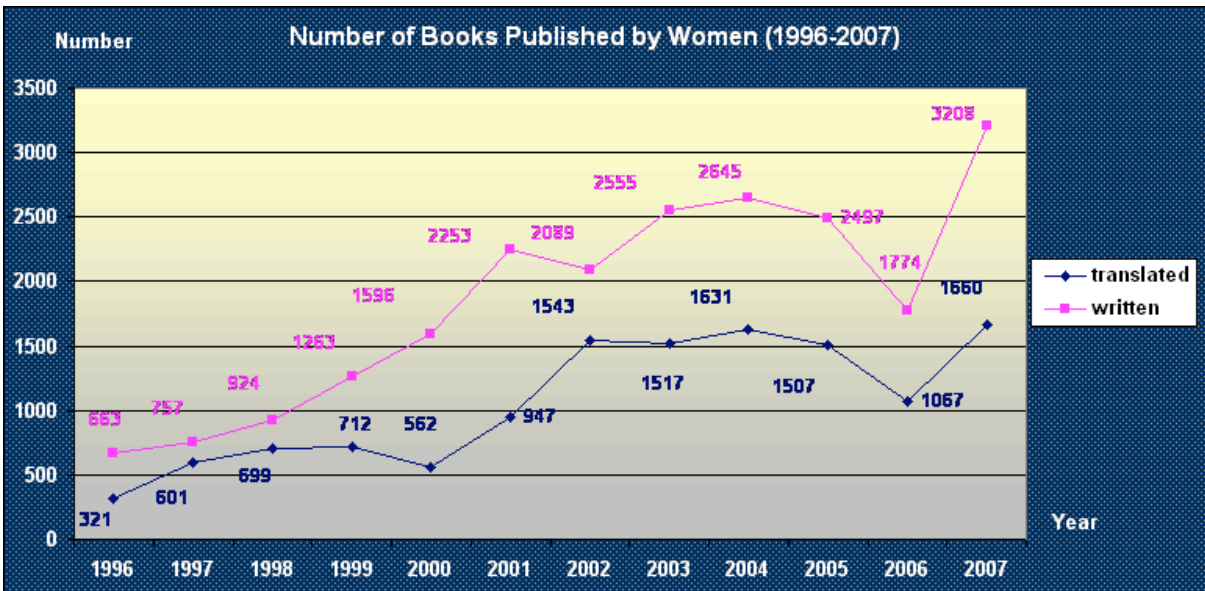
Since the Islamic Revolution, women have been more successful than men in the media field because of the special characteristics of their gender, such as their emotional and artistic traits. They have therefore participated more than men in producing visual and audio material in spheres relating to children, education, managing a family, etc. They have assumed a special role in advancing the public’s vision and social understanding through the media. The number of women working for radio and television stations in the Islamic Republic of Iran rose twofold in the production and technical engineering sector between 1992 and 2001 and by 2.5 times in the training, research and planning sector.

The number of women working for radio and television stations has increased day after day, wearing the *hijab* and without showing off their charms.<sup>11</sup>

