

### **Abstract**

This paper illustrates the salience of gender in social stratification systems. Socio-demographic indicators pertaining to women are examined to investigate the extent of female disadvantage in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following a review of the data, it is argued that remedial policy is seriously required if Iran is to pursue socio-economic development and redistributive justice.

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## **The Reproduction of Gender Inequality in Muslim Societies: A Case Study of Iran in the 1980s**

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## THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES: A CASE STUDY OF IRAN IN THE 1980s

### INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is the social position(s) of women in contemporary Iran, based principally on data from the 1986 National Census on Population and Housing--Iran's fourth census and the Islamic Republic's first. The data reveal a disquieting situation for women, including an adverse sex ratio, a disadvantaged place in the labor market, and high fertility. Some authors (Afshar 1985a; Najmabadi 1989; Nashat 1983) have argued that Iranian women have suffered a continuing loss of economic and social status since Islamization. What is clear is the existence of marked gender asymmetry. This article examines fertility, education, and employment patterns to draw attention to the reproduction of gender inequality in the Islamic Republic and to illustrate recent sociological research on gender as an organizing principle of society and a source of societal variability and differentiation (Scott 1986).

### Gender Inequality

In social theory, the concept of gender has now reached the analytic status of class and race (Crompton and Mann 1986; Farnham 1987; Spender 1981). Feminist scholars define gender as the social organization of sexual difference, or a system of unequal relationships between the sexes. Oakley (1972) and Rubin (1975) are among the earliest scholars to distinguish between sex as a biological category and gender as a cultural/social construct. More recently, de Lauretis (1987) has elaborated on the concept and the social fact of gender in the following way:

The cultural conceptions of male and female as two complementary yet mutually exclusive categories into which all human beings are placed constitute within each culture a gender system, that correlates sex to cultural contents according to social values and hierarchies. Although the meanings vary with each concept, a sex-gender system is always intimately interconnected with political and economic factors in each society. In this light, the cultural construction of sex into gender and the asymmetry that characterizes all gender systems cross-culturally (though each in its particular ways) are understood as systemically linked to the organization of social inequality (de Lauretis 1987:5).

A feminist historian points out that the term gender is useful inasmuch as it avoids arguments about the separate and distinctive qualities of women's character and experience, implies that relations between the sexes are a primary aspect of social organization (rather than following from, say, economic or

demographic pressures), and suggests that differences between the sexes constitute and are constituted by hierarchical social structures (Scott 1988:25). Much of contemporary research is now investigating the intersection of gender, race and class in stratification, subjectivity, and political consciousness. This is predicated on the idea that gender (like class and race), rather than being a homogeneous category, is internally differentiated and elaborated by class, race/ethnicity, age, region, and education. As Mann has recently noted: "Stratification is gendered and gender is stratified" (Mann 1986:56).

Some feminist historians and anthropologists have sought to locate the origins of women's subordination, which after Engels (1972) they link to the rise of property, classes, and the state (Leacock 1978; Lerner 1987; Gailey 1987). The thesis that women's relative lack of economic power is the most important determinant of inequalities, including those of marriage, parenthood, and sexuality, is cogently demonstrated by Blumberg (1978) and Chafetz (1984), among others. A number of feminists feel that women's subordination is such a truism, that it is not longer necessary to "prove" it causally or social-scientifically; moreover, social science has not been "innocent" in the perpetuation of gender distinctions and inequality (Nicholson 1987; Scott 1988). Others feel that further evidence is needed (and readily available), and that gender inequality can be measured in ways similar to that of class and race (Afshar 1985b; Beneria and Sen 1982; Leacock and Safa 1986; Papanek 1985; UNESCO 1984). This article will utilize evidence, mainly from the 1986 Census, to demonstrate the systematic reproduction, or institutionalization, of gender differences in the Islamic Republic. The article will examine differences in the educational and employment achievements of women and men in terms of the construction of a gender system designed and codified by the Islamist authorities in post-revolutionary Iran.

Gender distinctions are basic to the social order in all societies (Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Sayres, Evans, and Redclift 1987). A sociologist points out that, like age, gender orders society and is ordered by it (Epstein 1988). Some societies place more emphasis on ranking the sexes than others, and no society ignores it. What perpetuates gender inequality? Gender distinctions, rather than occurring as an accident or a fact of nature, are reproduced institutionally. In most contemporary societal arrangements, "masculine" and "feminine" are defined by law and customs; men and women have differential access to political power and economic resources, and cultural images and representations of women are fundamentally distinct from those of men. This is the case even in societies formally committed to social (including gender) equality. Feminist economists and sociologists have studied labor market segregation by sex (Hartmann 1976; Reskin and Hartmann 1986) and recognize the salience of gender in the social stratification system (Blumberg 1978; Chafetz

1984; Crompton and Mann 1987; Epstein 1988). Inequalities are learned and taught, and "the non-perception of disadvantages of a deprived group helps to perpetuate those disadvantages (Kynch and Sen 1983, quoted in Papanek 1989:8).

### Muslim Societies

That women's legal status and social positions are worse in Islamic countries than anywhere else is a common view. The prescribed role of women in Islamic theology and law is often argued to be a major determinant of women's status. Women are viewed as wives and mothers, and gender segregation is customary if not legally required. Whereas economic provision is the responsibility of men, women must marry and reproduce to earn status (Yousef 1978). Only men have the unilateral right of divorce; a woman can work and travel only with the written permission of her male guardian; family honor and good reputation, or the negative consequence of shame, rest most heavily with the conduct of women (Fluehr-Lobban 1989).

