

## Changing Gender Stereotypes in Iran

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, because of the vast socio-cultural changes which occurred in Iran, Iranian women have experienced new values and identities and they have achieved more advanced education and consciousness, so that they oppose the gender stereotypes which attribute inferior characteristics to women and cause inequalities and limitations in their everyday life. Although gender stereotypes still exist both in people's minds and in Iranian social institutions, it seems that the intensity of gender stereotypes is declining nowadays. The findings of this study demonstrate that in the domestic sphere, gender stereotypes tend to persist and this situation causes some paradoxes in the responsibilities and values concerning family. Women have stepped into the public sphere and participated in providing the family expenditures, but men still underestimate household chores and do not tend to take part in them. On the other hand, occupations are still divided into feminine and masculine in the minds of Iranians. Accordingly, a large section of Iran's job market is still considered masculine. However, gender views towards women's employment show some improvement so that working outdoors is not allocated only to men and women's employment is accepted. Finally, it is found that the intensity of gender differentiation is declining both in people's minds and social institutions.

**Keywords:** Iran. Gender stereotypes. Social differentiation. Social sphere. Domestic sphere. Job market. Gender division of labor.

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## Introduction

In the last two decades, Iranian women have experienced vast socio-cultural changes which have transformed their social roles and increased their consciousness and knowledge. The increase of women's education and their new roles has decreased the desirability of living as a traditional woman (having merely wifely and motherly roles) and increased the resistance against gender stereotypes. It has also caused some difficulties in harmonizing the traditional roles with new ones, thereby, leading to some challenges both in their identities and their everyday lives. Most of these challenges depend on the type of interpretation of "sex"<sup>2</sup> and "sex differences" existing in the minds of people. This interpretation determines the nature of social differences; and develops roles and positions which are dependent on gender for individuals. From this point of view, the first step in this study is to examine how gender is interpreted in the minds of social actors. This paper makes an attempt to answer the following questions:

How is gender interpreted by the social actors in Iran and to what extent gender differences have resulted in social differentiation?

1- What kind of problems does social differentiation of gender produce in different social spheres?

2- For answering these research questions, the findings of 14 valuable and important research studies and resources relating to the socio-cultural problems of women in Iran are going to be analyzed. Since large scope studies are given more weight than small-scope, studies which are mostly national surveys on women's socio-cultural problems in Iran conducted in the last two decades are selected. All of the 14 studies have appeared in refereed journals.

Methodologically, a meta-analysis is done on these research studies. By definition, a meta-analysis combines the results of several studies that address a set of related research hypotheses. In other words, a meta-analysis is a type of data analysis in which the results of several studies are combined together and analyzed as if they were the results of one large study.

It is worth noting the main differences between meta-analysis and other kinds

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2- Sex refers to the biological and unchangeable differences which exist between men and women but gender relates to the socio-cultural differences in which any given society attribute to men and women and is changeable over time and generations.

of studies and analyses is as a primary analysis is the analysis of data from a single study to test the formulated hypotheses or answer the research questions. Secondary analysis is the re-analysis of data from a single study to test new hypotheses and to answer new questions or to apply more appropriate procedures to test the original hypotheses. On the other hand, meta-analysis includes application of systematic procedures to examine and test a common hypothesis from more than one study. In other words, it is "the analysis of analyses".

Using meta-analysis method, this paper is an attempt to grasp the Iranian women's socio-cultural problems emphasizing their cultural roots. To this end, an attempt has been made to concentrate on the gender stereotypes and their consequences in social institutions. Concerning the main subject matter, the studies which are analyzed in this paper can be classified in three categories.

The first category includes the studies which have mainly emphasized on the public sphere and try to explain the problems relating to the job market and/or higher educations. 14 studies are analyzed and 6 of them are placed in this category (Pourghasem, 2002; Lola avar, 1995; Kaar, 2000; Kazemipour, 2001; Norouzi & Hashemi, 2001; Women's Social participation, 2003). The second category includes the studies which have exclusively emphasized on the problems concerning family stereotypes, roles and structure (Soroush, 2003; Givechian, 2003). Finally, the last category includes the studies which have dealt with the problems relating to both spheres namely family/private and public spheres (Bureau of National Projects, 2003; Abdollahian, 2005; Rafatjah, 2004; Gender issues in the Forth Socioeconomic Development Program Including Employment and Social Insurance, 2003a; The Report of the Measuring Socioeconomic and Cultural Needs of Women, Worrying About Future, 2003b; Motie, 2003).

