

Women and Iranian economy – Where is the place of women in Iran's economy?

Leila Alikarami

The presence of women's rights activists in the Iranian labour market and its economy have been met with many challenges, in light of the traditional and religious approach of Iranians to women's role in the family on the one hand and the legal approach of the state to women making special reference to her position as a 'wife and mother'. Various elements have come together in order to remove women from economic activities and ensure they 'remain at home', considered to be a woman's place based on traditional values.

The fundamental question then remains as to whether economic advancement in Iran and whether a departure from the current economic crisis can be addressed through removal of sanctions given the absence of half the nation's population, women, from the realm of industry, labour and production? From an economic perspective, human resources are a fundamental factor contributing to economic growth. With the difficult economic environment, the single-income family model has come under increasing pressure in Iran's major cities and women have been forced to enter the labour market. The current body of research illustrates that the service sector of the labour market is more open to women's participation, meaning most positions in the service industry are allocated to women, for example nursing and teaching. However, it is important to remember that employment within the service sector requires qualifications which only a particular segment of the educated urban female population tend to have. In addition, official statistics point to the fact that overall the Iranian labour market is male-dominated, meaning the path to the participation of women in many market sectors is obstructed. Such realities then point to one question, what is the place of women in Iran's economy?

On a global scale, between 40 and 45 per cent of the labour market is occupied by women, while women's economic participation rate in Iran remains less than 15 per cent.¹ According to official statistics, the rate of unemployment for female university graduates is at 65.5 per cent, meaning 3,476,000 Iranian women university graduates play no role in the nation's economy.

The most recent 'Women, business and the law' World Bank report which studies the economy of one hundred countries, measured discrimination against women in the law. The report showed that after Saudi Arabia and Jordan, Iran is has the third highest number of discriminatory laws against women's economic activities.

It appears that discriminatory laws and codes are among the main factors that contribute to limiting women's role to the home, as traditionally defined. Men's position as the head of the family, his right to determine the location of family's residence, the requirement for a woman to secure permission issued by the male head of her family in order to apply for a passport and travel overseas, and a man's right to refuse the women in his family the right to work are among those codes and laws that bar Iranian women's participation in the national economy.

Gender-based policies that signify overt discrimination are another factor in marginalizing women from the nation's economy. Although such policies are considered criminal in some countries, in Iran, they are not only part of the longstanding legal and political framework but also over the past years new plans and bills supporting gender-based quotas in the workplace have been approved and implemented. Gender-based quotas in universities are among such instances of discriminatory policies that are now in place. The 'Preservation of Chastity and hijab' Plan, which imposes unprecedented limitations on women in the workforce is another similar measure and was submitted to the Iranian parliament in October 2014. Based on this proposed plan, women's participation in trade unions is conditional on their chastity and abstinence from mixing with men.

In addition, according to this proposed law women's work hours must be between 8a.m. 9p.m. If women are needed to work night shifts, an employer needs to apply for the necessary license through the relevant police station. Those employers who fail to observe these measures face a one week of closure in the first instance, should they repeat such an offence, they face an entire month of closure.

Recently the City of Tehran introduced an additional plan designed to segregate women and men in the work place. Based on the proposed plan, women and men who work for City offices are obliged to work

¹ Statistical Centre of Iran, Labour Force, <http://amar.org.ir/english/Statistics-by-Topic/Labor-force>

² World Bank Group, Women, Business and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal, 2015, <http://wbl.worldbank.org/>

³ International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Other State Initiatives, February 2015, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/02/womenreport-other-state-initiatives/>

in separate spaces in each department. The plan also enforces that managers are no longer permitted to employ female assistants or typists—instead they must hire males. It is interesting to note that this plan was welcomed by national authorities, including the President of the Islamic Republic Parliament, President of the Court of Administrative Justice and a number of members of the parliament. The City of Tehran also encouraged other government offices to follow suit and include the implementation of a gender segregation plan in their list of priorities.

In a press release issued in October 2014 a Chief of Police announced a ban on employing women to work at coffee shops, traditional teahouses and eateries. According to Chief Khalil Helali, “those women who apply for coffee shop licenses must include men as their guardian at such locations, as in accordance with the law, occupation and employment of women, even as proprietors with licensing, is illegal at any coffee shop.”

It is worth noting that such policies and plans are presented and implemented when several articles of the Constitution, including Articles 3, 19, 28 and 43 place an obligation the state to end all forms of discrimination and introduce just conditions for all. Furthermore, the constitution does not ban a women’s employment in management positions, however, in reality, a mere 2.8 per cent of decision-making positions are allocated to women. Based on Article 38 of the labour laws, discriminatory measures based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, political beliefs and religion are strictly forbidden. Article 6 of the same document fully supports its provisions for all employees regardless of their being male or female. The principle of non-discrimination included in international instruments that form part of Iran’s national codes are also recognized, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Equal Remuneration Convention No.100 and Equal Remuneration Recommendation 90 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), enshrine the opposition to gender-based discrimination. As Iran has ratified the ILO’s convention No.100, and therefore, such discriminatory policies as being implemented in Iran in direct violation of the country’s international obligations.

Undoubtedly, in order to advance economically in Iran, it is essential to shine a light on the need to eliminate fundamental discrimination effecting human resources. Women’s participation in the economy is an opportunity to end economic depression and encourage growth. Under no circumstances should the female workforce be viewed as a threat whose participation merits marginalization. Ultimately, equal economic participation of women and men will improve conditions for the institution of the family, encourage job creation and economic expansion. Let us not forget that women’s economic participation on equal basis is one of the prerequisites of development, a phenomenon needed by our country.

⁴ Radio Zamaneh, Chief stirs controversy over women working in coffee shops, August 2014, <http://archive.radiozamaneh.com/english/content/chief-stirs-controversy-over-women-working-coffee-shops>

⁵ An English version is available at the International Constitutional Law Project Information, Iran Constitution, http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html

⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1976, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>

⁷ ILO, C100 - Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312245 and

ILO, R090 - Equal Remuneration Recommendation, 1951 (No. 90), http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312428