It is true that Muslim societies are characterized by higher-than-average fertility, higher-than-average mortality, and rapid rates of population growth (Weeks 1988:12, 46). Age at marriage affects fertility. An average of 34 percent of all brides in Muslim countries in recent years have been under 20 years of age, and the average level of childbearing in Muslim nations is six children per woman (Weeks 1988:15, 20). The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi has explained this in terms of the Islamic fear of fitna, that is, social and moral disturbance caused by single, unmarried women (Mernissi 1987). Early marriage and childbearing, therefore, may be regarded as a form of social control. The Muslim countries of the Middle East and South Asia also have a distinct gender gap in literacy and education (Weeks 1988:27), and low rates of female labor force participation (Moghadam 1990; Sivard 1985; Youssef 1978). High fertility and literacy and labor force participation are linked to the low status of women which in turn is often attributed to the prevalence of Islamic law and norms in these societies.

These conceptions, however, are too facile. In the first instance, the view of woman as wife and mother is present in other religious and symbolic systems. The Orthodox Jewish law of personal status bears many similarities to the fundamentals of Islamic law, especially with respect to marriage and divorce (Fluehr-Lobban 1989). Second, the demographic patterns are not unique to Muslim countries; similarly high fertility rates are found in sub-Saharan African countries today, and were common in Western countries at earlier stages of their development and demographic transition.

There are at least three reasons why women's subordination in the Muslim world, or which Iran is a part, cannot be attributable solely on the basis of Islam. First, adherence to Islamic precepts and the applications of Islamic legal codes varies throughout the Muslim world. For example, Tunisia and Turkey are formally secular states, and only Iran has direct clerical rule. Second women's legal and social positions are quite variable, as any detailed comparative and historical study will show. Gender segregation is the norm and the law in Saudi Arabia, and not so in Syria (Ingrams 1988). There are intra-regional variations in patterns of fertility, education, and employment of females. In Tunisia contraceptive use is widespread and the average age of marriage is 24 (Weeks 1988:26); in Turkey, the participation of women in high-status occupations (law, medicine, judgeship) is striking (Abadan-Unat 1980). Third, gender relations in Muslim societies are determined and affected by such factors as state ideology (regime orientation), level of economic development, the extent of industrialization and urbanization, and integration into the world system. The governments of Afghanistan (Moghadam 1989) and South Yemen (Molyneux 1985), motivated by Marxist and socialist ideology, took important steps to reduce gender inequality and increase women's rights. Areas with large Muslim populations outside of what is generally called the Muslim world, such as Soviet Central Asia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in Yugoslavia, have seen improvements in all socio-economic indicators (Bodrova and Anker 1985; Denitch 1976). Thus, to attribute principal explanatory power to religion and culture is methodologically deficient, as it exaggerates their influence and renders them timeless and unchanging.

These qualifications aside, however, there can be no doubt that where gender inequality exists in its most egregious forms in the Middle East, it claims a religious derivation and thus establishes its legitimacy (Molyneux 1985:157). Reintroduction of Islamic legislation, including family law, in countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Egypt has been so justified. Muslim fundamentalists in India oppose the move to a uniform civil code because it would supercede Islamic personal law which governs marriage, divorce, maintenance, adoption, succession, and inheritance (Pathak and Rajan 1989). Following the assumption of power by Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical associates, steps were taken to abrogate modern, Western-inspired codes related to personal and family life and to institute precepts from the Shari'a (Islamic canon law). Early marriage was promoted, the policy of birth control dismissed, employment of young mothers discouraged, and the raising of children (to become "committed Muslims") lauded. As the Iran-Iraq war continued, polygyny and temporary marriage (Haeri 1983) were encouraged as ways of dealing with a potential source of social and moral problems: the unmarried woman.

Muslim societies, like many others<sup>1</sup>, harbor illusions about immutable gender difference. There is a very strong contention that women are fundamentally different from men, and this

difference is often translated into inferiority; this contention strengthens social barriers to women's achievement. In some countries in west and south Asia (including India) there are marked disparities in the delivery of health care, along with an excessive mortality rate for women (Miller 1981; Weeks 1988:31; Weiss 1989). Papanek has studied gender inequalities in access to food, education, and health care, and argues that socialization for inequality results in unequal "socio-cultural entitlements to resource shares" which are both economic and cultural (Papanek 1989). In the realm of education and employment, as Epstein has pointed out, not only is it believed that women do not have the same interests as men and will therefore avoid men's activities, but also care is exercised to prevent them from preparing for roles which are considered inappropriate (Epstein 1988:122). Women's reproductive function is used to justify their segregation in public and their isolation to the home, as well as their lack of civil and legal rights (Ghoussoub 1988). As both a reflection of this state of affairs and a contributing factor, very few governments of the region have signed or ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Sivard 1985, Table 8:30).

Under such circumstances, where religion is a privileged sphere and where a more generalized discourse of equality does not exist, it becomes extremely difficult to challenge gender inequality and discrimination against women (Moghadam 1988b). However, even countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose legal system is largely based on the Shari'a<sup>1</sup> find themselves caught between the desire for ideological purity and the exigencies of global and societal change and of cultural prescriptions and economic imperatives. This tension was a theme explored by this author in an earlier study of women, work, and ideology in Iran (Moghadam 1988a). In Iran, women's educational attainment and employment patterns, while highly problematical, exceed the injunctions of Islamic orthodoxy. In understanding the mechanisms of gender inequality, therefore, it is necessary to examine structure and ideology, discourses and institutions, rhetoric and statistical trends.

