

Tertiary education is seen by many commentators as provider of greater opportunities for women in employment and social development.¹ However, in a number of countries, including Iran, this process has not fully materialised. In this regard, it is necessary to find out how and why girls in Iran have been able to become so well educated under the rules of constitutionalised gender discrimination and also under the dominance of a patriarchal culture that has affected the means by which Iranian women have managed to access higher education nationwide. Furthermore, this article briefly explores the influence of educated women on social change in Iranian society.

The number of females in higher education in Iran began to rise during the 1990s. They were gradually able to take more than 65% of university places by 2008. However, in 2006, the government became concerned about the unprecedented growth in the number of female students and began implementing a range of policies in order to limit this trend and, as time passed, these efforts were stepped up after the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009.²

Female students participated actively with and played leading roles in the Green Movement in 2009. One of the serious plans by the new Islamic government in 1979 was to Islamise the educational system, then enforce compulsory wearing of the hijab (veil), and finally to force women to stay at home, and therefore, according to official statistics, only 17% of women are employed today in Iran.³

Educated women became a new phenomenon in Iran, as they were seeking gender equality in employment, social and political positions. It is important to note that education has been the Islamic regime's goal from its establishment in 1979, but the leaders did not anticipate that many girls would suddenly decide to gain a university qualification. Today they are faced with a very highly educated, confident and outspoken female population. Especially since the Green Movement, the government's aim has been to reverse the growth in the number of female students by imposing gender and local quotas in higher education and by preventing women from studying in the same classrooms as men. As a result, in 2010-2011 the percentage of female students dropped to 50%.⁴

Despite the many obstacles placed in front of women, the Iranian government has failed to dissuade them from participating in higher education. They no longer feel like silent objects in the current political situation, so the number of female students increased to 60% from 2011 to 2015, but in September 2016 a new increase in the quota for Revolutionary Guards was put in place and the percentage of female students reduced to 49.5% again. It seems the government has provided a new challenge for women in Iran.⁵

According to Northwest University research in February 2016, Iranian female students have achieved successful results in scientific and technical fields. Iran, with more than 67% of female students in scientific fields is ranked first among 66 nations surveyed.

¹ OECD (2010b), *Improving Health and Social Cohesion through Education, Educational Research and Innovation*; OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264086319-en>. and OECD (2011b), *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/the-causes-of-growing-inequalities-in-oecd-countries_9789264119536-en

² Husseini, N., *WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF IRANIAN SOCIETY*, 10th International Technology, Education and Development Conference (INTED2016), March 2016-Valencia (Spain), published by LATED Academy, PP: 6037-6044

³ The World Bank, Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>

⁴ Mehr Press, 20 August 2011

⁵ Source: Statistical Centre of Iran; via Radio Farda, *Percentage of Male and Female University Students in Iran*, http://www.radiofarda.com/a/F12_percentage_of_male_and_female_university_students_in_Iran_is_even_now/2195003.html

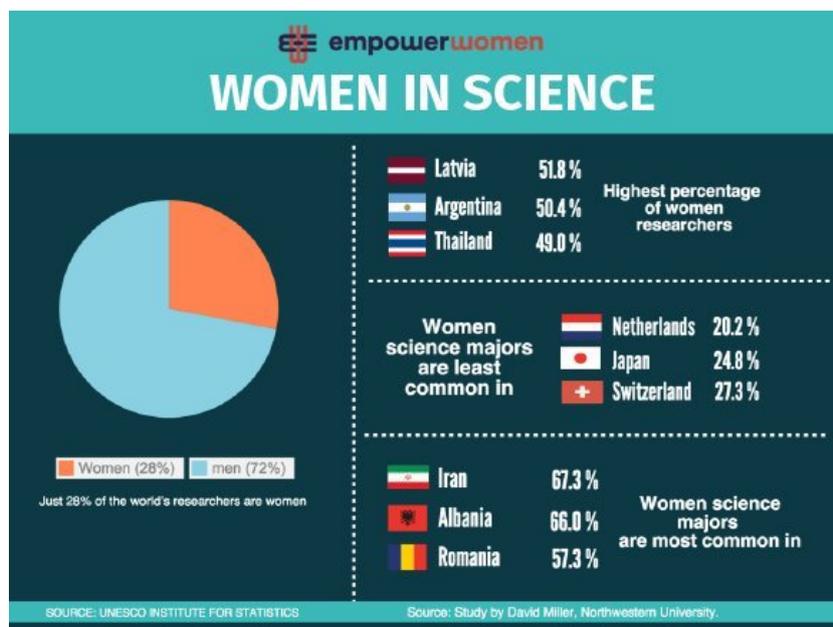


Figure 1 Empower Women: Women in Science via <https://twitter.com/bressyr/status/701043429288058880>

On the one hand, the Iranian government's policies have added to the existing barriers against women's access to higher education; on the other hand, these restrictions have generated a stimulus for women's rights activism. Women's rights activists have found new incentives and motives in their struggle for gender equality, which have allowed them to extend their influence among the female population, politicians and intellectuals.

The result of a Facebook page, 'Education for Change'⁶ which was designed to find out why women have been so keen to enter higher education in Iran, clearly suggests that freedom, gaining knowledge, employment opportunities and an urge to take part in local and national political and socio-political structures are the main reasons behind this trend.

A slow but steady and firm resolve to change, which can be understood as an undeclared aspiration in the meaning of 'Education for Change', can be observed in the various educational developments among women in Iranian society for about two decades. This is a silent slogan for each girl who wants to bring change in her life. It is an unspoken collective action from Iranian women from all walks of life, resulting in them gaining the majority of places in universities. The Iranian women's education movement is a social phenomenon, which can be recognised as a new social movement.

A social movement is a type of group action that focuses on common goals in social or political issues in order to bring about social change. A social movement is also a series of continuous collective actions that are completed by a group of people with common interests, a shared identity, and broad, communal goals. The clearest characteristics of a new social movement are that they are mainly social and cultural, then political movements, concentrating on quality of life rather than struggling with the state.⁷

This is the way the Iranian women's movement tends to overcome all difficulties and many negative changes to their rights created by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Higher education is a path to freedom, and it seems that young girls have managed to achieve it in relative terms. Certainly, there is still a long way to go, but what has been attained up to now appears to be irreversible as women have achieved them with their own very hard and continuous effort. Half of the 80 million population of Iran is women, and a significant proportion of them are university graduates. This certainly is social capital that can play a positive role in society. Having educated women with various abilities presents an opportunity for them to make a valuable contribution to social and economic development in the best possible way in the country.

⁶ Education for Change Campaign, <https://www.facebook.com/Education-for-Change-950453925041148/>

⁷ DelaPorta, D., Diani, M. 2006. *New Social Movements, an Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing. P20; Simin, Fadaee. (2012). "Social movements in Iran: Environmentalism and civil society." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 13. London: Routledge