

**On the Dynamics of
Women's Rights Movement in Iran, 1996-2006**

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Abstract

The capricious history of women's rights movement in Iran opened a new passage in 1997 that led to spectacular achievements in women's liberties and social status. Despite a mixture of social/political conservatism in Iran which opposes any improvement in women's rights institutions, cascades of change, following each other, incurred huge progress in social lives of millions of Iranian women. Discussing these remarkable changes, this paper aims to study the primary reasons of institutional changes in Iran. The argument is heavily based on Kuran's theory of preference falsification (1995). Using other modern institutional theories, the paper explains the political, social, economical and even technological factors that provided a self-reinforcing equilibrium under which the weak institutions of women's rights gained strength and are continuing to do so. Finally, the paper tries to give some intuition about the outcomes of these struggles in near future and how it could affect the future of social/political stability in Iran.

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Background

The history of women's rights movement in Iran dates back to the first encounters of western merchants with the Iranian society by the introduction and gradual penetration of European ideas and life style into the well-educated classes in early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the first organized participation of women in the political activities took place in late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bayat-Philipp 1978) and increased during the first Iranian revolution known as *Constitutional Revolution* of 1905-1911 (Afary 1997).

Since then, the movement gradually gained success in some arenas during the secular dictatorships of Reza Shah and his son and their comprehensive westernization programs, though it also faced many difficulties and constraints dictated by the political system (Mahdi 2004). Reza Shah imposed western oriented women's clothing and banned traditional forms, especially veils. But after the Islamic revolution of 1979, implementation of the Islamic law became top priority for the ruling clerics. The Islamic government took away many of the rights that had been granted to women previously contrary to what it had promised to them before the revolution. This took the women by surprise as they were considered a strong faction among the revolutionaries and they were promised more freedom.

Women were subject to various sorts of discrimination in the Islamic law. The state established harsh dressing codes for women, enforced veils, banned any non-Islamic behavior in public, and challenged the established rule of secular law especially in the individual/private domains. This accompanied by state's strong suppression and elimination of any opposition including women's movements which was legitimized based on extraordinary security situation of country, the highly probable civil war during early years of post-revolution and the eight years of war between Iran and Iraq (1980-88).

After the war, the era of reconstruction and socio-economic development began. Very little improvement took place in women's rights and freedom in this period. The oppression continued while the era of economic development brought new opportunities for women, increased their social participation, education and welfare which paved the way for future changes. The situation continued until 1994, when Faezeh Hashemi, young pro-modernization daughter of president of the time, was elected as a member of parliament in a surprising victory and obtained the second rank of vote in the capital. Her majority of votes came from women who were silently becoming a major political force in the Islamic Republic. Two years later, Khatami, who was a strong supporter of rights for women and youth, was elected as the president with a landslide victory that took everybody by surprise. After the election, cascades of change followed immediately in many fields, from freedom of press, and political rights, to social freedom and women's rights. The pace and volume of change was extraordinary and only comparable to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Although in many fields especially in those more related to political reforms the cascades of change were unsuccessful and sometimes reversed but women attained huge successes in their fight for freedom and rights that were totally unexpected at the onset of the 1997 election.

This paper aims to explain huge achievements for women's rights movement in the last decade and the reasons behind these changes. The argument is heavily grounded on Timur Kuran's theory of *preference falsification* (Kuran 1995). Using this thesis, I will argue that the 1997 election was a turning point for the contemporary history of women's rights movement in Iran that changed the pace and track of the fight for women's rights. Beside this theory, I also address other factors that helped establishment of new self-enforcing equilibrium.