A final note about women's status in pre-revolutionary Iran will enlighten understanding of the empirical discussion which follows. The gender system as it exists today is only partly "new," for many of its features are legacies of the past and/or inherited from the previous regime. Female physical mobility was not extensive in pre-revolutionary Iran, and there were many legal and customary restrictions on women. A woman could not travel, obtain jobs, or rent apartments without the permission of her father or husband. Moreover, male sexist attitudes and behavior were notorious, making it difficult for women even to wait for taxis or go shopping. The beneficiaries of Pahlavi-style modernization were primarily middle and upper-class women, while the majority of women from working-class and peasant households

remained illiterate and poor. From this, the 3.2 annual population growth rate resulted. The veil was not enforced, but rather characteristically worn by poor working-class, and traditional/lower middle-class urban women. Most secondary schools (the exceptions being the international schools where the language of instruction was European) were gender-segregated, though universities and workplaces were not. Men could be taught by female instructors (for example, I taught English at the Air Force Language School in the early 1970s), but the matter of "appropriate dress" was always raised. Thus there are some continuities, and some breaks, in the gender system.

## A REVIEW OF THE DATA

### Population, Sex Ratio, Fertility

According to the census, the population of Iran was 49.4 million in November 1986 and rose to 50.6 million in 1989.<sup>2</sup> The male population (25.2 million) compared to the female population (24.1 million) suggests an imbalanced sex ratio (105). In a few countries of the world, males still have a higher life expectancy than females. In the last decade, Iran was among the six countries for which this was true, the others being Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, and Nepal (Weeks 1988:31). Until recent years, this was apparently also true for Afghanistan when the escalation of the civil war resulted in more male deaths than female.<sup>3</sup> An adverse sex ratio indicates the low status of women, which within the overall cultural matrix and resource constraints, would mean more nutritional deficiencies suffered by women than men. Female mortality is also linked to high fertility and to poor access to health care services during pregnancy and in childbirth (Miller 1981).

The sex ratio in Iran is curious because the census shows more male deaths than female, for the years 1982 to 1986 (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Tables 13-15:65-67), and slightly more female births than male (Table 12:64). But in all age groups, there are more males than females (Table 5:57). It will be recalled that in the years 1980 to 1988 Iran was involved in a major war, which reportedly took half a million lives on the Iranian side, the vast majority of whom were male fighters. We may well ask, as Amartya Sen has asked regarding India: Where are the missing women?

In 1976 the population numbered 33.7 million. The increase of 15 million people over a ten-year period represents a population increase of 3.9 percent, and a total fertility rate of 5.6, placing Iran among the countries with the highest growth rates (The State of the World's Children 1989, Table E:88-89). Like many Muslim countries, Iran during the 1980s had no official population control or family planning policy; in fact, family planning was indeed



frowned upon. Contraceptive devices and abortions were banned after the 1979 revolution (Afshar 1985a; Mossavar-Rahmani 1983). The high rate of marriage and the promotion of childbearing, the lack of any policy of birth control or family planning services for older women, and the large number of women in their reproductive years has kept the birth rate high in post-revolutionary Iran (Aghajanian 1988). Accordingly, in 1986, 44 percent of the population was under the age of 15 (National Census on Population and Housing 1986:3). During the years 1980 to 1987, the maternal mortality rate was 120 per 100,000 (State of the World's Children 1989, Table 3:98-99). This may be compared to the low rates of Cuba (31) and Kuwait (18) and the high rates of Zaire (800) and Peru (310).

As noted by Aghajanian (1988), the social and economic consequences of such population dynamics are not consistent with the ideal goals of improving the welfare and well-being of the population. Similarly, the economic growth of the Islamic Republic is not consistent with such a high rate of population growth. Absolute poverty, inequality, and declining standards of living and quality of life have been documented (Amirahmadi 1990); these suggest the inability of the Government to create jobs, provide basic needs, and invest in industry and agriculture. Besides the strain placed on a country's resources and on economic development (Menard 1987), high fertility has also been linked to maternal mortality (Herz and Meacham 1987; Weeks 1988:31; World Bank 1987) and infant mortality (Trussell and Pebley 1984; The State of the World's Children 1989). Rising fertility rates negatively impact women's mobility, especially on educational attainment and labor force participation. Studies have shown that fertility and labor force participation are negatively related (Anker et al. 1982; Bodrova and Anker 1985; Concepcion 1974; Sathar et al. 1988). Economically inactive women tend to have more children than women who are waged and salaried. Women who work outside the home (particularly those who earn cash incomes) are presumed to have enhanced control over household decisions, increased awareness of the world outside the home, and subsequently more control over reproductive decisions. Therefore, one reason for the continuing high fertility rate in Iran is the small percentages of women in the labor force and the even smaller percentage of women workers who are wage-and salary-earners (as we shall see in the discussion of employment below). Rising fertility is also linked to rising unemployment and diminishing job opportunities for women, in an overall untoward economic situation. That the marriage age for girls was lowered from 16 to 13 by the new Islamic state in 1979 further influences the fertility rate, as suggested above.

## Literacy and Education

Over 7 million Iranian men and women, mostly in the provinces, do not speak or understand Farsi (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 6.1:86). Of that figure, 57 percent are women that is, over 4 million Iranian women (17 percent of the female population) do not speak Farsi. These women reside mostly in East and West Azerbaijan, Zanjan, Khuzestan and Kurdistan. How does this compare with the male population? The number of men who do not know Farsi is 2.9 million, or 11 percent of the male population. The male-female disparity in knowledge of Farsi may be explained by educational and employment disparities (discussed below).

