Situation Analysis on Gender in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country undergoing socio-economic and demographic transition and the situation of gender in Iran is an important aspect of these changes. The estimated population of the country in 2004 was close to 67.5 and the overall sex ratio is 104 with a life expectancy of 68.3 years for men and just over 71 years for women1.

Development assistance to Iran experienced a major shift in emphasis from the 1990s onwards in order to reflect gender issues better.

The IRI has taken legal, institutional and socio-economic measures to promote the status of women. Such measures have yielded tangible results, especially in the areas of literacy, education and health. Over the past decade or so, literacy of women aged 15-24 years has become almost universal. The overall ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education has increased by about 10%. The impressive statistic of 64% of all university entrants in 2003 being female speaks volumes about achievements in this area. Access to health including reproductive health (RH) care has improved. As a result, maternal mortality ratio (MMR) has declined from 52/100,000 live births to 37.4 and infant mortality from 41/1000 live births to 28. Contraceptive prevalence rate has increased by about 8% and women's life expectancy at birth is currently 71 years compared to 68 years for men.

Some of the main challenges faced by Iran in relation to gender are as follows.

- Increasing women’s employment (especially of educated women) and promoting gender equality in the job market.
- Legislative reform, in particular of the Civil Code and family laws, in order to guarantee women’s rights; ensuring equal access to justice.
- Increasing women’s participation in decision- and policy-making roles.
- Improving the availability and reliability of data and information on women's and girls' health and on violence against women.
- Removing the disparities in access to primary and secondary schooling between girls and boys.
- Reducing the greater risk of poverty among women, especially female-headed households.
- Addressing socio-cultural barriers and negative stereotyping of women.

The feminisation of poverty is a global issue and one faced by Iran as elsewhere. In Iran, female-headed households who comprise 8.4% of all heads or households are targeted in addressing this question. The recently adopted 4th Five Year National Development Plan (5YNDP) includes special provisions designed to reduce the social vulnerabilities of and empower female-headed households. An indicator that suggests a general improvement in the wealth of families and, hence, women was the sharp fall in the percentage of underweight children from 15.7% in 1995 to 10.9% in 19982.

Furthermore, the trend share of the poorest quintile (of whom women or female-headed households will form a majority) rose from 6.83% in 1995 to 7.40% in 2002. Certain other positive steps have been taken in relation to combating women's poverty, such as increasing the number of women’s co-operatives by 253% between 1997 and 20023, providing housing for female-headed

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2 Source: Islamic Republic of Iran - First Millennium Development Goals Report 2004: Achievements and Challenges (Tehran, November 2004). All other statistics given here are from this source unless otherwise stated.
3 Source: Center for Women’s Participation National Report on Women’s Status in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Tehran, February 2005).
households and the establishment of micro-credit institutions in five provinces with a special emphasis on lending to female-headed households. Despite these actions, women's poverty remains a significant challenge for Iran as reflected in the UN-sponsored projects listed in this briefing pack.

The education and training of women is an area in which much has been achieved in terms of reducing gender-related disparities in Iran although much also remains to be done. Important achievements over recent years have been an increase in the number of nomadic girls in primary schools, encouraging girls to return to primary school to complete their education, and reaching over 3 million people through adult education between 1999 and 2002 of whom 82% were women. Moreover, the literacy rate among 15-24 year old females rose from 81.1% in 1990 to 94.7% in 2002 (the equivalent figures for 15-24 year old males being 92.2% to 97.6%). The percentage of female to male students at all levels of education rose from to 85.3% in 1995 to 93.1% in 2002 (having risen from 79.2% in 1990) and capacity building has been conducted among women experts and managers. There has been an increase in the percentage of women students in tertiary education between 1990 and 2002 from ca. 37.4% to 110.5%, and a significant achievement has been reaching a percentage of female to male university entrants of 64% by 2003. However, traditional cultural attitudes and early marriage as well as economic problems remain obstacles to girls accessing and/or completing primary and secondary schooling. Disparities also continue to exist between provinces and the sexes especially in enrolment rates in primary education. For example, the primary school enrolment rate in Sistan and Baluchestan Province was 76.7% overall in 2001 (compared with a national average of 97%); 71.5% of girls and 81.8% of boys were enrolled.

