

Gender Gap Narrowing in Iran: A Sociological Appraisal of Education

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Abstract

Education as a key factor affects all aspects of life of girls/women. Higher education is widespread and thereby the standards of females have started changing. Higher education of women usually provides a better and stronger voice for them. The mentality of gender inequality could solely be reached through higher education of girls and for girls. As compared with girls/women in other developing and developed countries, female tertiary educated people are qualitatively and quantitatively in a satisfactory situation in Iran. The new scenario highly affects their living standards, social position, their demographics and their productivity. What the country needs, is the potential to further invest in them. As their expectations have changed, they materially need more income to enable them to consume. Education has transformed them to be more modernity-oriented. Higher education has greatly changed the fertility behavior of women, which endows girls/women with longer life expectancy in the years to come. Higher education by the girls/women has given them more chances of migration and mobility.

Key words: Gender gap. Tertiary education. Productivity. Transformation. Mobility.

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Objectives

The research intends to discuss how the gender gap is mainly lowering in Iran through women's educational attainment during the recent four decades. Though it may be a paradox of tradition and modernity, yet Iran has achieved it (Mehran, 2003). Through the inauguration of private universities in almost all provinces of Iran, girls can be admitted to the university system, and thereby parity of the two sexes has started to appear so far as higher education is concerned. At present, more entry of girls is observed into the university system. Higher education of girls and women has extensively impacted their lifestyles, their overall expectations and their talents. They are potentially very active in all areas of science and technology, but much tolerant versus the dominant unemployment in the country. Their tertiary education has highly affected their total fertility rate (TFR). The gender gap is being narrowed educationally, and is even well observed within rural young females. The whole scenario will greatly affect the next generations in the country too.

Introduction

The paper illustrates a picture of women's educational attainment in Iran in recent decades. The movement has impacted various aspects of the life of women including their marriage age, their fertility rate, their lifestyle, their life expectancy etc. The movement has allowed the women more socio-economic participation, and outdoor activities. Since the 1960s all the United Nations reports have emphasized on literacy and educational attainment of women to eliminate the gender gap (Rowely, 1993). One of the objectives of UN and UNESCO is to encourage countries toward the education of women; in the course of which women achieve more progressive opportunities. The ultimate objective of such organizations is to eliminate gender inequality. Following the development of education within women, such educated women would have the opportunity of making use of their capacities in the best and foremost ways.

Similarly, and from a sociological perspective, under the condition of educating women, a nation can qualitatively and quantitatively reach an ideal and optimum population; a situation in which health, food and other needs are easily secured. Such reports include the Pearson report (1969), the Brandt report (1987), and the UNICEF report (1994). All these reports emphasize on women's education and further investments in this regard in order to eliminate the gender gap. As the developing countries need to put into practice development plans in agricultural, industrial and service sectors, training talented and specialized cadres could be possible only through women's education. This movement, while it brings about distinctions, it also guarantees improvements in health and quality of life of the women and families. In spite of the aforesaid recommendations, and the attempts made in the past four decades, we still observe a large number of women in Africa, Asia and Latin America who are deprived of sufficient education. Instead, such women are subject to higher fertility rate which contributes to high population growth.

Method of Research

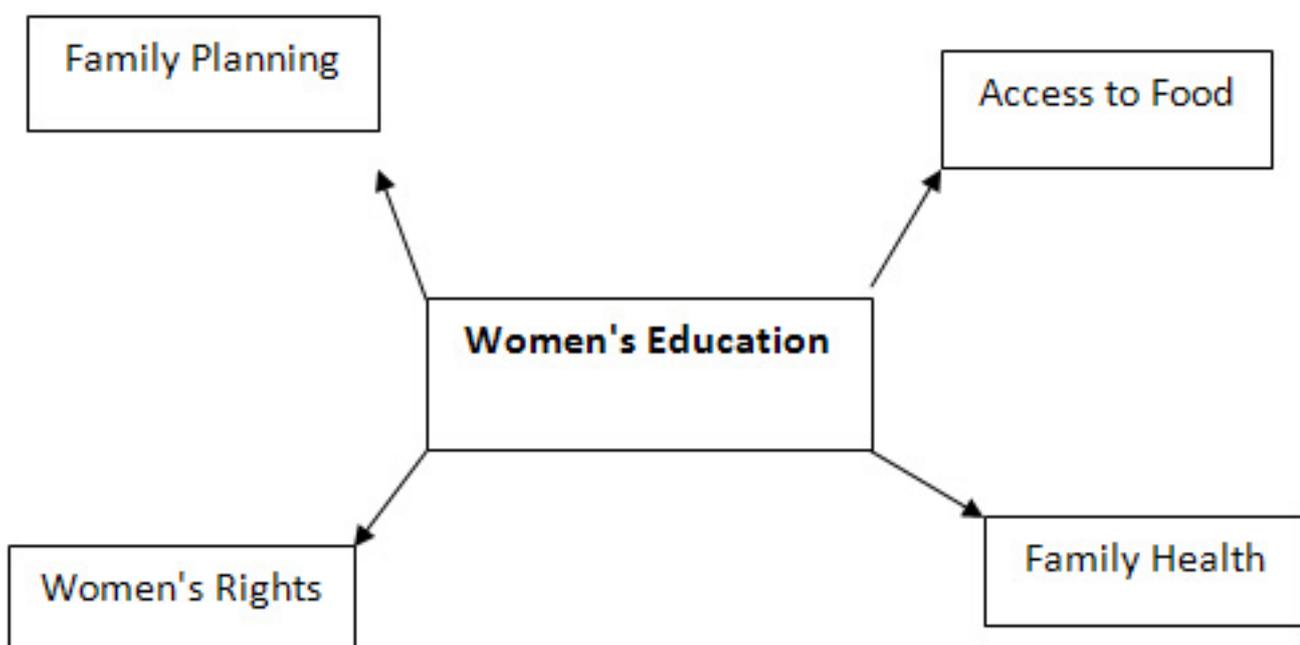
The procedure applied to conduct the research, was a combined method; comprising empirical as well as theoretical methods. The present project involved female students studying in public and private universities in Tehran City. In this way, selected students were chosen and interviewed accordingly. In the theoretical part, the required data was searched and extracted from different sources. In the empirical part female students of age 18 and above were randomly selected and orally interviewed. Through contact with the students, the researcher came to know that: "Better and improved quality of life of women is guaranteed by their tertiary education".

