Women's Access to Leadership Positions in the Political Sphere in Iran

Hsiang Chi Chen

Shanghai New Epoch Bilingual High School, Shanghai, 202163, China

Keywords: Gender equality, Iran, political institutions, Sustainable Development Goals, reform, inequality, education, constitutional change

Abstract: The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, has conferred greater emancipatory powers, particularly for female access to leadership positions in the political arena. However, this report argues that the quest for female access to Iran's political sphere has not gone far enough. There is yet to be a female President despite, in theory, the lack of legal ban. Thus, there exists a serious 'rhetoric-action' puzzle; whilst Ayatollah Khomeini, the seminal figure in establishing the Iranian constitution, frequently proclaimed the Republic's commitment to gender equality, the present reality is that this remains an unrealised myth. Women encounter numerous barriers to establishing their political careers. This essay will draw to light how Iranian women cannot access executive political roles due to gendered political institutions, and in the second section of this essay, provide solutions to the current gender inequality. Gender equality will be measured by access to the political sphere and leadership positions, but I acknowledge it can also be measured through levels of violence, property rights, legal rights and autonomy. Though beyond the remit of this essay, it is important to acknowledge gender inequality in its entirety constitutes a significant contemporary socio-economic issue in Iran.

1. Introduction

The fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal adopted by member states in 2015, focuses on achieving gender equality and inspiring females[1]. In the midst of crises including Covid-19, the climate emergency and, rising economic and political uncertainty, progress on gender equality has not only failed to move forward but has actually regressed[1]. SDG (5) requires extra attention from the global community to ensure gender equality does not remain an unrealised goal. In the context of Iran, which is the country of focus in this essay, women suffer from a routinised system of discrimination and entrenched inequality. This is manifest in the Iranian constitution, established after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and penal code of the Islamic Republic. In tort cases, females are permitted 50 percent of what their male counterpart would be presented[2].

Most choices from dress to employment to health decisions, and even simple pleasures like riding a bicycle are restricted and regulated by male-dominated authorities[2]. Given state sanctioned repression, the declaration by the Guardian Council in 2020 for female presidency, may sound exciting. However, this may be viewed as an empty gesture to appease the international audience and simultaneously suppress any internal grievance stemming from gender inequality. While an Iranian female president could hypothetically do all that her male counterparts currently do, she would still face daily discrimination, social repression, and physical insecurity. Therefore, a successful solution would not merely replace the current routine of male presidency with a female one. Instead, it would target embedded attitudes and cultures in Iran from a structural standpoint to facilitate conducive presidential terms for female candidates.

2. Analysis

Women have held roles of political authority pre and post Revolution. This is significant because pre-Revolution, the Shah's push for modernisation and Westernisation facilitated a different role for women, whilst the 1979 Islamic constitution set out the role of women as defined by religious law, *Shari'a.* In both cases, women were and are able to access political positions. Masoumeh Ebtekar, a

notable figure in Iranian politics; a former spokeswoman for the students who seized the Embassy in 1979, and under President Mohammad Khatami, vice president of environment. Under President Hassan Rouhani in 2017, she was also appointed the vice president of the women and family affairs committee[3]. The case of Marzieh Dastjerdi, a conservative and the first female cabinet minister, was also appointed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hardliner and heavily supported by Ayatollah Khamenei, in 2009[3]. The examples highlight women can and often do enjoy politically senior roles in politics and it is not a case that women are exiled from the political sphere altogether.

Moreover, Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei, a spokesman for the Guardian Council, a body charged with interpreting Iran's constitution and overseeing its elections, stated "there is not a legal ban on the presidency of women"[4]. In addition to the ability of women to hold leadership positions in cabinet, the Constitution prizes itself in the ability of women to be president. The lack of formal barrier to female access to Presidency means that a lack of historic female president finds its answer not in structural gender inequality, rather, the inability of female capabilities. Therefore, in a case of equal opportunities for men and women, women do not employ their opportunities to the same extent as their male counterparts. This is an argument that alleviates the burden on the Iranian state.

