

Education in Iran: Limitations Imposed by Theocracy

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Abstract. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the shift to a fully theocratic state radically changed society, including the structure, culture, and intellectual focus of education. Under clerical “guardianship of the jurispudent,” curriculum at all levels became a tool for political and ideological propaganda, with as much as 25% of the day devoted to Shi’ite religious instruction. Systematic changes completely reversed any hint of modernization from pre-revolutionary days, institutionalizing a significant discriminatory bias throughout society. Religious minorities are sanctioned and systematically harassed with impunity. The Islamization of education included forced conformity of all courses of study and textbooks to Shi’ite rules and values, suppression of any non-Shi’ite beliefs or historical context, the institution of religious loyalty tests for teachers and students, and mandatory segregation of schools by gender. Despite almost equal attainment at every educational level, massive educational inequities persist for women, who are officially excluded from many high-paying technical fields. Rigid theocratic control ultimately limits attempts to modernize or democratize education and any associated opportunities.

Keywords: Iran; democratization; education; gender; discrimination.

The Rise of the Theocratic State

In modern society, it is rare to find a country that has gone from a constitutional monarchy to a complete theocracy. Just decades ago, Iran was considered the Europe of the Middle East, a model of modern western social and cultural identity, but in less than four decades this has completely changed. This paper presents a brief analysis of the effects of these changes on access to education and democratic opportunities for women and minorities in Iran.

Although Iran is a modern republican state with a popularly elected parliament and president, Muslim traditions and practices of Sharia supersede modern standards of secular law and civil rights. The Assembly of Experts, a group of clerics elected by popular ballot, appoints the Supreme Leader, who serves as Commander-in-Chief, appoints judges, and has the final say in selection of key government ministers. However, all candidates for the Assembly and positions of national leadership must be vetted by the Guardian Council (Cole, 2015), twelve experts in Islamic law, chosen directly or indirectly by the Supreme

Leader. Hence, any action by the President or Parliament “depends by law largely on the willingness of the Supreme Leader to permit it” (Kagan, 2012, para. 4).

In 1979, following the overthrow of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became Supreme Leader. Khomeini decried secular nationalism as “a tool of the devil,” (Cole, 2015), exhorting, “We will break all the poison pens of those who speak of nationalism, democracy, and such things.” (Alexander & Hoenig, 2008, p. 26). Khomeini’s is popularly associated with the 12th Imam, a messianic figure in Shi’ite theology (Cook, 2011). Although he never explicitly identified himself as the 12th Imam, he styled himself as “guardian of Muslims” in the “first government of God on earth” (Ahdiyyih, 2008, para. 3), invoking the principle of *velayt-e faqih*, or “guardianship of the jurisprudent.”

At the same time, the Shi’ite clergy undertook draconian measures to limit the power and influence of Iranian intellectuals, many of whom had developed close associations with Western ideas and values. Many students and academics who were previously allies of the radical clergy began to challenge Khomeini, calling for democracy and nationalism. By 1980, universities re-emerged as centers of resistance. Khomeini declared *Daneshgahi Jahadeh*, Universities Holy War, “to ensure the prevalence of Islamic faith in every aspect of university life” (Tamer, 2010, p 65). All schools and universities were closed, including primary and secondary schools as well as all foreign-run schools. Thousands of teachers were expelled or forced to retire. Textbooks and instructional materials were completely revised to purify them from un-Islamic influence. Many courses in the humanities were eliminated and religion courses added instead. Behavior and dress were regulated and in many cases, students and faculty were required to affirm belief in Islam and the authority of *velayt-e faqih*. In 1983, Iranian public universities began to reopen, but many teachers and intellectuals had already fled Iran to escape persecution, which weakened the quality of education, further undermining any chance of reversion to a democratic culture (Afshar, 1985; Tamer, 2010).