A steady improvement in the literacy rates over the last 20 years is evident from the censuses: in the decade 1956-1966 the literacy rate improved from 8 percent to 17.9 percent for women, and from 22.4 percent to 40.1 percent for men. In 1971 some 25.5 percent of women and 47.7 percent of men were literate; the corresponding figure for the urban areas was 48.1 percent for women and 68.7 percent for men (Mirani 1983). According to the 1976 census, 55 percent of urban women were literate (Moghadam 1988a). In 1986, 65 percent of urban women and 80 percent of urban men were literate. As expected, the rural rates are lower: 35 percent of the women and 59 percent of the men are literate. For the total country, the female share of the literate population is 25 percent.

While total literacy rates have improved over the decade, women's literacy rates do not compare favorably with those of men. In all age groups, more men than women are literate. The female share of total urban literacy was 43 percent in 1986; according to the census data, women constitute 63.6 percent of the urban illiterate population. In the rural areas the gender gap is evident in that women comprise a mere 36 percent of the rural literate group. It is well known, and also a characteristic of many developing countries, that in the areas of literacy and education, men and women attain different levels of achievement which reflect the different possibilities and avenues available to them. A concise discussion of India's gender disparities in education (as well as literacy, access to health care, and mortality rates) are in Butalia (1985). The connection between under-five mortality rates and female illiteracy is discussed in the UNICEF report, The State of the World's Children 1989.

Following the launching of the "Islamic cultural revolution" in 1980, a number of steps were taken by the authorities to revise the educational system. Among the most widely noted changes were: the conversion of all co-educational schools into single-sex institutions; the establishment of Islamic dress codes in schools; the encouragement of Arabic (rather than English) as a second language; the elimination of private schools, including those of the religious minorities; and the revision of textbooks (Higgins

and Shoar-Ghaffari 1989:6). A recent study of sex-role socialization in Iranian textbooks (grade school through high school) concludes that the most dramatic change in textbooks lies in illustrations. Compared to pre-revolutionary Iran, there is much lower visibility of women in textbook illustrations, and a precipitous drop in the inclusion of women in lessons with a public as opposed to private setting (Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari 1989:17). Moreover, all women who are in the textbook illustrations are veiled. This is consistent with the Islamic Republican government's emphasis on the distinctiveness of male and female roles, and of the importance of family life and domestic responsibilities for women. Notions of gender difference/inequality are thus created and reproduced through the medium of the school textbook.

The 1986 Census reveals that universal primary schooling was yet to be achieved, especially for girls. Both absolutely and relatively, more males than females are receiving education, at both the grade school and post-secondary school levels. The gap is narrowest at the primary school level, where boys constitute 55 percent of the student population and girls 44 percent, and begins to widen at the intermediate ("guidance") school level, where the male and female shares are 60 percent and 40 percent respectively. But it is the post-secondary student population that is most striking for the gender gap. Out of nearly 182,000 receiving higher education in 1986, 56,000 (or 30 percent) are female. On average, the female student population across the various levels of higher education constitutes 31 percent of the total. Still, it is significant that some 31,000 Iranian women are pursuing bachelors degrees; 2,525 masters degrees, and 4,814 doctorates, while over 18,000 women are receiving various types of post-secondary certificates and licenses (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 10.1:97). The Statistical Yearbook 1986 lists 40 universities including one all-male seminary and one all-female seminary. The only institutions in which women's enrollment equals or exceeds that of men's are the country's public health and medical schools.

One thing that has not changed since the Revolution is that admission to the university remains extremely difficult, for both men and women. In the entrance examination for academic year 1986-87, 586,086 persons (383,245 males and 202,841 females) participated. Of the nearly 62,000 persons that were admitted, 19,000 women (as against 42,000 men) were accepted (Iran Yearbook 1988:627). These figures represent 9.5 percent of the women who took the entrance exams, and 11 percent of the men. But it means, again, that the female share of the university population is 31 to 33 percent.

And what are women studying? The census reveals that most women are studying health and medicine (mostly nursing), while engineering is the most popular field for men (National Census on

Population and Housing 1986, Table 10.2:100). It is well known that the Islamic Republic authorities have declared certain areas of study (technological, veterinary, and some arts programs) off-limits to women. The reasons cited officially are the limited capacity of the universities, lack of job prospects for women in those fields, and the need for women specialists in other fields (Iran Yearbook 1988:627). Women are discouraged from attending law faculties because they are stereotyped as "too emotional." Thus, of 3,087 law students in academic year 1986, only 402 were women (Statistical Yearbook 1986, Table 27:123). Najmabadi (1989) notes that as of the academic year 1987-88, the booklet guiding prospective university students in their choice of academic discipline specified 65 fields out of 108 in Group I (mathematical and technical sciences) that were closed to women. In Group II (experimental sciences), 21 out of 56 fields were open only to men, whereas two fields were open only to women. In 7 other field quotas, under 50 percent were fixed for women. In Group III (humanities) 3 out of 28 fields were closed to women and in 6 quotas, under 50 percent were fixed. In Group IV (arts) there were no official quotas, but numerous protest letters from students appeared in the press in the summer of 1987 indicating that a number of faculties had decided to reject female applicants, among them graphics and painting at Tehran University, and handicrafts and archaeology at Isfahan University. For women to be eligible for government scholarships to study abroad, they had to be married and accompanied by their husbands (Najmabadi 1989:26).

It should be noted that in the summer of 1989 the quotas for women at the universities were removed from many disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Zahra Rahnavard, a university professor and wife of former prime minister Mir Hossein Musavi, was responsible for negotiating removal of these barriers. This reversal of policy indicates that women are hardly passive in the face of official discrimination and that "Islamic feminists" such as Ms. Rahnavard can maneuver on behalf of women's rights within the confines of the existing Islamist system.