However, though there exists no legal barrier to women entering presidency, the case is that there has not been a female president because gender inequality remains a structural issue, facilitated by the state. Azam Taleghani, the daughter of a prominent cleric and member of Parliament, registered to run as a candidate in the 1997 elections, aswell as subsequent ones[5]. Though the constitution does not explicitly bar women from presidency, the Guardian Council which consists of an all-male body of 12 jurists and Islamic scholars – repeatedly disqualifies women who register for presidency[5]. Datjerdhi was reportedly considered running in the 2021 presidential election to succeed reformist Rouhani. Election mongering by the Guardian Council hinders access for suitable female candidates for President and it is through informal structures supported by the state, that women suffer from gender inequality. Though male counterparts also suffer from electoral abuse from the state apparatus, it is not to the extent as females given they can still access presidency.
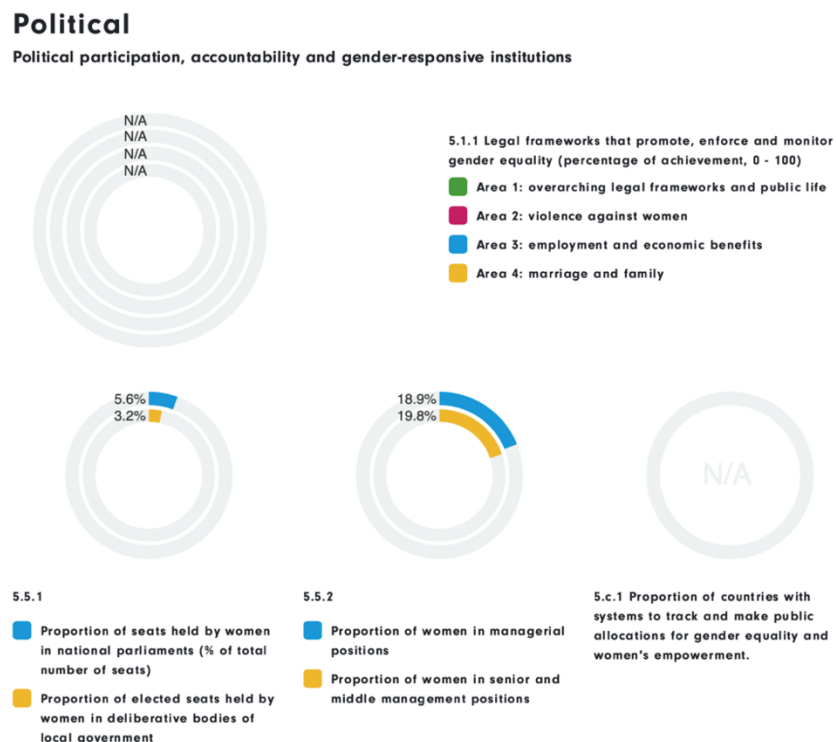

Fig. 1 Illustration of female participation in the political sphere

Iran has an overall Gender Inequality Index Score of 0.583 and is positioned 142 out of 149 countries by the World Economic Forum [6]. Hence, inequality in terms of political access exists within a context of broader gender inequality. In terms of the political sphere itself, as of February

2021, only 5.6% of seats in parliament were held by women [6]. Moreover, the proportion of women in managerial positions was 18.9%, indicating that inequality determines job mobility. The analysis opposes the claims of Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei who points to a freely accessible political sphere. The analysis shows women do not enjoy adequate representation and face informal restraints (as shown in Figure 1).

3. Constitutional Reform

3.1 Solution

To deal with the inaccessibility of women in elite political roles, constitutional reforms are necessary to uproot structural gender inequality. Within the Iranian constitution, women are referred to in Articles 10 and 21 and the Government has acknowledged their rights[7]. Regarding the basic rights like the right for education, the right for dwelling and the right for employment, women have been included in the term 'everyone.' However, there are some nuances concerning the role of women in political participation especially when it comes to Presidency. Article 115 signifies the president of the Republic must be elected from both the religious and political elite[8]. However, the term used in Persian writing for 'political elite' is an Arabic term called 'Rajol' which translates to 'men' in Persian. However, some argue this this is merely an umbrella term for political figures[8]. The interpretation by jurists of the term 'Rajol' has been a source of contestation and the inability of the Guardian Council of the Constitution to provide clarity on the issue, has led to the systematic marginalisation of women in their ability to become president. Whilst it may seem like a problem of interpretation, the unclarity has lent itself to enable the Iranian state to promote gender inequality through the façade of interpretation issues. Therefore, by placing a clear enough clause in the Iranian Constitution for the role of women in the political space, especially one building on the accessibility of women as Presidents, much of the political inaccessibility will be halted. Clarity will mean the Iranian state cannot hide behind the veil of interpretive issues as reason for marginalisation. Taiwan provides a case for constitutional clarity; Article 10 of the 1991 Constitution guarantees women's equal rights and security[9]. The seemingly positive female environment in Taiwan is support by the reflection in Taiwan's political system of the election of a female President in 2016, renewed in 2020. This capped a rising tide of women's political empowerment with 42% Parliamentary representation, legislative reforms, and an active women's programme[10].