Girls' Education

Based on a public consensus, girls' education is counted as one of most important investments in any developing country that enhances development in general. Therefore, as the world societies pursue their development plans in a competitive manner, girls' and women's education seems to be inevitable. Their training and education contribute to the best of their use. While the process gives them more satisfaction, it also helps in the social and economic development of the country. Based on this principle, the developing countries are increasing investments in women's education. If not, the women are subject to repeated fertility and eventually population growth at national level. However, though higher education has changed everywhere in the world, nations have not always changed the same everywhere (Bentley, 2013).

In the long term, almost any aspect of development from access to food, family planning, family health, women's rights etc. all would depend on how a country has invested in women's educational standards. Therefore, any progress in hygienic, economic and cultural sectors would depend on skills derived from women's education. Nowadays, the mass media of all kinds have developed in the world more than any time before, and thereby the rural and urban areas have been connected with each other. Such networks have connected various social groups. Under such circumstances, and based on world recommendations including UNESCO, women's education must be prioritized, and ahead of development plans in different countries. In this way, the socio-economic plans of countries would be implemented for the future followed by improvement of quality of life.

Figure 1: Objective Indicators Derived from Women's Education



Gender Equality

Gender discrimination usually starts from birth, and equality as an assuring step finds meaning: that is the condition under which both males and females feel that they can easily exploit their capacities in various spheres. Therefore, approaching gender equality will change the culture of discrimination and the gap between the two sexes. It is worth noting that the industrial countries could increase their productivity through the adaption of such policies. On the other hand, population growth decreased in such countries because of the new policies. Adoption of such policies by the developing countries would positively affect the future generations in these countries.

Hence, investment in food, health and education of girls from birth to adulthood is of prime importance, and eventually such socialization would lead to overall development. It is hereby suggested that the policy-makers must put girls and women on the world's development agenda (Global Poverty Project, 2018). Girls and women at the macro level can have productivity equal to men, or even more than them in any society provided that enough investment is applied to them.

Following the development of women's education, the views of many decision-makers and policy-makers toward women would change, and in this way, the position of girls would gradually change. Industrial countries since two centuries ago have been able to change the position and roles of their women; followed by their improvement. In this way, and through education they could play their best role in the development of their societies. Generally speaking, during the 20th century women could feel a great change in their lives through accessing education. In this movement, women could participate in decision-making in various ways including the number of their children, their age of marriage, their choosing employment etc. In the meantime, and from the viewpoint of sociology of gender, despite their capabilities, women are often chosen for typically low activities, and such a mentality has embedded in them that they are always dependent on men (Abbot & Wallace, 1990).

World Bank and Women's Education

World Bank in recent years attempted to diffuse the idea that women's education has more consequences, compared with other investments in the developing world (Schultz, 1993). This message had fruitful and effective consequences. While probably some other investments may not result in good ends, women's education is appraised as a positive investment. This movement is not defeated, and does not remain without results.

Statistics indicate that in the past four decades there has been an increasing rise in the enrollment of girls at school and high school levels in the developing world. The growth is good news for better change in welfare and health of women in future years. As a result, women's fertility would decline, and they would have more job opportunities and

social participation. World organizations stress that girls should have longer schooling, i.e. the type of investment that would directly and indirectly limit their fertility role. Yet, it is worth mentioning that customs, traditions, cultural values, the dominant patterns etc. inhibit girls from schooling and as a result, provide boys with more schooling chances. While there is still a gender gap of schooling in Africa, some parts of Asia and Latin America, Iran has done well to fill the gap (Bellew et al., 1992). Based on the idea that girls after marriage take their capital to the husband's home, many parents prefer to invest more in their sons as far as schooling investment is concerned.