Nineteen academic disciplines are listed in the census (although there is the inevitable "other" category). Women are represented in all of them, including engineering (2,259), but the largest numbers of women university students are in health and medicine (15,808), teacher training (7,490), humanities (6,934), and the natural sciences (6,257). At the masters and doctorate level, more women are studying health and medicine. Most employed women with higher education degrees have studied health and medicine, humanities, and teaching (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 24:194). The female share of the total university teaching staff is 17 percent, including 11 percent at Tehran University, 15.5 percent at Shaheed Beheshti University (formerly the National University), and 11 percent at Shiraz University--the three principal Iranian institutions of higher learning. Again, the greater female proportions are in the medical

training schools (Statistical Yearbook 1986:132-133). Clearly these are the "feminine" fields in the Islamic Republic, as they are in many other countries except certain countries in the former socialist bloc.

The preceding section and the data therein vividly demonstrate the intersection of class and gender in education and, as shown later, in employment. The female population is clearly stratified; one stratum, for example, will have access to high school and university education, while others do not. While one can argue that all women are viewed as equal second-class citizens under strict Islamist rule, in fact gender inequality is very differently experienced by women of different social classes, and women's life chances are greatly determined by their place in the social class structure.

### Employment

Before turning to the characteristics of the labor force, a note of caution is in order. As is well known, figures for urban areas are more reliable than figures for rural areas, but even so, dealing with large informal sectors, seasonal employment, migrant workers, unstable work arrangements, and part-time employment makes enumeration very difficult. Refugee populations (in Iran's case, large numbers of Afghan economic refugees work as domestics or construction workers) can also complicate enumeration. And there is the notorious under-counting of women, a problem in all developing countries (Benería 1982; Dixon 1982; ICRW 1980). Rural women in particular are frequently left out of the tabulations, or are assumed to be "homemakers."<sup>5</sup> Thus what follows should not be regarded as precise; the description does, however, provide a picture of labor force participation patterns in Iran that accords with earlier surveys and informed expectations.

According to the census data, the economically active population numbers 13,041,000 persons, constituting 19.3 percent of the total population over 10 years of age. Of the employed population, 65 percent is engaged in the private sector and 31 percent in the public sector. Further, of the total, 29.1 percent is engaged in the agricultural sector, 25.5 percent in the industrial sector, and 42 percent in the services sector. In the urban areas, 5.4 percent of the active population is engaged in agriculture, 29.8 percent in industry, and 60.5 percent in services. In the rural areas, 56.4 percent is in agriculture, 20.6 percent in industry, and 20.7 percent in services. Of the urban employed population, 52.1 percent is in the private sector and 42.9 percent in the public sector. For the rural employed population, 79.7 percent is located in the private sector and 17.1 percent in the public sector (Iran Yearbook 1988:476).

Nearly 990,000 women are classified as employed, with is 6 percent of the female population aged 10 and over, and 9 percent of the total employed population (male and female) of 11 million (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 27:237). About 332,000 women are classified as unemployed and seeking employment, 4.8 million as students, and over 11 million are categorized as "homemakers." Over 400,000 women (compared to more than a million men) who are civil servants comprise 11.7 percent of the total number of civil servants, and 41 percent of the total employed female population. The largest numbers of female (and male) government employees are in the Ministries of Education and Health (Statistical Yearbook 1986:86). The female activity rate is 8 percent, up one percent since 1982 (Moghadam 1988), while the activity rate for men was 67 percent in 1986.

And where are women located in the major economic sectors? The largest numbers of women are in private and public services; nearly 420,000 are government employees. Agriculture ranks second, with about 263,000 women, and industry third, with 216,000 women employees (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Tables 17 and 18:117, 122). But clearly vast numbers of women are not being counted in the agricultural sector; the figure for men in agriculture is nearly 3 million.

In line with the economic sectors, the occupational groups in which most women are represented are: (a) professional, technical and related workers, (b) agricultural, animal husbandry, forestry, fishing, and hunting workers, and (3) production and transport workers (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 20:140). Women are still under-represented in managerial, administrative, and clerical work, which continue to be regarded as the province of men. The largest numbers of women civil servants are employees of the ministries of Education and Health, who are working as teachers and health workers.

Among the most significant characteristics of the employed female population that may be discerned from the census are: (a) the female share of the total labor force is still small, that is, under 10 percent; (b) apart from carpet-weaving, women's role in industrial production is so limited, that they are only marginal to the productive process; (c) the majority of women workers are employed in the private sector (about 509,000 compared to 407,000 in the public sector); (d) the majority of women employees are teachers and nurses; and (e) large numbers of employed women in the private sector are not receiving wages for their work. Classified as "unpaid family workers" and "independent workers/self-employed," these women are found mostly in agriculture and industry. (Here "industry" really refers to carpet-weaving, which is largely rural and carried out in small workshops.) As in other countries, such as Turkey (Berik 1988; Kandiyoti 1984) and Afghanistan (Moghadam 1989), the products of their labor accrue not to themselves but to their husbands, male kin, or families. It is noteworthy that the

category "unpaid family worker" is large for women and rather small for men. It represents 4 percent of the total male workforce in the private sector, but fully 42 percent of the female private sector work force. Male wage- and salary-earners in the private sector comprise 26 percent of the male work-force, while the proportion of women in the private sector receiving wages or salary is 19 percent (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 27:237).

These figures, and the classification system, suggest both a methodological bias and a social problem. The social problem is that women workers are subject to "double exploitation" (as workers and as women, or, to put it more analytically, by class and gender), as fewer women are wage-earners and many more are unpaid family workers. This social problem of the labor market (low employment and unwaged employment of women) spills into other areas of the social structure and is manifested in rising fertility rates, as discussed earlier. The methodological bias and inadequacy lies in the fact that many women are simply not being counted as part of the labor force and will therefore not be considered in any employment or income policies designed by the authorities. The enumeration techniques and classification schema need to be reevaluated.