## **Interpretation of Gender in the Minds of Iranian People**

### **Women's Interpretation of Gender**

In women's point of view, the biggest obstacle to enjoy their social rights is men's views toward them (Report of Measuring Women's Socio-economic and Cultural Needs Project, 2003); but the very women's attitude towards gender differences is to some extent biased and partial, just as that of men. According to the results of studies conducted at the Center of Women Studies at the University of Tehran

(2003), 70% of women believe that men should have priority in getting job opportunities, and more than half of those women think that getting a job for women is not as essential as it is for men. It is also accepted by one fourth of women that their spouse be chosen by others rather than themselves and more than half of these women believe that their fate has been decided in advance and they cannot change it. Moreover, only one fourth of these women believe that Iranian culture is in favor of men and women equally.

It seems that most of the Iranian women do not think of equality in the same way that liberal feminists do. They neither completely believe in the equality of men and women nor persist on getting masculine roles and positions in the society, but emphasize that women should enjoy equal opportunities and rights in the society to improve their personality and enjoy more privileges.

### **Femininity and Masculinity: A Social Differentiation**

In the research titled "Values and Attitudes of Iranian People", there was a question concerning the appropriate characteristics of an ideal spouse. Answers to these kinds of questions can be evaluated as a very good indicator of people's image of an ideal spouse (male or female), and illustrates the ideal concept of being a woman or a man (i.e., femininity and masculinity) in the mind of Iranian actors. Some of the mentioned characteristics for a good spouse were common between men and women. These characteristics, in order of importance, include religious faith, honesty, high education, sympathy and understanding, and being from a noble family. Alongside the common traits, there were other characteristics considered ideal just for women. These characteristics in order of importance include chastity, doing housekeeping, contentment, hijab, compatibility, obedience and beauty (the Bureau of National Projects, 2003).

The characteristics that were considered ideal only for men, in order of importance were: being a responsible person, having authority, diligence, having a good job and financial position. No one has considered these traits necessary and important for women. It can be seen that these characteristics are considered as more masculine in the minds of Iranians.

Examining the two categories of characteristics shows that human characteristics are not interpreted apart from gender in the minds of Iranian people. There are

some characteristics which are considered more feminine and some considered more masculine.

Another important fact is that this kind of interpretation regarding men and women is consistent with the division of labor between men and women in the society. As it will be demonstrated, the contradiction between domestic and public spheres is one of the most important cultural oppositions revolving around the man/woman relationship. According to the gender division of labor, which is related to biological/natural differences between men and women, household sphere is mainly allocated to women and the public one to men. The subjective differentiation of human characteristics into feminine and masculine confirms this gender distribution of labor (roles and privileges) in the society.

### **Femininity and Masculinity: A Partial Differentiation**

In the study of values and attitudes, there is another interesting question: "If you are born again, would you like to be a man or a woman?" Analyzing the responses reveals another fact concerning gender differentiation among Iranians. According to the findings, about 47% of the female respondents stated they wish to be born man if they had the chance, and 36% of them wish to be born woman and for the remaining 17%, it did not make a difference.

It can be concluded that a considerable amount of women wish that they were born man and in their minds, being a man is better than being a woman. While more than 70% of the male respondents stated that they wish to be born male if they are reborn, and just 5% of them wish that they were reborn female (The Bureau of National Projects, 2003).

The discussed question of appropriate characteristics of a man and a woman is an indicator for the existence of two different interpretations of femininity and masculinity whose exterior appearance is splitting the social life into two spheres: "Domestic" and "Public" and each one allocates to a particular sex.

If the results of the first question only show the existence of such differentiation in the minds of Iranian actors, the second question will indicate the direction of the differentiation. In the minds of Iranian actors, being a man is somehow "better" than being a woman. We should find out the meaning of "being better"? Is being a man more enjoyable or does it result into more privileges? Does "being better"

imply being superior in a way that results in a more prestigious and honored position in the social stratification and gives men more honor, privilege and respect than women? Does "being better" mean that men can progress more than women?

The quality of "being better" is not defined through these questions, nor do we need a clear definition in this stage for analyzing the interpretation of gender. The important fact here is that most women and men consider masculinity better than femininity, and if they have a choice between being male or female, they will choose to be male for whatever reason.