Shortcomings from a gender perspective in national level policy-making have also proved to be obstacles, leading to a low importance given to girls' skills training and insufficient budget allocations.

In terms of women's health, Iran has seen success in the following health-related areas that have a direct bearing on women. The provision of high quality family planning services (with a contraceptive prevalence rate of 55% for modern contraceptive methods in 2000), health training to pregnant women and developing health services in rural areas have all been beneficial to women's health. Maternal mortality ratio was reduced dramatically from 91 per 100,000 live births in 1989 to 37.4 in 1997 and the proportion of births assisted by skilled attendants increased from 70% in 1990 to 89.6% in 2000. As a result of these and other factors, the life expectancy of women has risen in relation to that of men. The increased literacy rate among women, especially in rural areas, has also helped to empower women in terms of reproductive health (RH) issues and entering marriage at a later age. Both of these also have a significant benefit to women's health. However, a failure to pay attention to the social and economic elements that affect health issues, insufficient investment in health care access for women and girls and inadequate access to health care facilities and information all remain important gaps to be filled in relation to women's health.

Further necessary developments include the establishment of pre-marriage counselling centres, increased participation by women's NGOs in health programmes and providing food security. Social and regional disparities in terms of access to health care and health insurance coverage also need to be addressed from a gender perspective. Disparities in the fertility rate between urban and rural areas are a good indicator of other social, economic and cultural conditions that affect women's lives and health: the national average is 2 children per woman of child-bearing age,

Source: Center for Women’s Participation National report on Women’s Status in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Tehran, February 2005).
while it is 4 in Sistan and Baluchestan and only 1.3 in Tehran. Although the country has made strong headway in improving maternal health and family planning services, there is a need to address adequately other aspects of RH, such as men’s and adolescents’ RH needs as well as STIs and HIV/AIDS among vulnerable groups. Since Iran is the second most disaster-prone country in the world, there is a need also to strengthen its ability to meet RH requirements in emergencies.

**Violence against women** remains a major challenge in Iran. Women’s tendency to hide domestic violence from fear of social stigmatization, high social tolerance of such violence and the economic (and legal) dependency of women on men all make it difficult to identify and confront. Furthermore, the lack of reliable official data has conspired with cultural attitudes to conceal the level of such violence and thus obscure public recognition that a problem of domestic violence exists. Indeed, data from the Statistical Centre of Iran would suggest that there is no gender-based violence (GBV) in Iran. The Centre for Women’s Participation (CW P) established a National Committee for the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1997 to provide training, support and legal aid to women. Further measures taken recently have been the training of women police officers, the establishment of 30 crisis intervention centres for GBV and a health shelter (under the state welfare Organisation) for women and girl victims of GBV. Many obstacles to addressing this problem remain, including traditional and tribal customs that sanction GBV, the economic and legal dependency of women on men, inadequate preventative and protective measures (legal and other) and a lack of facilities for the victims of GBV.

As a result of the war with Iraq imposed on Iran in the 1980s as well as the severe refugee crisis from both Iraq and Afghanistan during the 1990s, there are a significant number of women in Iran that have been directly affected by armed conflict. There are, for example, 57,000 women who have lost male family members through armed conflict and are now female heads of household. Certain measures have been taken to alleviate their difficulties, such as providing full insurance cover for families of war dead, prioritizing self-employment loans to female-headed households of war veterans and granting child custody to women whose husbands were killed in the war. There are also numerous projects to support Afghani women and child refugees, for example in the areas of self-employment and health care provision. Further to these, women’s role in national defense decision-making has been officially promoted.