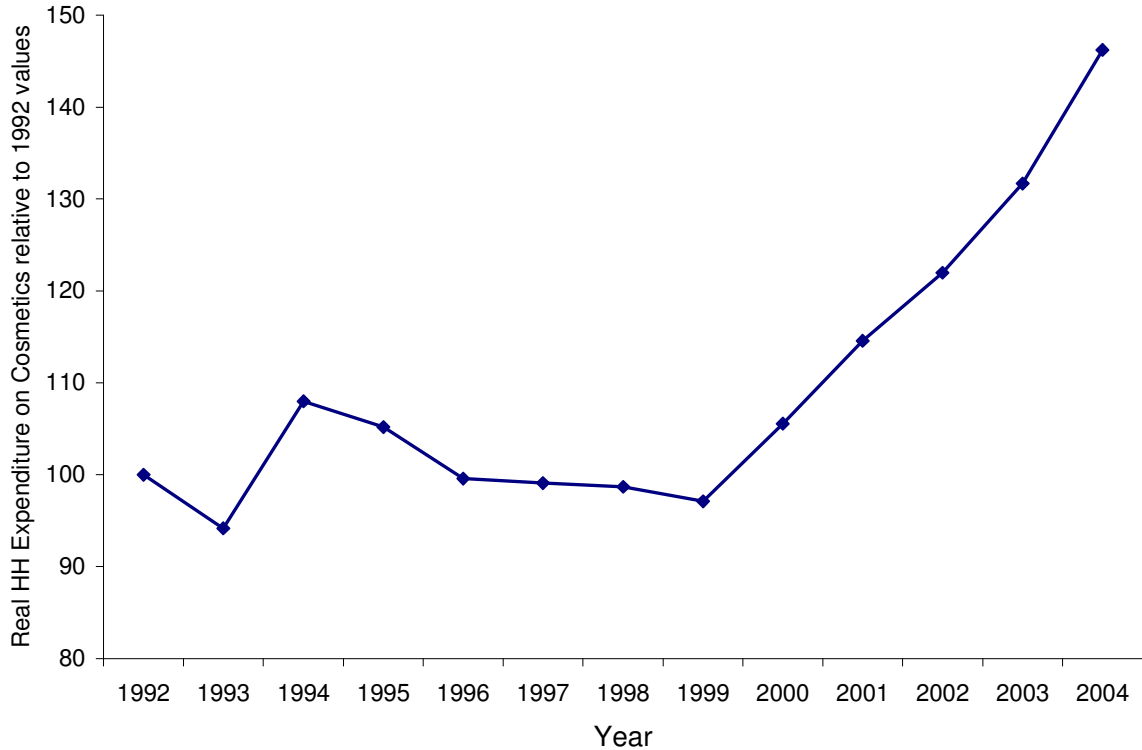
What has been achieved?

Many prominent Iranian feminists believe that there has not been much progress in women's rights during the last decade. Being lawyers and activists, they argue based on the fact that very little improvement in favor of eradication of any inequality between sexes in the laws, especially civil and family laws, took place. Although these facts are true, astounding advances happened in other non-formal domains related to women, such as dressing and veil, inter-gender relationships, freedom and autonomy inside families and in the public, and norms and attitudes of society toward women.

The freedom that women achieved for their dressing in the post war years, from 1988 to 1997, was not significant due to state enforcement of Islamic dressing codes. According to these laws, every strand of women's hair must be covered. Makeup, colorful veils, and anything considered attractive is forbidden as they distract women from piety and spirituality. Government officials arrest and sometimes flog unveiled women in the streets and other public spaces. But after 1997, in a very short period, women's clothing dramatically changed. They start confronting the state laws by wearing clothes and dresses that were not tolerated before. This trend continued very rapidly in a way that each year more dressing codes and norms were abandoned. Clothes that were considered extremely bold in one year and were seen very scarcely in public became the fashion the following year. Cosmetics that had punishments if they had been worn in public before 1997 were become prevalent everywhere in a few years. Women enjoy much more freedom of choice in the ways they dress and wear cosmetics that were unprecedented. As capturing and providing scientific documentation for these changes is not easy, I use a novel approach in bringing evidence on the change in the norms related to Islamic dressing which is to look at the cosmetics consumption of households before and after 1997. Figure 1 depicts the trend in the household expenditure on cosmetics in fixed prices from 1992 to 2004. Before 1997 there is a slightly decreasing trend

in the consumption of cosmetics but after 1998 it sharply increases with an unparalleled rate.

Figure 1 – The average urban household real expenditure on Cosmetics relative to its 1992 values, in 1992 prices



Source of Data: Statistical Center of Iran.