Although the solution of constitutional reform can contribute to societal change, there are challenges posed by changing the Iranian constitution. Below are considerations of limitations to this solution.

3.2 Limits to Reform

One limitation stemming from the solution of a constitutional guarantee is that actors can interfere with the electoral process and bar certain female candidates from entering the presidential race. Whilst the solution ensures women run for President, it does not ensure an equal and fair political process until the end. Freedom House (2021) report that whilst the current Islamic Republic of Iran holds elections regularly, they aren't wholly democratic, partly due to the influence of hard-liners in the Guardian Council who disqualify candidates deemed insufficiently loyal to the clerical establishment. The Ayatollah wields ultimate power, and the unelected institutions remain under his control. Election mongering is common and was exhibited in the 2009 election although Rouhani was not eliminated from the electoral process, he did not win the electoral race despite mass popular support[6]. Hardliner Ahmedinejad, supported by Ayatollah Khamenei, was elected instead. Therefore, the current constitution encourages men to take on roles of political leadership, but only through an undemocratic election process which simultaneously hinders the possibility of female presidency. Whilst women can have their name on the ballot paper, a majority of the female candidates would be removed.

A second limitation arises from constitutional change. This may lead to opposition, especially from males, as they benefit from the current system. 50.47% of the population are males[11]. Male voters make up 52% of the voting class in comparison to 48% of females[12]. If men are not onboard with the gender changes introduced in the constitution, their vote could in effect act like a veto against the possibility of a female president since they make up a larger number of the voting share. This may give rise to greater informal abuse and discrimination against females, and state institutions may become sponsors of such violence by turning a blind eye. It may also spark protests led by men, or even females who view the constitutional reform as too 'liberal' and against the Islamic ideology permeating the Iranian Revolution. Similar to the argument in the first limitation, a change in the constitution may remove unclarity, but it would not tend to the electoral process itself which can be victim to electoral fraud, election mongering and female candidates more heavily ridiculed by state media. But the two risks assessed are not at all fatal and there are ways of mitigating their effects[13]. Solution two works to eliminate much of the election fraud constitutional reforms do not provide. Thus, implementing solution one in conjunction with solution two would propose a better alternative since one directly eliminates many of the risks associated with the other.

4. Electoral Reform

4.1 Solution

Another solution that could lead to a turning point, is to ensure that an independent body oversees the electoral process so that all women have a fair chance, regardless of background. The private sector agency of the United Nations, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, works closely for election monitoring. In 2009, the human rights office took up its role in Afghanistan. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has developed a checklist on women's participation in presidential and provincial elections in Afghanistan. The checklist was developed to ensure that a gender dimension is included in the monitoring of their political rights. Questions were discussed to better understand how cultural practices, traditions, and security environments influence the participation of women and men in elections. Accurate data on election violence, such as data collected by Violence Education and Solutions Electoral Systems International's Electoral System, aided in combatting election violence[14].

When compared to the case of Afghanistan, Iran has a similar domestic atmosphere as it is also culturally rich. Afghanistan is also made up of a large percentage of Muslims and from a religious perspective, women running for president may be denounced by Islamic law. However, if Afghanistan can put aside its cultural and religious values, then there is hope that Iran can do the same and put itself up for international election monitoring. Whilst there are cultural similarities, Iran is different in that it has been more closed off from the international system than Afghanistan[15]. The invasion in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, proved the state-building apparatus had to be restructured with the aid of international intervention[15]. Iran has not suffered from such external intervention; opponents of election monitoring may argue that there is no need to change the political process. In Afghanistan, there was a greater need for such changes given the destruction after the invasion. Nonetheless, election monitoring is certainly feasible. There would be much international support for such a decision from Iran since Iran has come under scrutiny for its undemocratic "democratic" political system, especially seen in the Green Movement of 2009[15]. If there is international support, this may also reduce the financial burden of election monitoring through foreign investments.