### **Consequences of Gender Differentiation in the Domestic Sphere**

One of the main pivots in the feminist debates has been clarifying the relationship between femininity and masculinity as two cultural concepts. One of the most important cultural oppositions revolving around the man-woman relationship is the contradiction exist between domestic and public spheres. The domestic sphere is assigned to women because they are primarily expected to take care of children until they grow up, whereas the public sphere is allocated to supplying the economic needs of families, and thereby, assigned to men. The relationship between these two spheres is the relationship between man and woman. Since the public sphere includes financial benefits, independence, power and prestige for men; the wider the gap between domestic and public spheres, the more authority and dominance men would have over women.

In the hunter-gatherer societies, the mentioned gap was not very wide. Therefore, males' dominance over females was less than agricultural societies. In industrial societies, the relationship between the two spheres has started to change, and especially after the Industrial Revolution, women have started to enter the public arena widely. This trend has continued during the 20th century and has resulted in an absolute balance between men and women regarding attendance in outdoor activities. Besides this trend, some considerable changes have occurred in the domestic sphere. At first, a large portion of the domestic sphere's authority regarding instructing and raising children, as well as leisure activities, is transferred to the public sphere. Secondly, most of the household activities have reduced because of having fewer children and mechanization of home appliances. Therefore, in industrialized societies we are facing a small domestic sphere and a large public

one, neither of which peculiar to one gender (Fakouhi, 2003).

From another perspective, two different meanings for the concept of house can be considered: House as a physical place and house as a sentimental space (home). The physical construction of house is stagnant and resting but its sensational space (or construction) is dynamic and changes according to what we expect in our life or according to our sentiments like happiness, sadness, hope and other emotions. Historical research studies show that in the pre-industrial period, women were the major constructor of the sentimental space of house, but after this period, they were expected to participate in the construction of the physical place of house together with men; but the entrance of women to the public sphere does not mean that gender division of labor is over. The question here is if both men and women enter the public sphere, what will happen to the sentimental space of houses? This question becomes more serious when it is going to be realized, through scientific findings, that women have entered the public sphere and have contributed to the construction of the physical place of house, but men are not willing to take responsibilities in household duties. In spite of women's stepping in the public sphere and participating in the construction of the physical place of house, still formation of the sentimental space of house and dealing with household activities remains their responsibility (Givechian, 2003).

However, the relation between these two spheres is nearly specific and defined in developed countries, but in non-developed countries, the domestic and public spheres interfere with each other differently according to the culture and tradition.

In Iran, recent studies have shown that everything related to household duties is relegated to women, and women's participation in important decision making in the family and also in the public affairs is very low. Overall, a comparison between types and amounts of women's and men's involvements represents more involvement of women in the family and household chores and their low involvement in the job market and social affairs (Culture and Research Journal, 2003)

Nevertheless, the findings show that the authority of men is declining inside the family, especially in families where women are also employed. In such families, the decision making process is more participatory and the relationship between husband and wife is more based on mutual understanding and sympathy. The self-concept of employed women is far from a passive and obedient person. On the

contrary, these women have brought the traditional role patterns under question. The family of employed women enjoys a more democratic structure, and in such families, women have more authority (Soroush, 2003).

Decreasing the proportion of men's decision making in family is one step towards the elimination of gender division of labor but it does not necessarily mean that men undertake some household responsibilities. On the other hand, it could be a sign of increasing the burden of responsibilities for women because even after the entrance of women to the public sphere, household responsibilities still remain their duty.

### **Gender Division of the Job Market**

The problems resulting from the gender differentiation of labor market has been examined through some theories including "neoclassic theory", "segmentation of labor market theory" and "gender theory".

In "neoclassic theory", the existing differences between men and women in the job market are explained by economic variables, and it is assumed that these differences result from different efficiencies. Therefore, the differences are seen as natural and fair. This theory assumes that in the competitive situation of job market, workers are paid a wage equivalent to the increased value of the product and differences between men's and women's earnings are due to either women's lower efficiency or some deficiency in the job market. Women's lower education and frequent absence from work lead to lower job experiences and skills, less work efficiencies and lower pensions. Consequently, it is natural that they have inferior positions in the job market in comparison to men (Kaar, 2000).