Before 1997, strict laws regarding inter-gender relationships in public were enforced. If young men and women who were not first relatives of each other were seen together in public places would have been questioned, arrested and in some occasions temporarily jailed. More sever punishments would have been considered relative to the degree of breach of Islamic codes. After 1997, mass violations of inter-gender relationship laws took place in a way that was intractable for the government. Each year the number of young men and women who were seen in the streets and public arenas hand in hand rose and the degree of violations gradually increased relative to past years. One indirect

way to provide evidence on these dramatic changes is to look at the number and variety of places that young men and women went to socialize in each era. Before 1997, there were only general meeting places like restaurants and parks that were used to meet the opposite sex but after that, new businesses emerged to meet this demand of the youth population. Western-style modern coffee shops were opened rapidly throughout major cities. New modern shopping centers emerged that soon became the center for young people to gather, socialize and spend time together. These businesses were particularly not tolerated before 1997 as one of their functions was to provide a mean for inter-gender relationships. Table 1 demonstrates the expansion in these businesses. This is while number of movies, which are state-owned public arenas, remains fairly the same during this period.

Table 1 – The Expansion of controversial businesses related to inter-gender relationships in Tehran

Business	1997	2003	Change
Western-Style Coffee Shops	<5	68	1300%
Western Style Shopping Centers	1	11	1100%

Source of Data: Rough estimation of number of coffee shops based on extrapolation in north neighborhoods of Tehran.

Another dramatic progress for women was the sharp bounce in the number of women’s NGOs after 1997. In an effort to connect the government with people, President Khatami initiated a program which supported establishment of NGOs. Having public support, the program attracted many intellectuals and youths. In less than 5 years, the number of NGOs tripled and in some areas that political/social activity were inhibited numerous NGOs start operating and giving service to individual women. Table 2 provides estimates of the volume of change during this period.

Table 2 – The Expansion of NGOs after 1997

Type	1995	1998	2003	2005
Environmental	50	200	500	600
Women's	30	80	300	600
Human Rights	-	-	10	60
Scientific	-	-	115	-
Cultural	-	-	2181	-
Youth-Oriented	-	-	2500	3000
Charitable	-	-	5000	5000
Total	-	5303	10606	15000

- Data is not available.

Source: Baquer Namazi (2006) and Roshanak Shaery-Eisenlohr (2003).

In addition, young women start to gain equal status relative to their male counterparts in some domains such as education. They attained more rights inside families with their parents and husbands and enjoyed more liberty in public. These cascades of change which happened in about five years pose a puzzling question of why and how they happened.

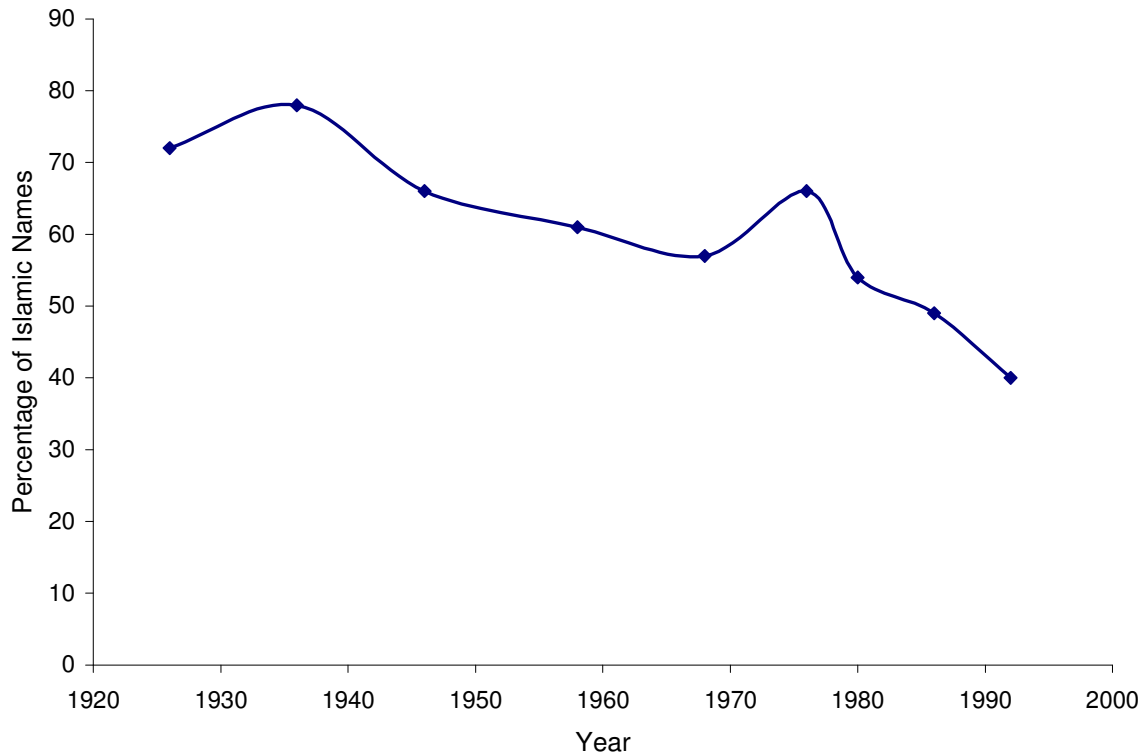
Why it happened?