Following the death of Khomeini in 1989, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who had served as President since 1981, was elected Supreme Leader. Khamenei further consolidated the unity of theological and secular rule, involving the office of Supreme Leader more intimately in daily political affairs (Nasr, 2007). In the late 1990s, President Mohammad Khatami briefly challenged the supremacy of Khamenei’s clerical rule in favor of popular sovereignty, personal liberty, and freedom of speech (Cole, 2015). However, this challenge was quickly sidelined, as Khamenei reasserted personal control (Nasr, 2007).

Islamic conservatives regained the presidency in 2005, with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a populist hardliner and leader of a faction advocating an Islamic government “free from democratic pretenses and devoid of modern concepts of human rights and the equality of the sexes” (Adhiyyih, 2008, para. 17). In 2009, Ahmadinejad’s re-election to a second term was briefly opposed by the relative liberals of the Green Movement, who accused the government of stealing the election. However, Khamenei affirmed the results and announced that he would not tolerate the Green Movement or its agenda (Milani, 2015). For

the next six months, the Greens staged protests and demonstrations in favor of popular rule, but the Khamenei regime soon reasserted control, suppressing opposition (Cole, 2015). With the election of Hassan Rouhani as president in 2013, there once again appeared to be a chance for reform but, without support from the ruling ayatollahs, changes have been largely superficial (Nader, 2015).

Rouhani's re-election as president on May 20, 2017, has been widely acclaimed in Iran as a populist victory legitimizing a mandate for reform, defeating hard-line cleric Ebrahim Raisi with a 57% plurality (Erebrink, 2017). Reformists and moderates won all 21 seats in the Tehran City Council, and major gains in several other cities, including Mashad, Raisi's home town. However, as Erebrink noted, hard-liners have their own centers of power and "Iranian activists are already bracing for a possible wave of arrests, as happened after Mr. Rouhani was elected in 2013" (para. 24).

Modernization of education in Iran

Traditional Iranian education was completely under the control of the clergy, existing solely to teach the Quran and Islamic law (Curtis & Hoogland, 2008). In 1907, Reza Pahlavi Shah established a Ministry of Education with a mandate to promote nationalism through education, patriotism, civic responsibility, and rule of secular law (Tamer, 2010). The mandate of this Ministry was threefold, to modernize, secularize, and Westernize education as a public institution of the state, free of clerical control. Additional measures such as the abolition of veiling and opening of the labor market to women enlisted still more support from the growing class of urban educated elites for modern, secular reforms.

Each faction of Iranian society viewed the importance of education reform differently. The Shah viewed education reform as a tool for nation-building, to blunt the influence of Islam, and "establish a monopoly of power" (Khaki & Baht, 2015, p. 47). Intellectuals and educators regarded reform as a goal worthy in itself, which would ultimately democratize society. Urban families regarded education as a tool for upward mobility, reserving the highest levels of education for themselves. Rural families were torn between the potential of education to secure their children's futures and fear of moral corruption from modern secularized schools. The merchant class regarded education as a drain on productivity, creating idle parasites, while the clergy, most of whom came from the merchant class, opposed nearly all educational reform as an effort to undermine the authority of religious rule (Tamer, 2010).

From the beginning, the Shi'ite clergy were powerful vocal opponents of attempts to democratize and modernize education. Secular Western values were condemned as corrupt and un-Islamic and, in the end, public education failed to equalize opportunity in any significant way. Children from the provinces and lower classes could not compete with richer urban rivals for highly contested university seats. Urban elites and the clergy resented reforms that might jeopardize their political and economic power, while rural dwellers and the merchant class were afraid of losing their traditional status (Tamer, 2010).

In January 1963, in response to political unrest and economic destabilization, the Shah announced a national reform billed as the "White Revolution," which included the establishment of a Literacy Corps of young men working as village

literacy teachers in lieu of military service. This radically increased the teaching force, especially in remote rural areas (Metz, 1987). These teachers were not rigorously trained and the education they offered was of inconsistent quality (Tamer, 2010), but they had significant effects on literacy. In 1976, three years before the Islamic Revolution, the literacy rate for adult females was 24.42%, half that of adult males (48.18%). However literacy rates for the youngest adults, aged 15-24, were much higher, 42.33% for females and 70.90% for males, and the disparity between genders had closed by 10% (Index Mundi, 2012).