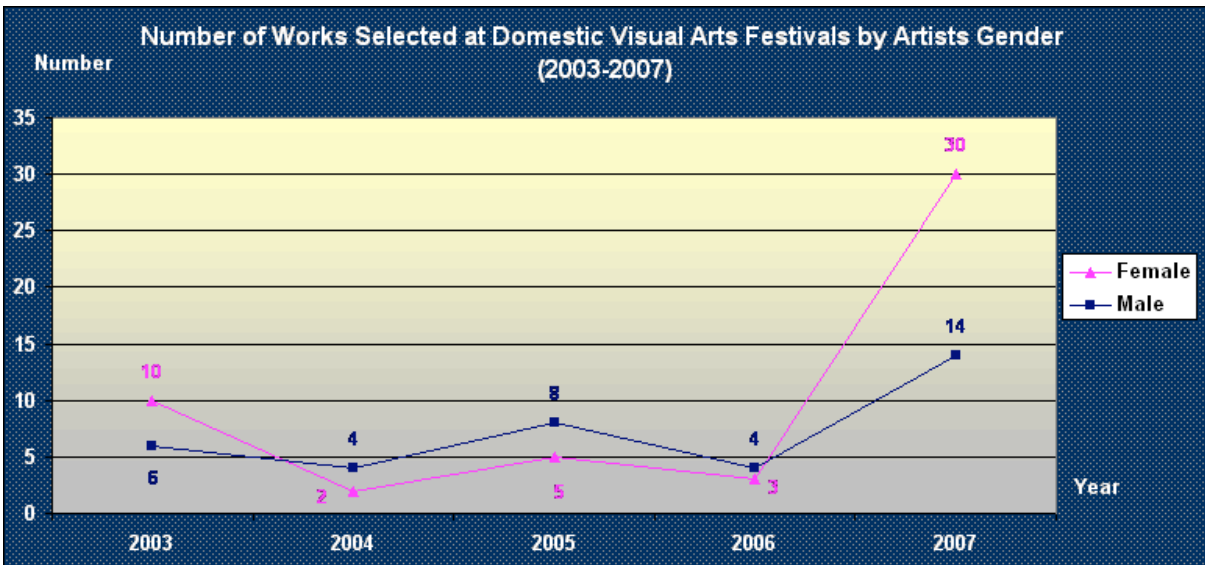


Women's intellectual and artistic influence has increased, particularly in film production and magazine publishing. There has been an astonishing increase in the number of female writers, as indicated by the following graph<sup>12</sup>:

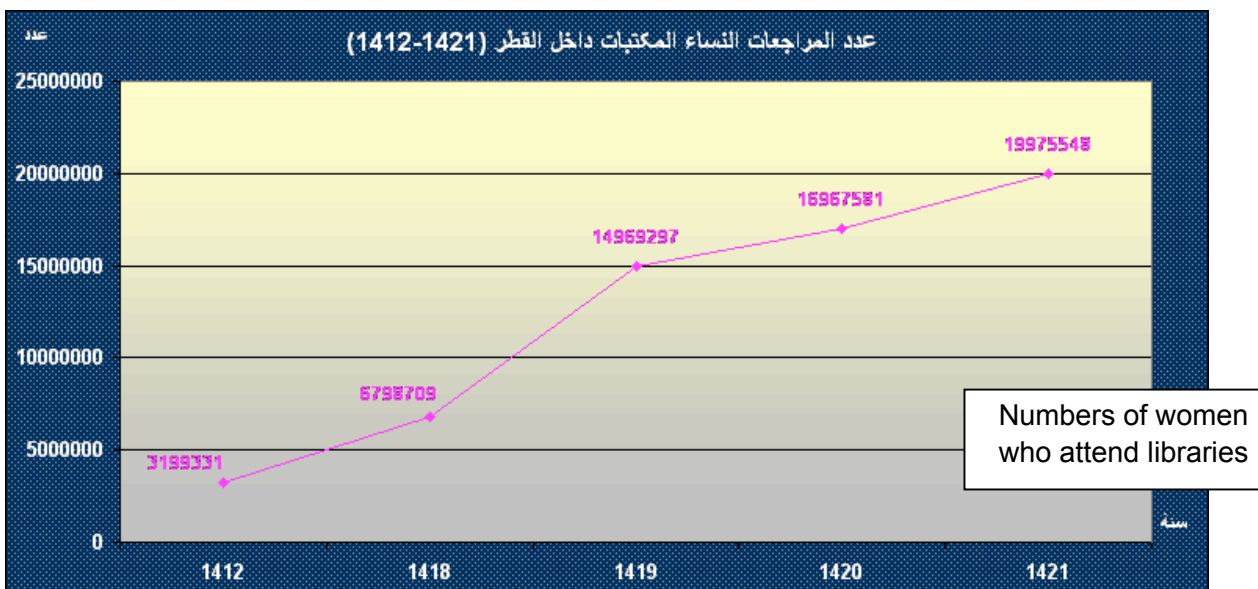
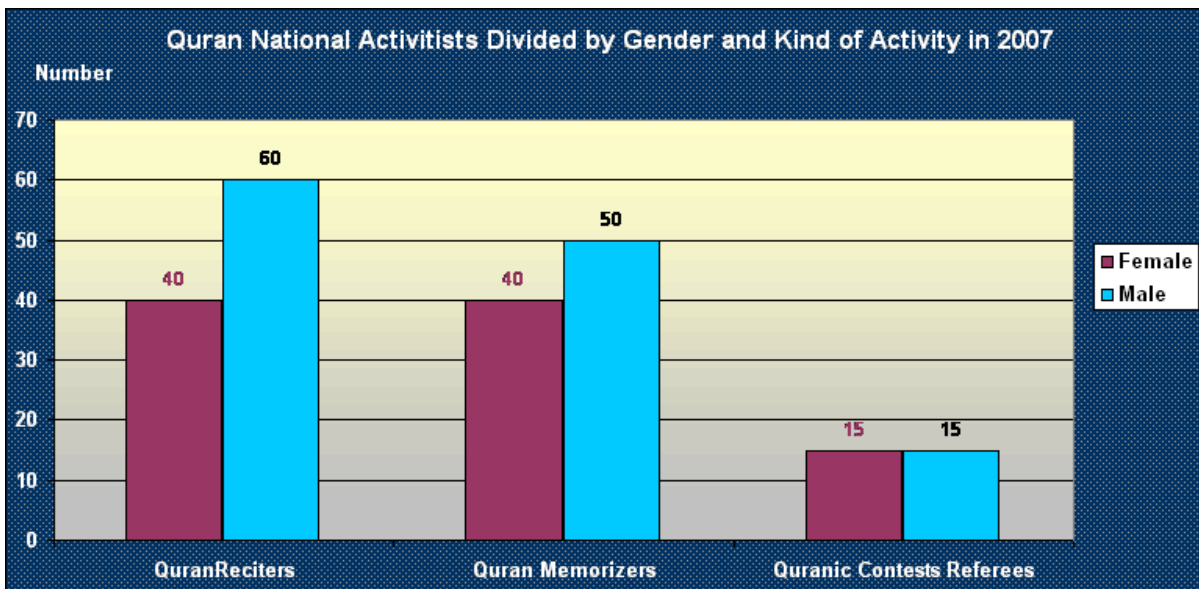