In contrast to the women in the private sector, all the women in the public sector are wage or salary earners (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 21:149; Table 26:223-224). They are also, as a whole, literate and better educated. The data reveal that large numbers of women in agriculture and industry (again, mainly private sector) are illiterate or have attained only primary education (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 19:131; Table 28:240).

Besides educational level and wage-earning, the difference between work in the public sector (whether as production workers or as professionals) and work in the private sector manifests itself in age as well. Census data on employed women by occupation and age group reveals that for such occupations as scientific/technical workers and teachers, the largest numbers of women are in the age groups 20 to 29 and 30 to 39. However, in agricultural occupations, the largest numbers of women are in the age groups 10 to 19 and 20 to 29. By the time we get to "industrial" occupations, such as rug-weaving, the largest number of women workers are in the 10 to 19 age group (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 22:160).

As previously mentioned, the data reveal internal differentiation of the female population. Women in the public sector tend to be largely professional, highly educated, and salaried; the largest percentage of them are in education, a smaller percentage are in health care. They are also less likely to be married than are women in the private sector. Of the total

female population of 16 million 10 years and over, 9.2 million are married, 1.1 million are widows, and 102,000 women are divorced. Over 5 million have never been married (National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 30:246). Where are these women to be found? The largest numbers of women who have never been married are literate and urban, and categorized as students or employed. In rural areas, however, a woman is typically married and illiterate. Census data categorizing literate and illiterate women by marital status and age group reveal that a literate woman is more likely to be unmarried, while an illiterate woman is far more likely to be married.

The stratification of women in Iran along educational, employment, and income lines does not attenuate gender inequality as it exists systemically. Women are less likely to be in positions of power, authority, and wealth than are men, and are less likely to be powerful and wealthy (in their own right) today than in pre-revolutionary Iran. This will no doubt change once the ranks of the influential, wealthy, and powerful are open to women. Until then, it is gender inequality, rather than class differences among women, that is the principal "fault line" in contemporary Iran.

## DISCUSSION

According to Papanek (1989:4), "Gender differences, based on the social construction of biological sex distinctions, are one of the great 'fault lines' of societies--those marks of difference among categories or persons that govern the allocation of power, authority, and resources." But gender differences are not the only such fault line; they operate within a larger matrix of other socially constructed distinctions, such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, that give them their specific dynamics in a given time and place. Because of the intersection of gender with other social forces, and because of such determinants and constraints as state policy, economic development, and international communications, gender systems are not totalistic and unchanging. Gender systems may be designed by ideologues and inscribed in law, enforced by custom and by the police, sustained by processes of socialization, and reinforced through distinct institutions. But they are not impervious to modification, change, or resistance. Modern societies are too heterogenous for a single system to remain intact without challenges. The challenges to a strictly-defined gender system such as that envisioned by the early Islamist ideologues in Iran may come in the form of contradictions arising from economic imperatives (such as the need to open the formal labor market to more women in times of economic expansion), or contradictions arising from the growth of the ranks of educated women who resist attempts to domesticate them, or the internal inconsistencies of a gender ideology which seeks to associate womanhood with family life--with marriage and childrearing--but



does not deny women education and employment opportunities, albeit limited to those deemed "appropriate". In Iran today, women may be veiled, but they are to be found in schools, universities, and government offices. Elsewhere, ideologies of gender difference and the practice gender inequality do exist, but are subject to the challenges of economic development and demographic changes, such as the growth of an educated female population.

Studies examining the rise in female paid employment worldwide and the structure of work opportunities for women (ILO/INSTRAW 1985; Joeke 1986; Lim 1983) have concluded that women are better off in paid employment than in unpaid family labor. Problems, unfair practices, and biases continue, however. Women are paid less for the same work, even when controlling for training and job continuity; whatever work women do tends to be devalued; and women often take jobs on appallingly bad terms (Afshar 1985b; Epstein 1988; Joeke 1986; Mackintosh 1981). Governments tend not to take an active interest in improving women's status and possibilities, and active and autonomous women's organizations to protect and further women's interests and rights are not widespread. High fertility rates limit women's roles and perpetuate gender inequality. Where the state's policies and rhetoric are actively pronatalist, and where official and popular discourses stress sexual differences rather than legal equality, an apparatus exists for the production of stratification based on gender. The legal system, educational system, and labor market are all sites of the construction and reproduction of gender inequality and the continuing subordination of women.

The census data (discussed in this paper) pertaining to women in contemporary Iran suggest that beyond the limitations and restrictions there are opportunities for women's advancement. Also, there is certainly much that could be improved, even within the confines of the Islamist system as it has developed in Iran. First of all, the female share of the total labor force has declined by two percentage points from previous years.<sup>6</sup> With the female share of the labor force not very great to begin with, the drop is significant. Male employment is down as well, reflecting overall untoward economic conditions. But the female share of the total labor force in Iran is exceedingly low, comparatively, as Table 7 shows.

The data also reveal that men are concentrated in the high-status, high-paying occupations; the labor market is extremely gender-segregated. And it will continue to be so if the present educational patterns persist--patterns wherein male students are overwhelmingly concentrated in engineering and related fields, while women are tracked into health and medicine, the humanities, and teaching. "Men's work" and "women's work" are social and cultural constructs, not natural ones. The market and other economic processes are not gender-neutral, nor are they divorced from political and ideological influences and non-economic

institutions (such as, in Iran's case, official interpretations of Islamic canon law). Thus the educational and employment patterns pertaining to women are neither accidental nor natural, but rather derive from women's disadvantaged position in the stratification system and in the ideological/symbolic system.