Structure of Education in Iran

Basic education is compulsory, with free public schooling up to the eighth grade. Students take exit examinations at the end of the fifth and eighth grades. Those who fail the eighth grade examination are required to repeat the entire academic year and if they fail a second time, must enroll in basic vocational training or seek employment (World Education Services [WES] Staff, 2017). Upper secondary public education is also free, but not compulsory, and lasts three years. Students are tracked into an academic, technical, or vocational program, depending on the results of the eighth grade exit examination. The academic track is further specialized into humanities and literature; mathematics and physics; experimental sciences; or Islamic theology. The technical track includes technical/industry, business and service industry, or agriculture specializations. Qualifying graduates of the academic or technical track can go on to a pre-university year of schooling or seek employment with an upper secondary diploma. Some students can also opt for a five-year integrated Associate Diploma (WES Staff, 2017).

University admission is based on a very competitive national entrance examination, with only as few as 12% of applicants awarded admission to a public university (WES Staff, 2017). In recent years almost 60% of those accepted have been women. Tuition at public universities is minimal (a few dollars) or free in exchange for a commitment to work two years in government service. All private universities except Islamic Azad University also use the national entrance examination, but there is much less competition for admittance at private institutions than at public universities. Excluded from the highly competitive public higher education system, the vast majority of Iran's 4.5 million university students enroll as fee-paying students (WES Staff, 2013).

According to Article 30 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "The government must provide all citizens with free education up to secondary school, and must expand free higher education to the extent required by the country for attaining self sufficiency" (1989). An introductory section, "Woman in the Constitution," promises an augmentation of rights in contrast to the previous regime, asserting, "Not only does woman recover thereby her momentous and precious function of motherhood, rearing of ideologically committed human beings, she also assumes a pioneering social role and becomes the fellow struggler of man in all vital areas of life." This rhetoric implies, but does not actually meet the standard of equality; instead, it underscores the traditional role of motherhood and steward of future "ideologically committed" generations.

In 2000, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched the Education for All initiative to generate worldwide commitments to six core goals for “basic learning needs,” as outlined in the Dakar Framework for Action. In particular, Goal 1 pledged a commitment to “[e]nsuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality” (p.15). Goal 5 advocated “[e]liminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015” (p. 16). According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Education report on progress toward these goals (2015), by 2013 pre-primary and primary enrollments were equal by gender. However, by junior high and high school, the gender parity index ratings declined to 0.91 and 0.94 respectively. The Ministry of Education report identified several challenges to reaching the Education for All goals of full equality, including (a) dropout rate of girls, especially in transition from one level to another, (b) cultural resistance to girls pursuing a secondary education, (c) lack of access to higher education, especially in rural areas, (d) limited recruitment of female teachers as role models, (e) early marriage for girls, especially in rural areas, (f) “incompatibility of educational programs with the needs and features of students including girls,” (g) cultural resistance to girls and women in the workforce, and (h) lack of alternative educational delivery methods for girls, such as remote and media education.

By The 2016 the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report indicated full parity for both primary and secondary enrollment (female to male ratio of 1.01 for both levels); although tertiary enrollment remained at 0.93. The 2017 Global Competitiveness Index ranked the quantity of education in the Islamic Republic of Iran 6.1 out of 7.0, resulting in a global rank of 38 out of 138 countries. However, the *quality* of education was ranked much lower, (3.3 out of 7.0), ranking 97 out of 138.