A number of these women have won international prizes, particularly in the aesthetic arts:



The number of women actively pursuing Quranic studies and religious subjects has multiplied in the doctrinal atmosphere governing the country. The number of female book readers and library subscribers has also risen, denoting a general rise in culture amongst women<sup>13</sup>:



### The Social and Political Activities of Iranian Women

The leaders of the Islamic Revolution called for significant female participation in the political and social spheres – in particular on the following:

Women have the right to participate in politics, and in fact must participate in decision making. Islam is a political religion. Everything in it is political, even religious practice. (Imam Khomeini, 15/9/1980)

Islamic history has witnessed women owning and selling their own property, and being present in important political and social circles. “Believing women come to you [the Prophet] to swear allegiance, so long as they do not commit idolatry against Allah”. Women swore allegiance to the Prophet, as the Prophet did not believe that men should swear allegiance whilst women merely submit. The West is lagging behind Islam in this area by one thousand and three hundred years, despite all their claims of democracy and freedom of expression. Women can

participate in society in every way – studying, trading, working in an office or a factory, undertaking the same social, political and combative activities as men. All this must be done within the limits of the *hijab* (Ayatollah Khamenei, 30/10/1986)

We are strengthened when our women, both the elderly and the youth, those old and young, enter the cultural, economic and military spheres and move forward alongside men along the path of religious perfection and towards the great aims which the Noble Quran has prescribed. (Advice of Imam Khomeini, 15/3/1968)

The Iranian Constitution says: “Members of the Iranian people, both men and women, are protected equally by the Law and enjoy all the same humanitarian, political, economic and cultural rights under the protection of our system of Islamic principles”. Some of these rights are specifically confirmed in the *Treaty of Women’s Rights and Responsibilities*, such as the right to freedom of thought, protection from objections to the right to enjoy social equality when implementing the law without consideration of gender (male or female), the right to acquire knowledge and the right to establish parties, participate in elections and stand for parliament (Clauses 3-11 Section One, and Clauses 112 and 115 Section Four).

The percentage of female candidates standing for membership of the *Islamic Advisory Council* in the first electoral session (1980) for parliamentary elections rose to 165.06% in the seventh session, a rise of 227.48%. The statistics show the percentage of female candidates standing for membership of municipal and village councils increased noticeably in the third session of these elections as compared to the second session. The percentage of female members of municipal and village councils rose by 61.9% between the first (1980) and third (1988) electoral sessions.