The role of **women in the economy** obviously provides a good indication of the gender profile of a country as well as being an important engine for improving it overall. The poor in Iran form between 20% and 25% of the whole population and the old, women and rural inhabitants make up the majority of these. Generally speaking, the economic conditions and employment situation of women in Iran have improved in recent years and the 3rd and 4th SYNDPs have included provisions aimed at creating suitable conditions for increased economic participation by women. However, both legal and socio-cultural barriers exist to prevent further economic participation. The percentage of women in waged employment in the non-agricultural sector was 10.5% in 1990. Currently the percentage is low at only 12% (in 2002), having fallen back from a high of 15.4% in 1998. The employment rate of women fell from 85.01% in 1997 to 79.82% in 2003 while, for the same period, it rose for men 2% to 89.8%. Clearly, then, there are significant challenges to be met in increasing women’s participation in the economy. Certain measures designed to achieve this include increasing the availability of credit funds for creating women’s employment, establishing micro-credit funds nationwide for rural women’s co-operatives and giving priority
to female heads of household in granting low interest loans. Challenges that remain to be addressed include weaknesses in the legislative and regulatory environment as regards women’s employment, poor conditions for women to become managers and decision-makers, inadequate funding for job creation for women, insufficient employment training facilities for women, limited access for women to information and/or technology required for employment and inadequate access for women to micro-credit facilities.

In terms of women in power and decision-making, Iran has made progress over recent years with the appointment under President Khatami of four women as deputy Ministers as well as women as ministerial advisers, Governors General, Mayors and middle and senior managers. Between 1990 and 2002, there was an increase in the percentage of women elected to the Islamic Parliament from 2% to 5% (from a low of 1.66% in the 1st Parliament and a high of 5.1% in the 5th Parliament). The percentage of women elected to city and village councils on the second run was 1.51% (having comprised 2.68% of all candidates). The number of female managers in the governmental sector has seen a 63.33% increase between 1996 and 2000 (from 726 to 1,186) and there has been a spectacular growth rate of 1215.50% in the number of women managers, legislators and chief executives between 1994 and 2004. The percentage of women as managers, legislators and chief executives has grown from 0.16% in 1994 to 2.1% in 2004. Furthermore, 630 women have been appointed to decision-making posts in the Provincial Planning and Development Councils.

Despite these clearly positive developments, important challenges remain to be met in increasing the number and involvement of women in positions of power and decision-making roles. A general lack of self-confidence among women in the power and decision-making spheres is a significant obstacle to women’s progress in this area. This is, of course, a common experience worldwide but is exacerbated by traditional cultural attitudes and needs positive actions to respond to it. In the political arena, women face institutional barriers with inadequate access to funds and limited political power bases. A weak gender perspective in national policies and lack of programmes for women’s participation add to the obstacles faced by women. As regards managerial roles, there is a need for strengthening legislative and other support for women to balance their professional and family lives and duties. It is worth noting that 80% of women in Tehran Province held high school diplomas in 2002 while their share of managerial positions is still very low.

Again, the institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women have seen an improvement over the last decade but one that was made from a very low baseline. In 1997, the Centre for Women’s Participation was established under an Executive Order of President Khatami and its Head given a seat in the Cabinet. Furthermore, all government Ministries now have bureaux of women’s affairs and all local and national government departments must allocate 0.25% of their internal budgets to gender-related programmes. In the 4th SYNDP, 43 articles (spread over seven chapters) deal with gender-related issues and budget lines for women’s issues have been allocated at sectoral and provincial levels. The development of the non-governmental sector is an important element in providing institutional mechanisms for the empowerment and advancement of women, and there has been a huge expansion of women’s NGOs showing a 773% increase between 1996 and 2004 (from 55 to 480, respectively). In 2000, the women’s faction was established in the Islamic Parliament with the aim of proposing legislation on women’s issues. However, there remains much work to be done in this

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7 Source: Center for Women’s Participation National report on Women’s Status in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Tehran, February 2005).

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area and significant challenges still exist. Among these are the inequality of the existing legal mechanisms to meet the expectations and needs of women, women’s lack of experience in institution-building (especially in the provinces), lack of capacity among specialized NGOs, inadequate use of women’s expertise by governmental bodies, budgets not sufficiently answerable to gender questions and cultural barriers to women’ advancement.

Guaranteeing and respecting the human rights of women has been regarded for some time as a major challenge facing Iran. One of the most important areas that needs to be addressed here is the need for legislative reform in order to bring the legal environment into conformity with international human rights standards. This will require the elimination of certain laws that discriminate against women, reform of some legislation and enactment of new legislation granting further rights to women. Some positive steps have been taken recently in this regard, with the reform of the child custody laws (granting custody to the mother up to 7 years old), granting women the right to sue for divorce, allowing unmarried women to travel abroad for further study and allowing a woman to sue her husband for non-payment of alimony and/or marriage portion. Despite these positive moves, however, further legislative reform and related measures such as increasing women’s access to justice and awareness of their rights are necessary to shore up women’s human rights in Iran. For example, the inheritance laws and provisions dealing with inheritance under the Civil Code remain discriminatory against women and girls and the legal age of criminal responsibility is set at 15 for boys but only 9 for girls.