4.2 Limits to Electoral Reform

Outsiders are often unaware of local cases tied to history, culture, and religion. As a result, they may not be able to acknowledge fraudulent electoral behaviour since they would not be able to distinguish between culturally sanctioned behaviour versus illegal. Observers can arrive quickly before the vote and often lack the linguistic or cultural background to help them properly evaluate

the vote and in Iran with growing literacy rates amongst males and females[14]. As there is widespread acknowledgment that the electoral process is already undemocratic, it would only paint a negative picture in Iran if supposedly democratic agencies mandated with election monitoring, became a source for manipulation. This would defeat the purpose of election monitoring: to ensure a fair political process. It is always difficult to monitor what goes on behind the scenes, whilst agencies may claim they are neutral arbiters, it would be hard to assess whether manipulation or poor election management is occurring [15].

To further complicate the problem of ignorance, video display units often do not work with home supervisors to avoid appearing biased. The monitors are also no longer fully independent but have a series of necessary limitations. For example, video display units affiliated with the organization that sponsors their mission are broadcasted on the screens[14]. This highlights that whilst independent bodies may arrive with the purpose of election monitoring, private agencies may bring with them external interests to diffuse across the Iranian population. Iran faces brewing social unrest from its citizen. The last thing Iran needs is more mechanisms that fuel the instability. Especially as Iran likes to permeate information only through its state-run media, external bodies broadcasting personal interests may seriously anger the Iranian state.

Reports can also be tailored to funding needs, sourcing rather than taking advantage of the electoral oversight mission. Especially for IGOs, it is tempting to claim most elections are fair given it increases the responsibility of IGOs to "remake" the election vote[15]. Even for independent organisations, corrupt measures may still permeate and influence decision making. IGOs are burdened with securing funding for their operation, and just as states are worried about the national debt, IGOs are worried about how they will secure funding for their day-to-day costs. This makes IGOs just as much a strategic and self-fulfilling character as states are acknowledged to be. This can be specifically fatal for Iran, as election monitoring may merely serve as a guise over the existent election mongering that occurs. The question certainly is whether independent bodies are willing to prove themselves to be as independent as it claims; free of external and internal interests manipulating its agenda? The fact that IGOs are made up of representatives of the state's capacity absolutely cannot ignore the role states play in the elections.

5. The Role of Education

5.1 Solution

My final proposed solution is educative reform through curricular changes. This is because education can work to change culturally embedded views so that citizens are more accepting of gender reforms. Not only will education increase awareness around gender issues, but it can spark interest from the population in pressuring government to enact change. Education works to inform the populace so that citizens hold the government to account. Currently in Iran, schools are segregated by gender, which makes discrimination common. Girls are not equally taught STEM based subjects, instead taught the arts and humanities to reinforce gendered perceptions of education which delineate STEM to males, and the arts to females. Boys are taught science, maths, and sports[7]. This educational divide fuels gender patriarchies as females embody the social code institutions promote. Women remain under the pretence that they cannot do the tasks men can do, an idea that shapes a lack of female presidency. By introducing compulsory topics of gender studies and its impact on women, for both boys and girls, women will put themselves out there to take on roles traditionally dominated by men.

In addition to curriculum changes, there is a need for pedagogical changes that may give wind to gender hierarchies. For example, the current classroom divides between males and females defeat the large goal of inclusive education policies as it connotes the idea that men and women are different thus require different syllabuses[16]. It is no good to merely change the curriculum, if classroom dynamics dividing boys and girls contradicts inclusive gender policies. A good show of how to practice equality in the teaching-learning process is Honduras, which has developed a specific agenda for secondary schools to encourage teachers to use non-discriminatory methods[17].