Relative distribution of female candidates and elected female members of the Islamic Advisory Council:

Parliamentary elections	Candidates		Elected	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
First	90	3.02	4	1.66
Second	32	1.98	4	1.66
Third	47	1.99	5	1.6
Fourth	86	3	9	3.6
Fifth	351	6.43	14	5.6
Sixth	504	7.3	13	4.4
Seventh	806	9.89	12	4.4

Women have held posts as ministerial advisors on women’s affairs in forty ministries and government bodies, and have acted as advisors on women’s affairs in 31 provinces. Some 250 women have held advisory posts for women’s affairs on town councils and 400 women have taken up positions of responsibility in villages and the countryside. This all gives a basic idea of the prominent decision-making positions women have assumed. The number of women active in the countryside has increased during the past two decades by 156%. These rural female officials were chosen from amongst the members of village councils, who were in turn chosen by the villagers via electoral processes for the village councils in various electoral sessions.

**Ratio of female managers, legislators and senior employees to total female employees:**

1976 – Men 0.52 – Women 0.11  
 1986 – Men 0.43 – Women 0.16



2001 – Men 2.11 – Women 1.71  
 2006 – Men 2.9 – Women 3.36

The percentage of female managers, legislators, senior employees and officials increased significantly between 1976 and 2007. The ratio of female managers to total female employees rose from 0.16% in 1986 to 2.32% in 1996, and then to 3.36% in 2006. This figure rose markedly in the non-government sector.<sup>14</sup>

Women's non-government organisations (NGOs)	Percentage of female members of municipal and village Islamic councils	Percentage of female delegates of the Islamic Advisory Council	Indicator Year	Five Year Plan
0	0	2%	1989	1st
0	0	3.3%	1993	
55	0	3.3%	1995	2nd
137	0.84%	5.6%	1999	
248	0.84%	4.4%	2000	Third
480	1.51%	4.4%	2004	

The percentage of women's NGOs increased by 998.5% between 1997 and 2006. Organisations with a socio-cultural character recorded the highest growth rate of 1500%.

The *Women's Socio-Cultural Council* assists these organisations with comprehensive planning in the field of cultural and social affairs for women, conducting studies, smoothing the way for effective attendance and participation and taking all the necessary measures to draw attention to women's problems. The *Centre for Women and Family Affairs* undertakes to implement these laws and provide protection from social harm targeting women or the family.

### **The Economic Activities of Iranian Women**

The Iranian Constitution states that: "Every individual has the right to select the work they wish to engage in, providing that this does not contravene the provisions of Islam, the public interest or the rights of others (Article 28)".



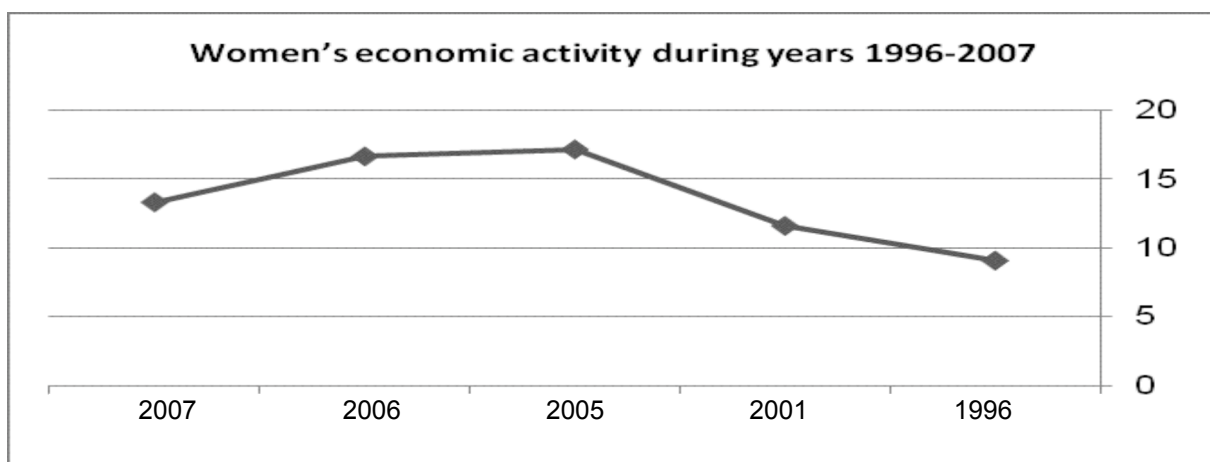
The *Treaty of Women's Rights and Responsibilities in the Islamic Republic of Iran* states that women have the following rights<sup>15</sup>:

- The right to enjoy full financial rights when married (Clause 28 Section 2)
- The right to enjoy the advantages of equal working conditions with men and other women (Clause 102 Section 3)
- The right to her own personal money and property and to make use of them within the framework of the law and legislation (Clause 29 Section 3)
- Upon reaching the legal age of maturity, the right to work and to select the type of work, the right to utilize individual capital and take responsibility within the framework of Islamic law, to gain an income and choose how to spend it (Clause 101 Section 3)
- Right to receive payments from her husband to pay for the upkeep of the house when required, and the right to uphold the effect of women's domestic work on family economy and national income (Clause 98).

After the Islamic Revolution and the war with Iraq that was forced upon Iran, the country exerted great efforts to improve women's economic capabilities, including<sup>16</sup>:

- Increasing women's economic capabilities at the individual and family level by introducing protective laws in the field of marital payments, dowries and meeting women's primary needs
- Supporting women's economic participation by introducing protective labour laws which prevented women from performing difficult and dangerous work under Article 75 of the Labour Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran, introducing a law preventing the firing of pregnant women, granting 185 days of maternity leave after childbirth on a full salary, calculating a period of pregnancy leave based on years of service, setting a time allocation for breastfeeding of one hour a day for two years, banning hard labour and child labour, ensuring the freedom of association and the freedom to set up organisations and unions related to the sphere of work, increasing loans in agriculture and village women's handicrafts and helping women supporting families in the countryside and in towns.

As for economic rights in terms of equal wages and the material entitlements of the two sexes, wages paid for undertaking private work do not differ between the two sexes, as stipulated in the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Support payments are the only payments that are different as they are based exclusively on men's wages. This is because of men's role in supporting their families (wives and children). The sum given as a support payment thus also applies to working women who are supporting their families, because of their supportive role.<sup>17</sup>



The female economic participation rate was 13.9% in 2007 -- a 3.33% fall on 2006. The female economic participation rate during the last decade rose from 9.1% in 1996 to 16.6% in 2006, and then fell to 13.3% in 2007.

### **Women and the Family**

The family is the essential building block of society, and is the wellspring of humanity's development and progress. All laws promulgated in Iran view the family with consideration and appreciation. When studying women and women's affairs, the pinnacle of good practice is to be found in the Islamic Republic's view of women - a view which does not consider women separately from the family and inexorably links the two together. This can be seen in the title of the Women's Office of the President of the Republic at the *Centre for Women and Family Affairs*. It is said that a view of women which excludes her family or a view of the family which does not consider women is inherently unjust.

Statistics show that in some developed countries, despite higher standards of living, women suffer from an identity crisis and the disintegration of the family. The Islamic Republic of Iran achieves development in various social, economic and cultural spheres whilst upholding the family structure and ensuring a woman's ability to maintain an even keel and strengthen the family support system.

The results of a statistical survey of men and women before and after the triumph of the Iranian Islamic Revolution show that the special concern for the idea of the family has deep cultural roots amongst Iranians. Therefore, and considering the cultural policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the desired aim of Iranian experts and thinkers is to achieve both qualitative and quantitative development for women and the family in all spheres of life.<sup>18</sup>

Government leaders mention the family and its important role in their speeches on many occasions. Just as we hear assertions on the pivotal role of women in the family, we can also see that the problems and difficulties which women face can mostly be attributed to the family. These two notions are discussed in the speeches of Imam Khomeini and the current leader Ayatollah Khamenei:

Islam has drawn up a design for mankind covering every minute detail. It has drawn up designs for him so that he may enter into the family and society. In order to create a refined, virtuous person it has established rules and laws which cover all aspects of his individual, married and family life, and the time of pregnancy, birth, suckling, weaning and raising in his mother's lap. (Imam Khomeini, 1965)

Imam Khamenei confirmed the rights given to women in Islam, and the provisions awarded to her by a marriage contract, to which she has a legal right:

Women have the right to set conditions within the contract, conditions which do not violate her elevated place or Islamic law... Similarly an Islamic ruler has the right to stop anyone who harms his wife in any way, including scolding her. (Imam Khamenei, 1978)

The fundamental job assigned to women is marriage and motherhood, even though some see this as a diminution of women. Motherhood is the most important job for a woman. Should society one day require her to take up her social obligations and see this as her religious duty, she must take up her social responsibilities without neglecting her role as a mother. Let a-Zahra (Fatima) be her example in this. (Ayatollah Khamenei, 13/3/1984)

The most important thing affecting a woman is what happens within her house and her family, as these ensure her dignity, her position and her rights. The law must elevate their role, just as women must do their part to improve the deteriorated situation from which they are suffering.