Critics believe that these theories can only explain a small part of the different wages of men and women in the job market, and criticize some of the main assumptions in the mentioned theory. They argue that women's working is irregular and non-continual due to their maternal role and that there are no biological factors, other than pregnancy, that exclusively assign the parenting role to mothers. Moreover, these theorists assume that men and women have an equal opportunity in taking a job and that they compete on the same basis in the labor market. This assumption ignores the gender division of labor market (Kaar, 2000).

In "segmentation theories", gender is the most important factor that splits the



labor market into two separate parts: feminine and masculine. In the feminine part, the number of jobs was kept limited so that feminine jobs have been reduced and women's salaries become lower than that of men. The gender division of jobs prevents women to compete against men in a large number of jobs which are considered masculine.

This type of theory provides some understanding about gender inequalities, but it does not fully specify why gender causes the differentiation of job market so extensively. This theory cannot fully explain the differentiation because it ignores that the main cause probably posits outside of the economy, and doesn't consider the prejudices which exist in the social customs as the main cause of the labor market discriminations; and the indirect discriminations which occur during the process of socialization and education (Kaar, 2000).

According to "gender theories", women's dependence and subordinate position in the labor market and family are related to each other and are part of a whole social system. In such a system, the professional masculine associations play a major role in the reduction of feminine occupations. Low salaries for women in these systems keep women dependant on men and justify household chores being done by them. On the other hand, responsibilities of women in the labor market, and solely carrying the burden of household responsibilities, increase their inadequacy in the labor market and intensifies the problem.

"Gender theories" also emphasize that feminine jobs like teaching and nursing are a reflection of women's domestic role. As domestic work is underestimated in most societies, these types of occupations are also of less importance. The systems which evaluate "value of occupations" often tend to overestimate the masculine characteristics such as physical strength more than the feminine ones such as agility and patience (Kaar, 2000).

It can be concluded that except the "neoclassic theories", which have failed to explain a major proportion of occupational gender inequalities, the two other types believe that the most important factors which affect the quantity and quality of women's presence in the job market are cultural and subjective ones, and originate from the actors' conception of woman and the position of women in the society. In the coming part, an attempt has been made to present a report from the occupational problems of women in Iran, and then, explore their origins in the

minds of Iranian actors with regard to available resources.

### **Women's Employment in Iran**

Although about half of our population consists of women, only 11% of the total numbers of employees are women. During the period between 1976 and 1986, employment of women as well as men reduced by an average of 1% per year. The rate of women's employment in these years was 7.5%, and 4%, respectively, and the rate of unemployment for women who graduated from high school was 46% in rural areas. Furthermore, the rate of unemployment among highly educated women in the urban areas has been 28% in 1986. Additionally, only 2.8% of the managerial body of the public sector was occupied by women the same year (Lolaavar, 1995; Culture and Research Journal, 2003).

In spite of considerable increase in the rate of educated women, the rate of unemployment among those who finished their high school increased 20% during 1996 to 2001. It has also increased among highly educated women from 4.7% to 22%. This rate for highly educated women who are under the age of 25 has exceeded 50% (Noroozi & Hashemi, 2001).

### **Gender Differentiation of the Job Market in Iran**

Examination of women's occupational structure indicates that the feminine jobs do not go beyond more than three or four particular domains, and that women's presence noticeably is in occupations which are the continuation of their traditional roles in the family and are now extended to the society. These areas include teaching, and jobs related to sanitary and therapeutic issues. Other types of women's outdoor activities are agriculture, works related to cultivation, spinning and knitting. These jobs are somehow the extension of maternal, fostering and breeding roles which are transferred from household to society (Kaar, 2000).

Gender differentiation of the job market has some reasons which are beyond economy's realm, and is influenced by the prevailing beliefs and values so that many scholars believe that customs, mores, beliefs, laws and even the form of family affect the social differentiation of the job market more than economic factors.

According to Iranian customs and mores, men are expected to provide the economic needs of the family, so they are given the priority in gaining job opportu-

nities. Consequently, the improvement of women's employment beyond the economic factors involves the modification of thoughts and attitudes of Iranians toward women's employment and suitable propaganda as well as a vast reformation in the legal system (Kaar, 2000). For instance, during years between 1976 and 1986, the rate of women employees reduced from 13.8% to 8.9%. In these years, there was a considerable amount of propaganda which emphasized women's non-economic roles, and their motherhood, wifeness and household duties. Considering its old and deep roots in the individuals' minds, this propaganda caused private sector employers to refuse employing women more than before. Although policy makers devote some attention to women's participation in the job market and mention it in their formal speeches, due to the existence of traditional attitudes, most of the high level managerial and political positions are often allocated to men (Lolaavar, 1995).