It is important that the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women be ratified by Iran in the near future without excessive reservations to the text. It is also important to introduce a stronger gender perspective into national policy-making and foster the role of NGOs and civil society in upholding women’s rights. Apart from the aforementioned inadequacies in existing legislation, the poor enforcement of certain laws that would guarantee women’s rights also needs to be addressed. Certain traditional and tribal customs that are contradictory to the realization of the human rights of women and girls also need to be confronted as does violence against women and girls.

Over recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in women’s participation in the media, achieved in part through providing training and raising women’s levels of awareness and skills in this area. The Government has taken steps to promote and ensure a gender balance in terms of access to the media. There has been a 53% increase in women Managing Directors of the print media since 1997 and 10.8% of senior executive positions in the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting organisation and 3.4% of middle management positions have been allocated to women9. The number of women publishers has risen by 56% between 1997 and 2003 (from 66 to 103) and 32 periodicals are now published and managed wholly by women10.

However, moves aimed at achieving a gender balance in appointments to advisory, managerial and governing bodies in the media as well as to monitoring roles are still in the early stages. There still exist traditional and stereotypical attitudes towards women in the media that discriminate against them in terms of participation and access as well as negative stereotyping in the images of women presented in the media.

Although Iran ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, there area still many areas in which the rights of the girl child are either violated or insufficiently respected. The problems are much more acute in nomadic and rural areas where the combination of lack of resources (and geographical remoteness) with certain traditional customs often exacerbate...
existing obstacles to the realization of the rights of girls.

Positive measures that have been taken include increasing access to education for all children in deprived areas, developing a culture of sport among girls and women and increasing their access to sporting facilities, organizing training programmes for the empowerment of girls, running information campaigns for girls on reproductive and sexual health, STDs and HIV/AIDS, setting up crisis telephone hotlines for victims of child abuse and introducing legislation to combat violence against girls though increased punishments for offenders. There have also been programmes aimed at lowering rates of pregnancy and unwanted pregnancies among under 18 year-olds and the average age of women on marriage rose from 19 to 24 years during the 1990s, although this may, in part, be accounted for by an increased in late marriages. The adolescent (15-24 years age group) fertility rate fell from 54 children per 1000 women to 29.8 between 1996 and 2000. There remain, however, many factors that mitigate against the effective realization of the rights of girls and these will need further work. Families are often unaware of their girl children’s rights and traditional attitudes and practices act as a bar to the realization of these rights. The relatively low educational level and even illiteracy of some rural women also hold back their daughters whose enrolment rates in secondary schools are lower than those of their male cohorts. There is a lack of appropriate information on domestic violence, especially that perpetrated against girls, insufficient support for girls forced into early marriages and not enough awareness of training and other services available to young people to help them deal responsibly with sexual issues. Although the minimum legal age for marriage has been raised from 9 to 15 years, marriage for girls below this age is still allowed with the legal approval of the girl child. Negative stereotyping of girls discourages them from pursuing scientific and technical disciplines and there are not enough entrepreneurial, technical and vocational centres for girls. Generally, girls’ participation in social, economic and political activities is lower than that of boys.

As regards women and the environment, the appointment of a woman as the Head of the Environmental Protection Organization might be viewed as a nod towards recognizing the role women have to play in ensuring sustainable development. There have also been moves to increase the number of women experts in organizations active in environmental matters where they now comprise 64%, four of them at managerial level. Efforts have also been made to increase women’s participation in environmental issues through organizing a training workshop for women NGOs, implementing a national project for environmental advocacy training for women in 16 provinces during 2003-2004 (training 160 women as environmental advocates) and holding a training course on environmental management for rural women. The presence of women at middle management and policy-making levels remains thin and there is limited female representation on the national sustainable development committee. As a result, there is a lack of a female perspective in environmental planning and policy-making.