The argument that I provide for the dynamics of these dramatic changes is heavily based on Timur Kuran's thesis of *preference falsification* (Kuran 1995). Kuran developed a methodology to understand cascades of social change that take place in a short period of time. The rationale is based on "a collective choice model that distinguishes between individuals privately held preferences and those they espouse in public" (Kuran 1989). People who hate a system do not show their preferences in public and this increase the reputation costs for other people who want to provide their true thoughts.

But a small appropriate shock that reveals some of the preferences would put in motion a surprising bandwagon of preference demonstration that change the system in a very short time.

The oppressions and the need for national cohesion during the war in Iran promoted conservative and fundamental values, ideas and attitudes. Islamic values and revolutionary ideas were honored and evangelized every where. They were advertised on every corner with huge publicity as they are the only virtues a man should have. They became the only strong force shaping the public ideology. Despite these facts, Rajabzadeh (1999), Abdi (1999) and Habibi (1992) provide evidence that a process of secularization was happening in people's private lives. Looking at the trend of religious naming of children in this period, they showed that there is a constant fall in religious names after the revolution. Figure 2 depicts replication of Rajabzadeh (1999) results. This shows that people were privately against the government religious policies, while any expression of private opinion did have grave consequences in public. It was not only because of government punishment but also a fear of losing reputation and social status for being seen as a monarchist, unpatriotic, or anti-revolutionary. This fear caused people not only to hide their true beliefs but also to deceptively express the state-promoted values instead of their own. This expression of false beliefs increased the perception that more people are defending the state-promoted values and hence raised the fear of losing reputation and social status in public for more people. This vicious cycle continued to make many people falsely sponsoring government values and policies. The country was under the pressure of a collective conservatism.

Figure 2 – The Trend of change in the number of Islamic names from Hamadan and Arak (Rajabzadeh 1999)



Source: Rajabzadeh (1999)

There were four forces reinforcing this equilibrium for social conservatism. The first one was the fear of the civil war after the revolution which stopped the process of democratization and provided a ground for oppression. The second was the war with Iraq which brought a need for social cohesion and strong support of government policies and the third force which is usually ignored was the international sanctions during the war. Closing the doors of Iran, the sanctions dramatized the situation to become more radical. The government blamed the sanctions and international community for all deficiencies and asked for more cohesion and support in this extraordinary situation. Substantial decrease in oil prices was the other factor that supported this process. Having deprived of resources to fund the war and the growing population, the state used ra-

tions to provide basic needs and announced extraordinary situation in the country. These forces mobilized a dynamic that reinforced government autocratic policies, Islamic and revolutionary values and hence social conservatism.

After the war, the socio-economic development program, which became the priority of the government, paved the way for a new society. Government pressure to uphold revolutionary values decreased slowly while any opposition to the social/political order was strongly suppressed. Few norms are challenged during this period and the system enjoyed a period of stability. People's support for the government in public continued each year in revolution anniversary demonstrations and in various elections.

Campaigns for presidential election of 1997 started in this environment with candidacy of Mohammed Khatami, a new figure who came with the message of reform. His message, widely recognized as a courageous one, became a voice for women, university students and young people. For his progressive ideas, it was clear for many that he would not come out of the ballot box. Polls after polls, before the election, showed that he is behind his rivals not only in rural and small urban areas but also in the big metropolitan areas (Iran reporting agency 1997, May 20).