Second, attention must be drawn to the large numbers of women in the private sector who are not receiving wages for their work ("unpaid family workers"). Studies are needed to determine who these women are, how long they work per day or week, what tasks they perform, how the income generated is disposed, who disposes of it, and so on. Their subordinate status as workers--determined solely by their gender--needs to be faced equally through steps taken to improve their situation. The first step is to transform work conditions in the private sector so that women are properly compensated for their labor. Studies have shown that women's social and economic positions are improved most directly by their involvement in paid work (Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Joekes 1986).

The connection between employment patterns and fertility rates has been widely made in the development literature (Allman 1978; Anker, Buvinic, and Youssef 1982). When women are marginalized from the productive process, they pursue strategies of childbearing either because they are unable consciously to choose fertility reduction or because they may find such a reduction economically disadvantageous. Stripped of their economic/productive role, women depend on their motherhood performance for status and prestige and on their children's labor as a strategy for survival (Ward 1984). When one factor in the pro-natalist Islamist regime, it is a small wonder that fertility rates and population growth rates have been increasing rather than decreasing in Iran over the decade (World Development Report 1984:166; World Population 1983:225-226). Spiraling population growth at a time of depleting fiscal resources and increasing pockets of poverty throughout the country (Amirahmadi 1990) has apparently led authorities within the Islamic Republic toward one more policy reversal: family planning. In June 1989 the government formally lifted the ban on contraceptives at state hospitals and clinics. Still prohibited by law, however, are abortion, vasectomy, and tubal ligation.

Another issue that needs to be faced is the methodological problem of under-counting women workers, which has been the subject of many international reports and studies. How, for example, is it possible that millions of rural women in Iran are categorized as "homemakers"? Rural women normally carry out household and field tasks that should be counted as "work" (Beneria 1982; Charlton 1984; Dixon 1982). Perhaps the census-takers need to examine the questions, to see if they can be reformulated toward more exact answers (Rogers 1980).

Finally, the data reveal that while there is clearly a gender disparity in education and employment, women as a group are

internally differentiated; they are stratified by class and region, and further differentiated by occupation, income, education, age, and marital status. While gender determines one's status in Islamic countries where the Shari'a is law, status is also influenced by other factors (notably class and ethnicity) which in turn affect life-chances. The diversity within Iran's female population, however, should not preclude steps to overturn the discrimination that all Iranian women face by law and by custom.

Throughout the world, policies are enacted on the field of gender, specifically gender roles and family organization. Inevitably, state policies are filtered through a gender lens, and serve to either reduce or increase gender inequality. In the first years of the Islamic Republic, the rhetoric and policies were intended to segregate the sexes and domesticate the women (Nashat 1983). Though the authorities have not been successful in driving women out of public life, they continue to see men and women as fundamentally different. It is perhaps being overly idealistic to suggest that gender not be imposed on policy, or that an egalitarian outlook be adopted. While leaders of the Islamic Republic are still preoccupied with the myth of brain size, and it is clear that their thinking is distorted by the banalities of biology,<sup>7</sup> there would seem to be little cause for hope or optimism. However, to the extent that the Islamic Republic is not autarchic and intends to be an actor on the global and regional political and economic scenes, women can be expected to take part in public life and in so doing, to subvert the notion of immutable gender differences.

## Notes

1. The Islamic Republic inherited and retained a legal system based on both Shari'a and the Code Napoleon.
2. I am grateful to Hooshang Amirahmadi for this information. The religious breakdown of Iran's population is as follows: 99 percent of the population (male and female) is Muslim, according to the 1986 census. Non-Muslim Iranian women are the following: 47,000 Zoroastrian, 13,700 Jewish, and 48,700 Christian (mainly Assyrian and Armenian). Nearly 46,000 are classified as "other" or "not adequately defined." One may speculate that they are Baha'i women and foreign wives of Iranians. Most members of the religious minorities reside in Tehran, but large numbers of Zoroastrians are found in Khorasan, Jews in Fars, Assyrians in West Azerbaijan, Armenians in Esfahan, and "other Christians" in Mazanderan.
3. Interview with Dr. Abdulaziz Saidali, Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital, Kabul, February 9, 1989. See also United Nations Statistical Yearbook 1983/84 (1986), Table 18, p. 65.
4. I am grateful to Shahin Gerami for bringing this to my attention.
5. In the urban areas, women who are classified as "homemakers" may actually be part-time workers in the informal sector. Or they may be women whose domestic work and childcare take up so much time that there is not time left for work outside the home. Other women may be bound by cultural and familial constraints, while others may choose to stay at home. Shahin Gerami suggests that due to the low prestige of certain occupations some women may identify themselves as housewives rather than workers. In the absence of more detailed labor force and household surveys, one can only speculate as to why the female employment figure is so low in Iran, and theorize on the basis of similar patterns found elsewhere.
6. In 1982-83 the female share was 11 percent. See Moghadam (1988), p. 229. The female activity rate was 7 percent; compared to men at 47 percent. See also International Labour Organization, Yearbook of Labour Statistics 1985, Table 1.
7. Recently, Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Speaker of Iran's Parliament, opined "A man's brain is larger. Women mature too fast. The breathing power of men's lungs is greater and women's heartbeats are faster . . . Men heed reasoning and logic, whereas most women tend to be emotional . . . Courage and daring are stronger in men." (Washington Post December 21, 1988.)