The pervasive focus on Shi’ite ideology represents a significant discriminatory pressure inherent at all levels of Iranian education. Gender discrimination is evident in school structure and organization as well as the curriculum. By law, both primary and secondary schools are segregated by gender (Mouri, 2014), with daily schedules staggered so boys and girls never intermingle. In 2011, this policy was extended to preschools as well (Iran to Extend Gender Segregation, 2011). In 2012, the Ministry of Education also announced the publication of separate textbooks for male and female students (Bazhan, 2012). Even at the university level, male and female students in the same classroom are segregated into separate rows (Shahrokni & Dokouhaki, 2012). The government-mandated Iranian curriculum is very clear in its support of Shi’ite doctrines regarding inequality and enforced separation of the sexes. Men are defined as superior and women as secondary to men with each sex assigned to gender-specific roles in all contexts of life (Paivandi, 2012).

Religious Discrimination in Iranian Education and Public life

Since the 1979 Revolution, the hegemony of the Islamist state and supremacy of Shi'ism has permeated all major institutions, including the educational system. Systematic changes in education law, curriculum, school organization, and teacher training completely reversed any hint of modernization or de-secularization lingering from the pre-Revolutionary era, as educational institutions became "a place of political and ideological propaganda" (Paivandi, 2012, p. 2). Dissident teachers were dismissed, restrictions were imposed on female students (including mandatory veiling), and religious practices such as mandatory prayers were incorporated into daily school activities. The office of Educational Affairs was created to instill Islamic culture in all students, with designated political officers in every school to oversee and enforce compliance by teachers and students. As the Cultural Revolutionary Council mandated a systematic revision of school curricula to create "a virtuous believer, conscientious, and engaged in the service of the Islamic society" (Paivandi, 2012, p. 3), the proportion of the school day devoted to overt religious studies doubled, from 6.4% in 1975 to 12.7% by 1994. However, the Islamization of textbooks was not limited to religious studies. All textbooks in all subject areas were re-written, "adapting academic knowledge to the 'rules' and 'values' of Shi'ite beliefs, and to the political vision of the Islamic state" (Paivandi, 2012, p. 4). As a consequence, 25% of the average school day is devoted to the indoctrination of Shi'ite beliefs.

Members of officially recognized religious minorities are allowed to open their own schools and receive religious instruction designed by members of their own community in non-Persian languages. However, the directors of such schools must be Muslim and the Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks, including religious texts (United States Department of State, 2012). Non-religious texts must be those mandated by the state-approved curriculum, with full integration of Shi'a doctrines and perspectives, which radically oppose the traditions and beliefs of religious minority groups (Paivandi, 2012). Even the 10% of Iranians who are Sunni are cut off from their own historical and theological heritage. Textbooks represent Islam exclusively from the Shi'ite viewpoint and avoid the presentation of any examples of the significance of Sunni history or culture (Paivandi, 2012).

Iran's 300,000 Baha'is are particularly targeted for suppression and persecution, expelled by government order from public universities. The same order specified that Baha'i children "should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing [Shi'a Islamic] religious ideology" (United States Department of State, 2014, p. 5) and only if they do not identify themselves as Baha'i. Since denial of one's faith would violate a major tenet of Baha'ism, this effectively excludes adherents from the educational system in Iran (United States Department of State, 2014). As of February, 2017, at least 90 Baha'i were held in prison solely for their religious beliefs and dozens more had been arrested in the past year (U. S. Commission on International Freedom [USICRF], 2017).

In December 2016, President Rouhani released a non-binding Charter on Citizens' Rights with provisions to respect freedom of thought and religious

belief for all citizens. However, this had little effect, as even members of constitutionally protected minority non-Muslim religions and dissident Muslim clerics continue to be subjected to official discrimination and persecution (USICRF, 2017). As of December, 2016, at least 90 Christians were under arrest and detained, awaiting trial. Antisemitic messages remain pervasive in mosques and the state-run media, and even Zoroastrians have experienced an increase in repression and discrimination. Fellow Muslims are not exempt. At least 120 Sunni Muslims are currently in prison on charges solely related to religious beliefs and activities and in August, 2016, 22 were executed for “enmity against God.”