Many political analysts, journalists and activists in Iran and around the world had predicted that the other incumbent would be the next president. Even some foreign countries like Saudi Arabia and Russia invited him before the election to visit their countries, being quite sure about who would be the next president. It was not until the last days before the election that everything changed. Many people jubilantly attracted to his campaign, as some journalists put it in words "This was not at all what the mullahs had in mind two weeks ago when they assumed their favored candidate, ..., would win easily over three bland rivals whose role was to provide a semblance of competition." (Kinzer 1997, May 23). The landslide victory of Khatami by sweeping 70% of votes, twice as high as his best rival, took everybody by surprise. Stephen Kinzer wrote "a

soft-spoken cleric whom many Iranians had not even heard of until last week has sent this country into an electoral frenzy” (Kinzer 1997, May 23). He continued “It was an almost unimaginable triumph for a candidate who had been considered an outsider since beginning of his campaign in January and who had been attacked in the pro-Government press as a liberal with weak Islamic credentials.” Although in the last days there were signs that he is gaining momentum in the political campaign, “many Iranians, accustomed to a form of politics in which the religious leaders always seemed able to impose their will, doubted he could win” (Kinzer 1997, May 25). This surprising political upset brought hope for everybody thinking that the new era of freedom, democracy, and prosperity would start and nourish the new Iran. As Ahmad Borghani, a close aide and spokesman to Khatami in his campaign, said

Of course Mr. Khatami will not continue the present restrictions on the press and media. He will have an open policy toward them. The new Government would seek to curb the police and religious militia whose members patrol streets and neighborhoods looking for those who are having parties, listening to forbidden music, watching imported videos or satellite television, playing cards or otherwise violating the social code (New York Times 1997, May 25).

The dynamic of this election and its outcomes are the evidence that preference falsification was prevalent in the society until the election. On the day of election, as everybody was alone in the voting booth, many people revealed their true preferences based on the freedoms Khatami promised and his propositions for the oppressed and a more civil society. Looking at signals that people revealed in public about their preferences, everybody thought that people will support the government candidate. This made many people not to represent their true preferences in public even in the polls as they feared the consequences of supporting a “liberal with weak Islamic credentials”. This in turn

provided more signals to the public in favor of the government candidate and led to more preference falsification.

Women's status dramatically changed after the election. Quite similarly there was a preference falsification in how people respected Islamic codes and norms. Before the election many hid their true preferences and abode by the Islamic codes and laws. Many believed that society considers it shameful and rude if one breaks these codes. Hence very few dared to challenge these codes. After the election, when the true preferences revealed and the government slightly increased social freedoms, people start to break the long-time established codes and laws. It is excellently explained in Kuran's terms "a paucity of social conflicts" exposed (Kuran 1989).