They must learn and become educated in culture, knowledge and religion, and be aware of their individual and family rights as granted by Islam. (Ayatollah Khamenei, 18/2/1997)

There are some who pay great attention and show excessive sensitivity to violence against women by men, yet they do not give priority to what happens to women within the family. Statistics show an increased rate of violence by American and European men oppressing and tyrannizing their wives and children with ease. These people ignore all that to focus on women's clothes and on the *hijab*. (Ayatollah Khamenei, 12/5/1990)

After the Islamic Revolution, several attempts have been made to put a stop to the oppression of women within the home, as follows:

First: Laws have been implemented making it obligatory for a husband to pay his wife for the work she does in the house, and to pay her dowry when demanded at current prices.

Second: On 28/8/1362 *Hijri* (19/11/1983 CE), provisions were added to the marriage contract to offer protection to women should their husbands violate their marital duties or mistreat them. The *Supreme Legal Advisory Council* approved the idea that the institute for validating documents and property – acting according to the notion of upholding the rights of women and providing legal means to protect their rights – should make sure the couple understand the provisions stipulated in the marriage contract and sign their approval.

These provisions all take into account women's future rights and interests. It is evident that signing these provisions gives a woman the right to an immediate divorce should she face any of the issues covered therein. If her husband divorces her for any reason other than her own bad conduct or a shortcoming on her part, she will acquire half of the property which he has earned during the period of their marriage.

Third: A 13-article law named "*Policies of Women's Work in the Islamic Republic of Iran*" has been promulgated, which includes the following articles<sup>19</sup>:

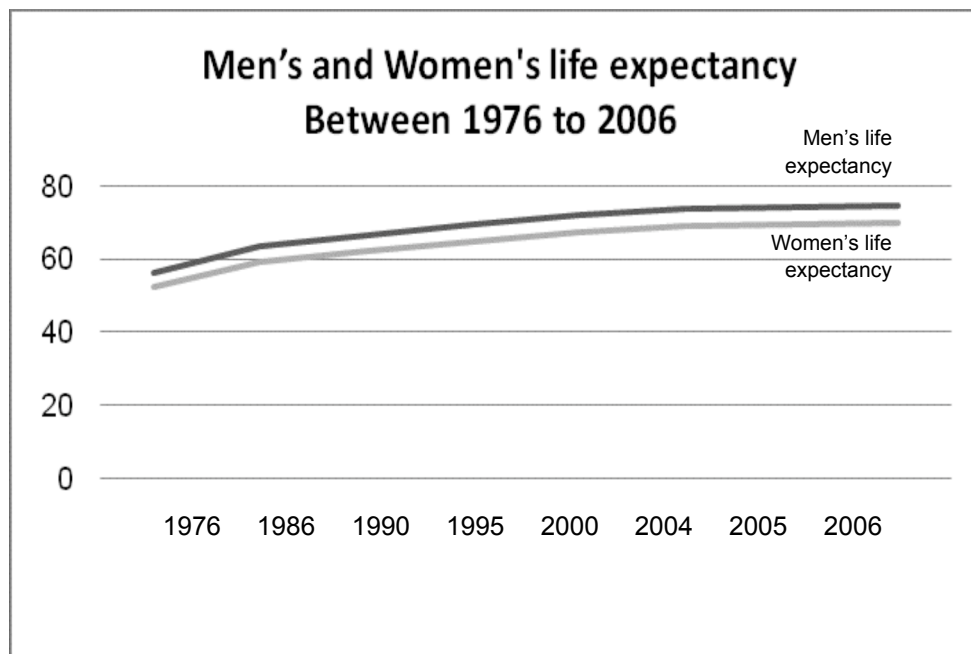
- Changing the type of work from 'arduous' to 'light'
- Awarding six months pregnancy leave
- Setting up children's crèches next to their mothers' places of work
- Allowing women to work half shifts
- Allowing women to work divided shifts
- Granting specific time (in hours) to breastfeeding mothers
- Law on Women's Shares
- Providing facilities for women whose husbands move from one town to another
- Early retirement
- Exempting married women from working abroad.