5.2 Limits to Educative Reform

The first limitation is the level of acceptance from key stakeholders to introduce changes that uproot the educational system. The Iranian constitutions may be happy with how the current education systems function and what messages they socialise children to adopt. Without the Iranian state willing to implement educational reform, these changes cannot occur. This solution is entirely dependent on the willingness of the Iranian state to change its ways. Moreover, this isn't just a question for the Iranian state, educational bodies in Iran may be unwilling to implement these changes. This may create a divide between the Iranian state who may agree with educational reform versus educational bodies who may be unwilling to implement such changes. Further, education is a system that relies heavily on keeping parents' content with what children are taught. If there is opposition from parents, then this solution may not be sustainable. Navigating the various conflicts between stakeholders will be difficult to navigate through when implementing this solution.

A second limitation that arises is that education may not achieve what it has set out to do. By this I mean education may not result in children to reform traditional attitudes. If change is produced, quantifying the change produced by education is difficult since it is premised on unquantifiable changes in attitudes and behaviours rooted in current gender stereotypes. A question that arises is how can we measure the effectiveness of educational reform and therefore, its long-term implementation?

6. Conclusion

To conclude, gender inequality remains a hot socioeconomic issue for Iran, especially in the political sphere. Despite the many challenges instilling gender equality brings, uprooting cultural attitudes, constitutional change and institutional reform, gender equality is still feasible. It will require vast amounts of work including working with key stakeholders in Iranian society as well as actors in the international system to facilitate a transition from a system that denies female rights to one that is more inclusive. It will require a wider time horizon since uprooting systems that have been functioning for over several decades is not a quick job. It will require adequate planning and preparation as well as support to ensure the new systems are durable to withstand pressures. Once this is achieved, Iranian women can benefit from equal opportunities and access a political sphere currently dominated by men. Educational reform through operational and curriculum change, constitutional change by eradicating misinterpretation of the term 'Rajol' and election monitoring to ensure equality in the political process, are all viable solutions albeit accompanied with limitations. The broader question to consider is whether the time, effort, and resources needed to achieve structural change through gender reform is worth the disturbance? As the UN highlights gender equality as a fundamental human right and gender-based discrimination prohibited under almost every human rights treaty, implementing these difficult solutions is undeniably worth it.

References

[1] United Nations, 2022. *UNWomen,* https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/08/in-focus-sustainable-development-goal-5

[2] Jha, A. & Shah, M., 2020. *Leveraging Education as a Tool to Achieve Gender Equality – Strategies and Signposts,* https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/04/08/leveraging-education-as-a-tool-to-achieve-gender-equality-strategies-and-signposts/

[3] G Sepehrrad, R., 2003. The Role of Women in Iran's New Popular Revolution. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs ,* 9(2), pp. 217-228.

[4] ZakerSalehi, G., 2020. The Status of Women in the Iranian Constitution. *Journal of International Women's Studies ,* 21(1), pp. 309-327.

[5] W. E. F., 2021. *Global Gender Gap Report 2021,* Switzerland: World Economic Forum.

[6] U. N., 2022. *Data UN women – Iran,* https://data.unwomen.org/country/iran-islamic-republic-o

[7] Moinipour, S., 2022. Iran's Educational System and the Instituionalisation of Gender Inequality. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs .*

[8] Hanna, A., 2020. *The Iran Primer,* https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/dec/03/part-ii-profiles-women's-movement

[9] Brysk, A., 2020. Constructing rights in Taiwan: the feminist factor, democratization, and the quest for global citizenship. *The Pacific Review ,* 34(5), pp. 838-870.

[10] PBS, n.d. *The Structure of Power in Iran.* [Online] Available at: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/govt.html

[11] Agency, C. a. i. S., 2022. *ELECTION SECURITY RUMOR VS. REALITY.* [Online] Available at: https://www.cisa.gov/rumorcontrol[Accessed 21 October 2022].

[12] Alihodžić, S. & Asplund, E., 2013. *The Prevention and Mitigation of Election-related Violence,* Stockholm : Institute for democracy and electoral assistance. Azizi, A., 2020. *Atlantic Council.* [Online]

[13] Daragahi, B., 2019. *A decade after Iran's Green movement; some lessons.* [Online]

[14] Available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/a-decade-after-iran-s-green-movement-some-lessons/

[15] Action. *International security ,* 27(1), pp. 5-39.

[16] Mathews, S. M. & Savarimuthu, A., 2020. *Role of Education in Transmitting Culture in Society.* Coimbatore: Bharathiar University .

[17] Times, S., 2021. *Statistics Times.* https://statisticstimes.com/demographics/country/iran-demographics.php