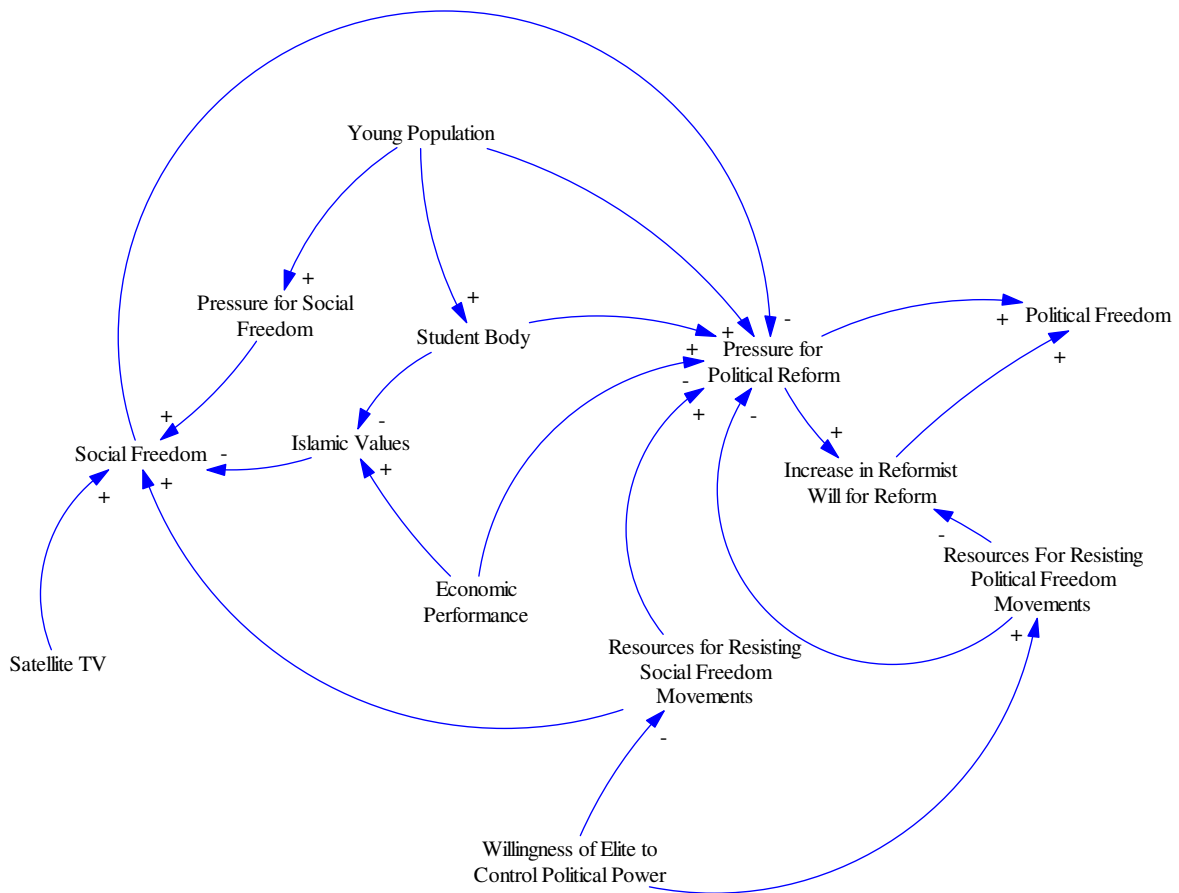
A re-enforcing equilibrium

After the election of 1997, the clerics start confronting the reforms in political scene. Everyday new measures were used to defy president Khatami's programs. Step-by-step the programs started to fail. At the end of Khatami's second term of presidency, there was little progress in political arena. But in women's right domain, quite the opposite was going on. Progress was surging in all areas with an unprecedented pace. The women's status in 1996 is quite incomparable to that in 2003. Reasons for this difference in achievements lie behind other factors that reinforced women's rights and liberties equilibrium after 1997 and helped the process of social freedom.

One of the main factors was that ruling clerics pursued a thesis which permitted more social freedom in exchange for political reform. Figure 3 depicts the dynamics of this thesis. After 1997 election and the revelation of people's preferences regarding the power structure and Islamic norms and codes, clerics found themselves in the constant pressure from the people demanding not only political liberty but also social and cultural freedom. Having a very young population in which 70% were below 25 years of age at the time, Iran provided a huge momentum for change that could become disastrous if

it was not controlled. This young population provided a large base of students who supported political reform and the reformist. The clerics had to confront this movement in at least two battlefields, political and social. The state had to allocate its resources between these two fronts. As students and the young population showed their capabilities to withstand the political structure, the clerics realized the gravity of the situation and allocated their resources to resist the movement leaving the social arena relatively uncontested.

Figure 3 – The Model depicting the exchange of social freedom with political freedom