Education of Women in Iran: Extreme Patriarchy in a Modern World

Following the Islamic Revolution, the role of women changed dramatically, not just in Iran, but in the Muslim world at large. Women were required to wear veils, forbidden to serve as judges, and segregated or excluded in many public venues, including universities. Yet, the proliferation of new provincial schools in Iran resulted in significant advances in literacy for both sexes, especially for females (Cole, 2015). By 2012, overall adult literacy rates had risen to 79.23% for females and 89.36% for males; literacy for the youngest adults was nearly equal by gender, with 97.7% for females and 98.34% for males. (Index Mundi, 2012). The increasing literacy of the youngest segment of the population continues to raise overall literacy: as of 2017, literacy had increased to 91.2% for adult males, 82.5% for females, and 86.8 % overall (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017).

Twice as many women are unemployed than men, yet women constitute one-third of doctors, 60% of civil servants, and 80% of teachers (International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 2015). According to the World Economic Forum (2017), Iran ranks 137 out of 138 countries in female participation in the labor force. Both clerical leadership and government officials consider female education a threat to Islamic values, due to postponement of marriage for women and competition for education with potential husbands (International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 2015). In 2009, Iran’s Science Minister announced segregation of the sexes in Iranian universities, and exclusion from gender-specific fields in accordance with the Islamic worldview (Iranian Minister Backs Gender Segregation, 2009). In August 2012, 77 academic subjects were closed to female applicants, including high-paying fields such as engineering and applied sciences. Not all universities followed suit, but in some provinces, the exclusion of female applicants meant that women who wanted to pursue these careers had to move to other regions of the country, where they were less competitive (Samadbeygi, 2012).

Conclusion

The search for credible and highly valued university credentials exerts increasing stress on an already-strained higher education system in Iran, fueling a boom in international enrollment. Between 2008 and 2010, the number of Iranian students studying abroad increased 42.5%, from 26,927 to more than 38,380 (WES Staff, 2013). By 2016, this number had increased to 50,053

(UNESCO, 2016). Overseas study has become a means to meet the needs of the highly skilled modern workplace, as well as provide an important link to the outside world, despite sanctions and world-wide isolation of the ruling regime. However, this option has become more expensive in the past decade, due to falling oil revenues and discontinuation of government subsidies for currency exchange (WES Staff, 2013).

Iranian education “imposes a belief system on students that they do not have the freedom or right to criticize” (Paivandi, 2012, p. 8), which ultimately limits any attempt to modernize education or the society which that education supports. Shi’ite Islam is predicated on fundamental concepts of inequality under the universal government of Shi’a as the standard bearer of worldwide Islam. This affects not only women, but all religious and ethnic minorities. In 2014, the United States Department of State reported, “All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, especially in employment, education, and housing” (p. 6). Persecution and harassment of religious minorities occurs with impunity (United States Department of State, 2012). Official support for intolerance and discrimination, with reverence for martyrdom and jihad, create a rhetoric of violence and isolation that infiltrates every aspect of Iranian society, including education (Paivandi, 2012).

Policies that exclude women from educational advancement, political positions and full employment are indicative of anti-democratic gender discrimination on a much larger scale that predates the Islamic Revolution. Despite almost equal educational attainment by gender at every level of education, massive inequities persist. Iran ranks 140 out of 144 in overall economic participation and opportunity and 136 out of 144 in political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2016). As of 2015, at least 50 women’s rights activists were in prison as a result of their advocacy, so public criticism is often guarded (Alidarami, 2015). Nevertheless, many Iranians privately acknowledge a growing pressure for modernization and reform through peaceful resistance, if not overt activism (Vick, 2015). According to news commentator Leila Alikarami, “Iranian women are too educated, talented, and ambitious to remain held back by an archaic set of rules” (2015, para. 13).

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