Table 1

## Iran's Population in Various Years

Year	Total	Male	Female	Ratio
1956	18,954,704	9,644,944	9,309,760	104
1966	25,788,722	13,355,801	12,422,921	108
1976	33,708,744	17,356,347	16,352,397	106
1986	49,857,384	25,491,645	24,365,739	105

Source: Statistical Yearbook 1986, Table 1, p. 55.

Table 2

Literacy/Illiteracy Rates for Population  
6 Years and Over, By Sex and Region

	TOTAL	URBAN AREAS			RURAL AREAS			
		LITERATE	ILLITERATE	NAD*	LITERATE	ILLITERATE	NAD	OTHERS**
Men & Women	38,707,879	15,506,666	5,591,119	112,518	8,370,643	8,861,504	74,714	191,715
Men	19,822,155	8,764,725	2,090,465	51,486	5,286,753	3,520,089	29,529	97,108
% Men	51%	57%	36%	45%	63%	39.7%	39%	50%
Women	18,886,724	6,741,941	3,500,654	61,032	3,083,890	5,359,415	45,185	94,607
% Women	48.5%	43%	63.6%	54.4%	37%	60.2%	60.8%	49%

\* Not adequately defined.

\*\* Includes non-residents, non-settled, not adequately defined.

Sources: National Census of Population and Housing 1365 [1986], Table 7, p. 87, Statistical Yearbook 1366 [1987], p. 97.

Table 3

College Population and Fields of  
Study For Men and Women, 1986\*

	Total	Post-Diploma	Bachelors	Masters	Doctorate
	181,889	60,490	96,353	10,394	14,652
Male	125,327	42,357	65,263	7,869	9,838
% Total	69%	70%	68%	75.7%	67%
Teacher Training & Education	16,659	15,194	1,392	60	13
Health and Medicine	17,922	3,955	4,345	1,696	7,926
Engineering	34,569	8,870	22,866	2,433	400
Natural Sciences	10,271	1,958	7,522	661	230
Female	56,562	18,133	31,090	2,525	4,814
% Total	31%	30%	32%	24%	33%
Teacher Training & Education	7,490	5,858	1,575	50	7
Health and Medicine	15,808	5,477	5,060	1,033	4,238
Humanities	6,934	1,318	5,298	183	35
Natural Sciences	6,257	931	5,011	251	64

\* Selected on the basis of the greatest concentration of male and female college populations.

Source: National Census of Population and Housing 1365 [1986], Table 10.2, p. 100.

Table 4

## Comparison of Male and Female Economic Activities, 1986

Activity	Male	Female
Total population	25,280,961	24,164,049
Population 10 and over	16,841,000	16,030,900
Employed	10,048,858	987,103
Unemployed seeking employment	1,486,138	332,602
Student	6,449,023	4,816,555
Homemaker	194,689	11,250,865
Activity rate	45%	8%
Proportion of labor force	91%	9%

Sources: Compiled from National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 16, p. 14. Statistical Yearbook 1986, p. 79.



Table 5

**Distribution of Male and Female Government  
Employees in Selected Ministries, 1986\***

Ministry	Male		Female	
Total (m/f share)	1,104,422	(71.0%)	419,544	(29.0%)
Education (No. and percent)	381,710	(37.5%)	286,103	(68.0%)
Health	123,967	(12.2%)	87,102	(20.7%)
Economics and Finance	84,562	(8.2%)	10,130	(2.3%)
Roads and Transport	58,801	(5.7%)	2,863	(0.5%)
Rural Reconstruction	54,388	(5.3%)	579	(0.1%)
Other**	312,422	(1.0%)	36,544	(8.7%)

\* Selected on the basis of the greatest concentration of civil servants.

\*\* Prime Minister's Office, Islamic Guidance, Foreign Ministry, Commerce, Post/Telegraph/Telephone, Justice, Interior, Culture and Higher Education, Labor and Social Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, Industries and Mines, Power, Oil, Islamic Republic Media, Defense, Heavy Industries. This makes for a total of 1,433,966 employees.

Source: Statistical Yearbook 1366 [1987], p. 86, Statistical Yearbook 1367 [1988], p. 69.

Table 6

## Comparison of Urban and Rural Women, 1986

	Urban	Rural
Population*	13,074,944	10,974,868
Literate	6,741,941	3,083,890
Illiterate	3,500,654	5,359,415
Married	5,230,991	4,091,615
Never Married	2,783,593	2,363,663
Employed	524,864	473,000**

\*total female population  
\*\*rounded

Sources: Compiled from National Census on Population and Housing 1986, Table 7, p. 87; Table 30, p. 246; Table 31, p. 247. Statistical Yearbook 1986, p. 79.

Table 7

**Female Share in Percent of Employed Population,  
Various Countries and Years**

Indust- rialized Country	Year	Female Share	Indust- rializing Country	Year	Female Share
Austria	1987	51.7	Egypt	1984	15.1
Bulgaria	1985	45.6	India	1981	11.7
Canada	1986	44.0	Indonesia	1985	28.3
France	1987	39.0	Israel	1983	41.0
West Germany	1987	39.5	S. Korea	1987	36.2
Italy	1987	35.5	Mexico	1980	36.6
Japan	1985	36.2	Pakistan	1980	4.9
Portugal	1987	36.6	Philip- pines	1987	36.2
Spain	1987	29.9	Tunisia	1984	15.2
Sweden	1987	48.7	Turkey*	1980	25.0
U.S.	1987	45.4	Venezuela	1987	30.7
Yugo- slavia	1981	34.4	Iran**	1986	9.0

Source: International Labour Organization, Yearbook of Labour Statistics 1988, Table 2A

\*Source: ILO/INSTRAW, Women in the World Economy: A Statistical Survey 1950-2000, p. 60.

\*\*Source: 1986 National Census on Population and Housing.

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