Investment Returns

Education of girls and women has been recognized as the key factor of their success in the developing world, including Iran. Western countries that invested in female education earlier could make use of their productivity in various spheres. Those countries could cyclically obtain more national income which enabled them to invest more in new areas/aspects. Critically speaking, though girls and women have been equipped with high levels of modern education, their hopes and expectations have not responded well (Cotterill, 2007). Hence, the developing countries that pay attention to the education of their female youth equal to their male youth, may reach social and economic reforms within a shorter stand of time. Therefore, planners should prioritize female education regardless of race, language, religion and nationality. In this manner, a guaranteed future could be illustrated for a nation.

Education and Demography

The above two themes are mutually correlated. Education can evenly impact demographic events including birth, death and migration rates. It also affects marriage age and divorce rates as well. It has largely affected Iran's population indicators expect for migration which has extensively occurred despite a high education rate.

The levels of higher secondary and tertiary education have constantly been increasing in Iran in the past four decades. Such an infrastructure has been the basis of other developments such as health and industries. The recent improvement in tertiary education is apparently observed within the women, impacting their age of marriage and their total fertility rate (TFR). Another indicator shows that more than two-thirds of young women (aged 15-24) in Iran today have completed at least junior secondary education. The appearing educational patterns provide impressive high hopes of development and further prosperity for the years to come.

Iran, though strictly Islamic by religion, had one of the world's rapid fertility declines which is very much relevant to female education in the country. Education as a means caused fertility to rapidly drop; a scenario which is very unlikely to reverse shortly.

Table 1: A Comparative Demographic and Educational Image of Selected Countries 2017

Country	Total Fertility Rate	Secondary School Enrollment		Tertiary Education Enrollment	
		Ratio		Ratio	
		Males	Females	Males	Females
		2009/2016	2009/2016	2009/2016	2009/2016
Iran	1.8	89	89	76	68
Pakistan	3.6	49	39	11	9
China	1.8	93	96	43	49
India	2.3	74	74	27	27
South Korea	1.2	99	98	105	80
Egypt	3.3	86	86	37	36
South Africa	2.4	88	112	16	23
Brazil	1.6	97	102	42	59
United states	1.8	97	98	73	100
Venezuela	2.4	86	39	—	—

Source: World Population Date Sheet 2017.

Table 2: Literacy rates for women aged 15-19 to 25-29, by rural and urban areas, Iran, 1966-2006

Age group	1966		1976		1986		1996		2006	
	Urban	Rural								
15-19	57.7	5.4	75.4	19.8	85.8	53.0	96.9	86.4	98.3	93.2
20-24	41.2	2.7	59.4	10.1	75.8	36.5	93.8	77.9	97.9	90.5
25-29	29.5	1.4	49.4	4.9	65.5	22.0	89.5	65.4	96.3	84.1

Source: Statistical Center of Iran, quoted by Population and Development Review 2010.

Since 1996, informal education through television and radio has provided rural people with the information to control fertility and thereby implement family planning. However, such an infrastructure diffused the idea of smaller family size and family planning within the rural women: leading them to better health, longer life expectancy, and higher quality of life. The inauguration of formal family planning in Iran since 1989 contributed to TFR dropping to around 1.9 in 2006 (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2009). Narrowing the gap between urban and rural fertility has continued since 2006; creating TFR of 1.8 children on average for a woman, which is leading to ageing at the time being.

Conclusion

Observation of quality and quantity of educational diffusing in Iran in the past four decades indicates the gradual elimination of the educational gap. While the educational gender gap is disappearing, in contrast, high expectations of women are appearing. These women expect jobs and income, higher standards of living and more social respect and valuation. Such controversies are appearing in the present society of Iran. New socio-educational uplifting of education is not in good harmony with the current political norms, creating controversies. However, narrowing the gender gap needs effective political infrastructure too. Iran is at present equipped with sufficient talents and educated women who are in search of job positions. Paradoxically speaking, Iran as a Muslim country by no means prohibits women's modern education. But if jobs are not provided, increasing vulnerabilities would inevitably appear. So, the country is trying to achieve further economic development to respond to the stand-by youth.

However gender equality as brought about in the framework of educational settings, is in contrast with different values of the Islamic Republic which need to be eroded. Since the 1980s women in Iran could feel great change, but in the framework of the Islamic ethics. Many world institutions including the World Bank have strongly recommended investment in women's education which is determining in various aspects including socialization of the new generations. As the education of women is constantly increasing; creating further change, governments must also plan and equip themselves to respond to them. Education also has contributed to change in demographic indicators of Iran in recent years.

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