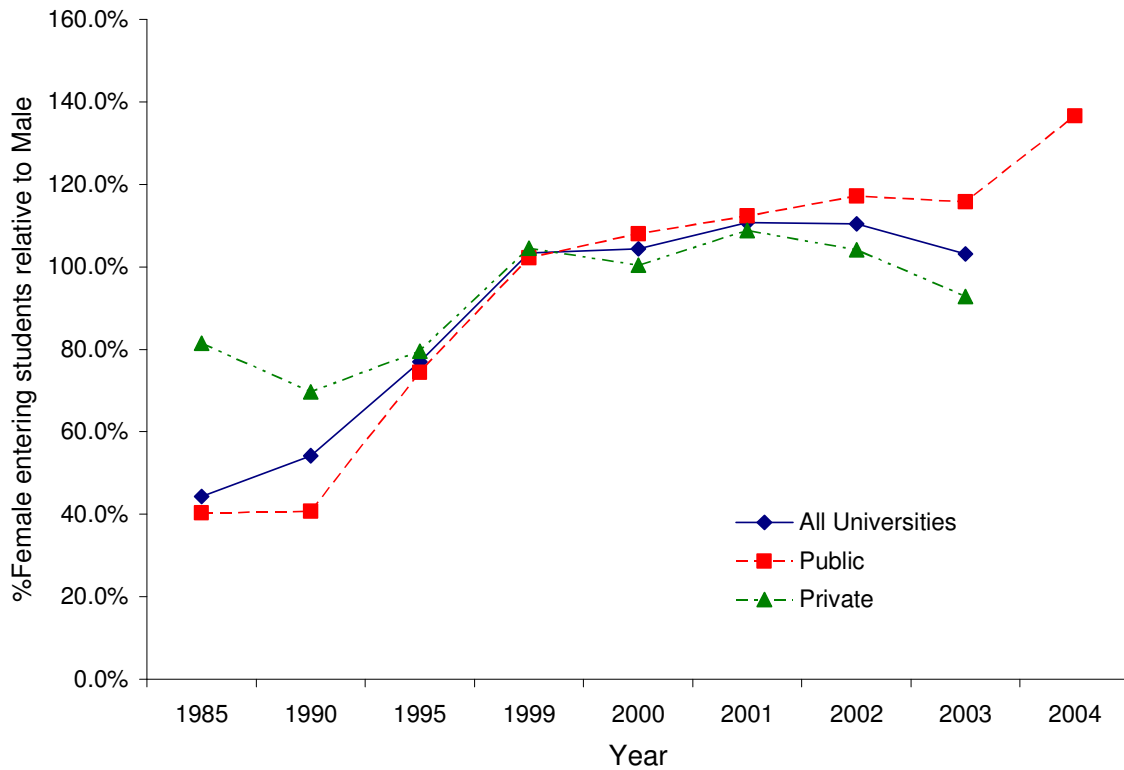


Each arrow depicts a causal relationship. The variable on the back of the arrow causes the variable on the front of the arrow. The sign at the head of the arrow shows the correlation between cause and effect. “+” shows positive correlation between cause and effect. Increase(decrease) in the cause variable will induce an increase(decrease) in the affected variable. “-” shows negative correlation between cause and effect. Increase(decrease) in the cause variable will induce an decrease(increase) in the effect.

On the other hand, after a while they realized that if they want to fight in both areas, it may increase frustration of people to the extent that a catastrophe would take place but if they give up one of the fronts to people it may act as a *safety valve* for the pressure in political arena and reduce the tensions in the other front to the extent tractable by the state. In figure 3, the negative feedback from social freedom to pressure for political freedom denotes this effect. Appreciating this fact, they did little to overcome the social freedom movement led by individual women. Cascades of progress occurred with more women breaching the Islamic codes of dressing and inter-gender relationships. After a while, it became almost impossible to defy the social freedom movement of women. This confrontational policy of clerics reinforced the process of change in a way that every year more codes and laws abandoned and more liberal western-style lifestyles were expressed in public.

The other factor which reinforced this equilibrium was the boost in educational attainments of women in the years prior and after the 1997 election. Figure 4 depicts the trend in the percentage of female vs. male students entering universities each year in the period of 1991 to 2004. After 1994 percentage of female vs. male students soared dramatically from 40% to more than 110% in 2001, and then it remained at above 100% for a while. The effect of this trend is that in 2004 about 65% of students in the universities are female, that is the ratio of total female vs. male students in the universities soared to 186% which is a remarkable progress for women. One should take it into account as there is not enough university seats supplied it is a breath-taking competition to enter the universities. Only one in ten applicants is able to enter college. The trend shows that women are performing much better in the entering examination than men. This is while participation of women in the labor force remained essentially constant in this period. It is still a puzzle for many researchers working on the economics of labor force in Iran that despite negative returns to tertiary education for women in Iran, they have high motivations to enter college.