The important point that was borne in mind when devising the laws of the Islamic Republic on women's work was the integration of women working as housewives into the body of active people working in economic activities and production.

At present, Iranian women perform the role of mother and wife as in the past, but have also devised strategies to harmonise all their other social activities alongside their main role within the family, i.e. as mother and wife. We sometimes see women changing the type of work they do and taking on work which allows them more time at home to care for their family and be with their husband and children. We also see them choosing not to increase their salaries and reducing their working hours in order to better care for their

families. In this respect, and in order to establish familial bonds, ensure firm support for the family and meet the psychological and social needs of its members, and considering the significant problems which married working women face, the idea of reducing working hours and giving an entire monthly wage to women with children working for government bodies has been put at the top of the agenda by the Cabinet, and the *Centre for Women and Family Affairs* has drawn up the proposed regulations. It is expected that this will alleviate some anxiety about the results of women working outside the home.<sup>20</sup>

Statistics show that the government has been successful in preventing women feeling any detriment from working both at home and outside. According to the statistics, the percentage of life expectancy has increased from 56.23% in 1976 to 74.51% in 2006. This rate has increased more for women than for men, across all age categories.



Life expectancy by gender

## Conclusion

The religious ideology that initiated the Islamic revolution in Iran has been reflected by leaders of the revolution since then in the laws of the Islamic Republic. The main points all leaders of the revolution insisted on - from Imam Khomeini to Imam Khamenei - are as follows: First, to protect the chastity of both men and women and to warn people against looking at, and perceiving women, as if they are sexual objects; secondly, to protect the family and to have laws that ensure this, as well as laws that protect women's rights; and thirdly, to balance the need for women in the political, social and economic fields with the need for women to keep their important role inside the family.

Thirty years after the revolution, we can now look at the achievements made in Iran regardless of whether media outlets are pro- or against the government. The statistics indicate high level of women's education in Iran in all fields, particularly in the field of medicine, human sciences and art.

A number of analysts believe that the laws that forbid and prevent women being perceived as sexual objects are the main reason why many women participate in the scientific and social fields – particularly laws where women and men are not physically segregated as in Saudi Arabia. In Iran, men and women study together in university, except a number of universities and colleges which are for women only. In addition to these laws,

there are also laws that give women the right to education and to significant social entitlements - even more than men; for example, military service which women are not obliged to do, and which men are obliged to do for a 2 year period. In addition to this, there are various allowances that men pay whereas women are not liable for these payments.

These are in addition to rights given to women to help them with family responsibilities, while at the same time giving them the opportunity to work outside the house, without being forced to use any of their personal money for household expenses (Editor's note: In Islam and in Iranian law, women are due payment for household work). Women are also protected against all physical and moral abuse from their husbands through a statement that they both sign before marriage.

One of the most important reasons why women in Iran have become very involved in society is that they receive substantial legal protection and entitlement from religious rules, as well as the constitution of the country, at the time of giving birth and after the birth of their children.

*The opinions in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of Conflicts Forum.*

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> "The Iranian Revolution in SAVAK documents", Vol 1, /86
  - <sup>2</sup> Introduction, Constitution of the Islamic Republic
  - <sup>3</sup> Karamadi System / 113
  - <sup>4</sup> Article 30, Constitution of the Islamic Republic
  - <sup>5</sup> *Treaty of Women's Rights and Responsibilities*, Section Three, Clause 78
  - <sup>6</sup> Iranian Statistics Report (produced every 5 years) / Education
  - <sup>7</sup> Iranian Statistics / 39
  - <sup>8</sup> Periodic Report / 35
  - <sup>9</sup> Periodic Report / 37
  - <sup>10</sup> Trajectory of Women's Development / 91
  - <sup>11</sup> Iranian Statistics / 29
  - <sup>12</sup> Iranian Statistics / 33
  - <sup>13</sup> Iranian Statistics / 29
  - <sup>14</sup> Periodic Report / 15
  - <sup>15</sup> Trajectory of Women's Development / 52
  - <sup>16</sup> Ibid. / 54
  - <sup>17</sup> Period Report / 26
  - <sup>18</sup> Periodic Report / 2
  - <sup>19</sup> Security and Morals of the Family / 26
  - <sup>20</sup> Period Report 26