### **Gender Division of Labor in the Minds of Iranians: Feminine and Masculine Jobs from Viewpoint of Iranian People**

The gender differentiation of the labor market is mainly based on the social actors' interpretations of gender. According to the results of a research, 50.3% of respondents consider the prejudices concerning women's and men's employment as the most important obstacle for the employment of women. More than half of employees believe that gender plays a crucial role in their selection from graduates who seek jobs. Most officials also believe that men should be given preference in employment due to their responsibility for providing family expenditures (Poorghasem, 2002).

According to the results of research studies, negative attitudes toward women's employment are seen even among women unconsciously which indicates a lack of self-confidence among them.

In the national research of "Iranians' Values and Attitudes" (2003), the respondents were asked that in cases where a man and a woman with similar capabilities apply for a job, which one should be employed. 51.5% of the men and 37% of the women (which formed 45% of total respondents) replied that in situations like Iran, the man should be employed. Only 11% of total respondents believed that the women should be employed (Bureau of National Projects, 2003).

In the national survey titled "the Values and Attitudes of Iranians" there was a question which asked individuals if they agreed with women taking positions such as the President, a police officer, a minister, a bus driver, a mayor, or a factory manager; and technical occupations such as a mechanic or a welder. Technical jobs, taxi or bus driving, and Presidency were all considered masculine jobs from Iranians' points of view, and more than 50% of the society opposed employing women for these jobs.

About 77% of the respondents opposed to employing women for technical jobs, 69% to employing women as taxi or bus drivers, and 56% to the idea that women can become the President. Around 38% of the respondents opposed to employing women as a police officer, minister, mayor or related jobs. So it can be concluded that gender differentiation of the job market is internalized in the minds of Iranian people (Bureau of National Projects, 2003).

However, gender views towards women's employment show some improvement, and although occupations are still divided into feminine and masculine in the minds of Iranians, the very principle of women employment is accepted today (Rafatjah, 2004 & 2009).

It is worth noting that in spite of recent socio-cultural changes, a large section of Iran's labor market is still masculine, and although the number of highly educated women has significantly increased and most of them are willing to be employed, the average rate of women employment in Iran does not exceed 12%.

## **Conclusion**

The sources analyzed in this study show that the social differentiation between men and women in Iran originates from the deepest layers of social actors' minds and extends beyond the social structures such as education, family and economy. This differentiation is partial and it usually involves superior positions and more privileges for men. Gender differentiation in the thoughts of Iranian people splits life into two spheres: public and domestic. The public sphere has been mainly allocated to men and the domestic one to women. In the domestic sphere, some paradoxes concerning responsibilities and rights exist. Although most of the household responsibilities are assumed by women, decision making is often made by men.

There are also some contradictions in the position of Iranian women in the public

sphere. Iranian women have entered the public sphere and contributed to the construction of the physical place of the house and have partially provided family expenditures, but their spouses are not willing to take responsibility in household duties. Therefore, in spite of women participation in the public sphere and in the construction of the physical place of the house, formation of sentimental space of the house and dealing with household chores also remains as their responsibility.

According to the research studies analyzed in this paper, socio-cultural obstacles are among the most important obstacles for women's employment in Iran, such that the "gender theory" can explain the challenges of women's employment better than other theories. In the labor market of Iran, there is a segmentation based on gender that generally arises from the interpretation of gender in the mind of social actors. In one hand, the examination of women's occupational structure indicates that occupational scope of women does not exceed three or four particular fields, and the presence of women is tangible only in occupations that are the continuation/extension of their traditional feminine/domestic roles into the public sphere. On the other hand, the proportion of women's employment in the total number of employees of the country has reduced from 13.8% in 1976 to 8.9% in 1986, and it has currently increased to about 12%. Furthermore, most of the managerial and political positions belong to men and only 3% of women have been able to overcome personal and social obstacles and take managerial positions in the government.

However, gender views towards women's employment show some improvement, and although occupations are still divided into feminine and masculine in the minds of Iranians, the very principle of women's employment is accepted today.

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