

Unimplemented laws and the decline in economic opportunities for women: ‘Soup in the bowl but burnt mouth’
Maryam Hosseinkhah

Following the recent announcements by Ayatollah Khamenei calling for an increase in Iran’s population to 150 million,¹ legislators and law enforcement officials who portray women’s employment as the most important barrier to this rise in population, are more than ever before seeking ways and means of decreasing the rate of female employment and limiting them behind the walls of their homes in order to fulfil their ‘motherly duties’.

Increased maternity leave, considering telecommuting (working from home) for women in employment, part-time employment, early retirement and a decrease in the number of hours for women, are among plans and bills that in recent years formed part of the government’s policies aimed at increasing Iran’s population. However, these plans and bills that, although still unimplemented, remain under consideration and consultation, have already affected the market for female employment and led to a decline in women’s access to the job market.

Based on the latest official reports during 2015, the rate of women’s economic participation in Iran was 13.8%.² This means that 78% of Iranian women have no share in the Iranian economy. Furthermore, they are not even considered as part of the workforce in search of employment. In other words, from among 27 million women in Iran, only 3 million are in employment and the rest are considered homemakers.³ The project to survey the labour force in 2015 published by Iran’s National Statistics shows that the rate of unemployment among women is more than double that among men, and even more among youth between the ages of 15 and 29.⁴

Under such conditions, when more than 70% of educated women in Iran are unemployed⁵ and cultural barriers on their path to employment keep them behind the walls of their homes, announcing laws that highlight the ‘duty’ of homemaking and motherhood among women as particular ‘advantages’, places another barrier on this path of unequal competition.

A look at the laws aimed at increasing maternity leave to 9 months and the recently passed bill entitled ‘Reduced working hours for female employees with special circumstances’⁶ demonstrate the manner in which these two laws, the first due to lack of sufficient budget, and the second, approved as recently as last June,⁷ have yet to be announced to the executive bodies,⁸ leave a negative impact on statistics regarding women’s employment, leaving public and private sector employers hesitant to hire women who are entitled to more leave.

Maternity leave was increased from 6 to 9 months, following years of debate and challenges. It was finally approved by the parliament on 13th June 2013 and announced to the executive bodies the same year.⁹

This plan has not yet been implemented due to the lack of a budget.¹⁰ According to Mohammad Hassan Zeda, the Technical Assistant for Social Security and Assistance, “the government is not able to implement

¹ Persian source from BBC Persian, http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/10/131031_l38_iran_khamenei_population

² Persian source from the Iranian Agricultural News Agency, <http://www.iana.ir/media/k2/attachments/89/Amar.pdf>

³ Persian source from Donya-e-Eqtasad Newspaper, <http://donya-e-eqtasad.com/SiteKhan/1065826>

⁴ Persian source from the Iranian Agricultural News Agency, <http://www.iana.ir/media/k2/attachments/89/Amar.pdf>

⁵ Persian source from Donya-e-Eqtasad Newspaper, <http://donya-e-eqtasad.com/SiteKhan/1065826>

⁶ Persian source from the website of Iranian parliament at: http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal_draft/show/971511

⁷ Persian source from the Iran Students News Agency <http://www.isna.ir/news/95040112966/%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AD%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%84>

⁸ Persian source from Entekhab.ir website, <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/281213/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B7-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF>

⁹ Although along with other approved bills announced between May 2014 until revised decision remained unimplemented, however during the September of the same year Ishagh Jahangiri, the First Deputy to the President announced that the government will once again announce this law to the executive powers as women’s maternity leave has officially been increased to 9 months.

¹⁰ Persian source from Mehr News Agency, <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/3689888/%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AE%D8%B5%DB%8C-%DB%B9-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%87-%D8%B2%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%AF>

For instance, in April 2015 Alireza Mahboub, a member of the Social Committee of the Parliament, while the bill remained under consideration, stated that the declining rate of female employment was a result of “measures aimed at decreasing the number of working hours for women” and that presenting such plans would “cause a decline in demand by employers for female employees in different fields resulting in doubling the rate of unemployment among women.”¹⁶

Reports by the Research Centre of the Iranian Parliament confirm concerns regarding the impact of these bills. In this report, pointing to the fact that such bills will worsen conditions for all employed women, it highlights that it will not offer any positive benefits to women with social circumstances either and emphasises: “Protective measure in this bill does not only offer any solution to the problems faced by this segment of the female population in employment, but also due to its lack of resorting to any special techniques, results in greater harm to them... and gradually decreases the willingness of employers and executive bodies to employ them.”¹⁷

In addition to the ‘decline in demand by employers’ for female employees, the situation of employment in the public sector is also disappointing. During the 2015 employment examinations, out of 2,800 positions, 2,284 positions were allocated to men and only 16 positions were allocated to women. This year out of 3,000 positions, 961 positions were exclusively allocated to men and only 16 positions were exclusively allocated to women.¹⁸

All management and executive positions are exclusively allocated to men and 16 positions in mid-management were allocated to women.¹⁹ In addition to extreme gender-based discrimination in the positions exclusively allocated to men, throughout the rest of the hiring process men have better chances of employment and so the new laws on reducing women’s working hours can decrease women’s chances even further.

In effect, in addition to other objections to these illusive ‘advantages’ that appear positive and supportive measures for female employees, without addressing other barriers faced by women seeking employment, in the long term women’s presence in the labour force will be more limited and will make reaching management positions even more difficult. The main and more urgent problem may be that presenting and approving such laws that portray the seeming advantages not yet in effect, already impose problems in securing employment or extending employment contracts.

Official statistics confirm that during recent years women in employment or those seeking employment are living embodiments of an old Persian expression “Soup in the bowl but burnt mouth” where, with no benefit from such illusive advantages, women are accelerating down the hill of lost employment opportunities.

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¹⁶ Persian source from Resalat Newspaper, <http://resalat-news.com/Fa/?code=202966>

¹⁷ Persian source from the Islamic Parliament Resource Centre, http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal_draft/show/847718

¹⁸ The qualifying examination for 2016 following orders of President Rouhani have been postponed due to gender-based discrimination in job allocations, however, it is not clear to what extent review of the positions will result in higher number of positions for women at the managerial level. Please see BBC Persian article from August 2016, http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/07/160731_me_rouhani_gender_imbalance_employmen

¹⁹ Persian source from Khabar Online, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/560714/society/2077>