Figure 4 – The percentage of female entering students to college relative to male entering students



Source of Data: Statistical Center of Iran.

I explain this puzzle using the model depicted in figure 5. Willingness of young girls today to pursue advanced degrees depends not only on the monetary returns but also non-monetary ones like breaking some of the misogynistic norms, gaining social status, and obtaining more bargaining power and better chances of marriage. In Iran, women and especially young girls who demand an equal position with their male counterparts can only attain their desire through the channel of education. Similar to men, education provides many women with better job market outcomes and therefore better wages and

On the other hand, wives with high education attainments, sometimes higher than their spouses, are respected more and enjoy more bargaining power with their spouses. Furthermore, women with high education degrees tend to have husbands with high education levels who are more enlightened and have more favorable attitudes toward women. Additionally, since colleges are not segregated and men and women enjoy each other company, there is a better chance for both boys and girls to find good company and form better marriage bonds.

Better social status, better bargaining power with patriarchal figures, better marriage possibilities in addition to better job market outcomes and economic independence that attained by previous generation motivate new generation of girls to pursue advanced education. Hence this vicious cycle repeats and reinforces itself and produces domino effects, as new generations experience the results for previous generations. As boys have less motivation than girls to go to college, number of girls entering college increases rapidly. This reinforces the social freedom equilibrium that had been attained through preference revelation in 1997. Today young girls are trying to push toward more participation in the labor force which will empower the women's right movement to attain more liberties and independence for young girls.

The byproduct of attaining more social status by women as it is shown in figure 5 is the gradual change in norms of society in favor of women. As social status of women soars more traditional views toward women break down and more misogynistic norms transform to favorable ones. This process may take time but forces like globalization and satellite TVs have large impacts on its pace. There is no official estimate of penetration rate of satellite TVs in Iran but it is widely accepted that satellite TVs are very popular and cheap in Iran and they grow rapidly among all households to the extent that there were several attempts by the government to resist this trend. New technologies clearly helped the process of modernization/secularization in Iran.

Beside these factors, the new media of communication brought possibilities for women to experience freedom of expression for a short period. Online diaries and weblogs as an unbounded vessel of communication became very popular in late 90's and early 2000's as the press went under government scrutiny. These media were above government scrutiny for a while and became a clear truthful voice of young generations, promoting dialogue and transfer of information and revealing preferences among the youth.

Future

The extraordinary journey that women's rights movement in Iran went is promising a bright future. Women have gained more freedom of choice and are still moving forward. They are going to be twice as much educated as their male counterparts very soon which bring more cascades that will change the labor composition and structure of economy, promising a better social status for women. They are also going to be the profound force in shaping the future paradigms. The dynamics of the process may produce a different outcome. The complete defeat of reformists at the end of Khatami's presidency and surrendering power to the clerics was the beginning of a new era for women's rights movement. Eradicating all the opposition parties from the political power, the clerics no longer face pressure for political reform and now seek hegemony in the social arena. They want to reverse (or at least stop) the process of social freedom and take back the liberties that had been gained through the last decade by women.

It seems that the next step for the movement could be abolishing laws promoting inequality between women and men. For a brief period under President Khatami's rule in 1997, women made some progress including reforms that raised the marriageable age of girls from 9 to 13 and that put divorce in the court system. Recently, the women organizations became very active in eradicating unequal laws. A campaign is conducted across the country to gather one million signatures in support for abolishing all forms of dis-

criminating laws. It was defied by a strong opposition from the government. Many activists had been arrested and some had been jailed. This was the first time after the 1997 election that women's activists experience this harsh reaction by the state. The clerics have showed their intentions to counteract any reforms and this may change the dynamics of the equilibrium and undermine further progress in women's rights.

On the other hand, international pressures on the government's nuclear programs provide it with reasons to legitimize suppressing any opposition in the name of promoting national security and unity. This motivates the state to increase its tensions with the international community by pursuing its nuclear program more intensively. Besides, it also distract the worldwide attention from human rights issues in Iran and provides a better condition for lengthening their monopoly of power. The challenge that women's rights movement should overcome seems to be more difficult than those they had been already passed but structural factors, like highly educated young women population and their socio-economic prospects bring hope for the future.

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