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**Department of Economics and Management Master Program in  
Entrepreneurship And Innovation**

**“ Gender Inequality in Iranian Women Entrepreneurs  
inside the Country and Abroad”**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized loop at the top and several horizontal strokes below, written over a thin horizontal line.

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the pervasive issue of gender inequality, with a specific focus on Iran and also the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Grounded in the definition of gender equality provided by UNICEF, which emphasizes equal conditions, treatment, and opportunities for both sexes, this research investigates how entrenched social norms, cultural traditions, and institutional structures perpetuate disparities between men and women. The study examines various dimensions of gender inequality, including historical, legal, social, economic, and cultural aspects, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping gender relations and women's experiences in the MENA region.

The research highlights the persistent barriers to women's empowerment and full societal participation, which pose significant risks to the socio-economic development and democratic progress of many nations in the region. It delves into the historical roots of gender inequality, the impact of religious interpretations, and the socio-political contexts that further complicate efforts to achieve gender parity. Furthermore, the study scrutinizes the legal frameworks that often reinforce gender disparities, especially in personal status laws, and explores the socio-economic implications of these inequalities.

By addressing both general and institutional aspects of gender inequality, this thesis aims to contribute to the academic discourse and inform policy debates on promoting gender justice and women's rights in the Middle East. The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that challenge discriminatory norms, advocate for legal reforms, and promote women's empowerment across various sectors. This research ultimately seeks to provide actionable insights and recommendations for fostering inclusive and equitable societies in the Iran and beyond.



## Introduction

Gender equality, as defined by UNICEF, encompasses the notion that women and men, girls and boys, should have equal conditions, treatment, and opportunities to realize their full potential, human rights, and dignity, while contributing to and benefiting from economic, social, cultural, and political development. This principle requires the equitable valuation of the similarities and differences between men and women and the roles they play, fostering full partnership in the home, community, and society.

Despite global advancements, gender inequality remains a persistent and multifaceted challenge that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. This issue is particularly pronounced in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where deep-seated social norms, cultural traditions, and institutional structures intertwine to sustain and exacerbate gender disparities. Against the backdrop of the region's rich history, diverse religious practices, and rapid socio-political changes, gender inequality emerges as a critical area of academic inquiry, social activism, and policy debate.

In the MENA region, gender disparities manifest across various domains, including economic participation, political representation, educational opportunities, and health outcomes. Women's empowerment faces formidable obstacles, ranging from restrictive legal frameworks and patriarchal societal norms to economic barriers and political exclusion. These challenges hinder not only the individual potential of women but also the broader socio-economic progress and democratic development of nations within the region.

This thesis aims to explore the general and institutional aspects of gender inequality in the Middle East and specifically Iran, providing a comprehensive analysis of the complexities, underlying causes, and implications. By examining historical, legal, social, economic, and cultural dimensions, this research seeks to elucidate the multifaceted nature of gender inequality and the various factors that contribute to its persistence.

The study will delve into the historical context of gender relations in the Middle East and Iran, tracing the evolution of societal norms and legal frameworks that have shaped gender dynamics over centuries. It will also analyze the role of religious interpretations and socio-political contexts in reinforcing gender disparities. Furthermore, the research will investigate the impact of gender inequality on economic development, human rights, and social justice, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Ultimately, this thesis aspires to contribute to the academic discourse on gender inequality and inform policy debates aimed at fostering inclusive and equitable societies in the MENA region and country of Iran. By addressing both general and institutional aspects of gender inequality, this research aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for advancing gender justice and women's rights, thereby promoting broader goals of peace, stability, and socio-economic development.

# Chapter 1

## General and Institutional Aspect of Gender Inequality in the Middle East

### 1.1 Introduction

In accordance with the definition presented by UNICEF (UNICEF, n.d.), gender equality is the concept that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development. It is, therefore, the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in the home, community and society.

Gender inequality is a persistent and multifaceted challenge that transcends geographical boundaries and cultural contexts, manifesting in various forms across the globe. In few regions is this complexity more pronounced than in the Middle East, where entrenched social norms, cultural traditions, and institutional structures often intersect to perpetuate disparities between men and women. Against a backdrop of rich history, diverse religious practices, and rapid socio-political changes, the issue of gender inequality in the Middle East emerges as a focal point of academic inquiry, social activism, and policy debate.

Gender disparity and the marginalization of women have been barrier to human development across significant regions of the Muslim world such as the Middle East and North Africa. Persistent opposition to women's empowerment economically and politically, along with their complete involvement in all facets of societal life, poses a risk to impede the future advancement of many nations. This hindrance could manifest in various forms, whether it be economic advancement, human development, or the progression towards democracy (Moghadam, 2003). This chapter seeks to delve into the general and institutional aspects of gender inequality in the Middle East, exploring its complexities, underlying causes, and implications for individuals and societies within the region. By examining historical, legal, social, economic, and cultural dimensions, this discussion aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping gender relations and women's experiences in the Middle East today.

## 1.2 Overview of Gender Inequality

Justice, influenced by its general concept, has also entered in the field of gender, which refers to the characteristics that appear differently in each of the two sexes as a result of social and cultural factors (Ghanimi et al., 2022).

Gender inequality generally refers to “the greater status and power of men than women that often emerges in the control of women's sexuality and other aspects of their behavior” ( Zhu & Chang, 2020).The notion positing that gender inequity is deeply entrenched within familial, cultural, economic, political, and social systems is frequently understood as a patriarchal and societal paradigm that upholds male dominance over females (Panahi& Abedini, 2020) .Over the previous decade, the Middle East, including Iran, has experienced notable advancements in societal, cultural, political, and economic realms that promote the empowerment of women, particularly in education and employment. Nonetheless, significant disparities persist in terms of women's access to leadership roles and equal opportunities in the workplace (Salehi et al., 2021). As mentioned, it encompasses various dimensions, including social, economic, political, and cultural aspects, and manifests in numerous forms. For instance as a dire consequence of gender inequality in terms of economic Participation, Female labor force participation remains significantly lower than men's, hovering around 28% compared to 72% (World Bank, 2022). Women often face unequal access to economic opportunities, including employment, wages, and ownership of resources. The gender pay gap, occupational segregation, and barriers to entrepreneurship are common manifestations of economic gender inequality.

These disparities intersect with social and political exclusion, where women are often sidelined from decision-making processes and leadership roles. Considering Political Representation, Women's voices are largely absent from decision-making bodies. Parliamentary representation averages only 18%, reflecting limited access to political participation and leadership positions (UNDP, 2022). This undermines their influence on policies impacting their lives.

In both public and private spheres, underrepresentation persists, affecting political participation and access to education and healthcare. Furthermore, violence and discrimination, including gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices, disproportionately impact women and girls. Discriminatory laws and social norms exacerbate these issues, perpetuating cycles of abuse

and marginalization. Additionally, unequal access to education and healthcare further entrenches gender disparities, with cultural norms and economic constraints hindering women's and girls' opportunities for quality education and healthcare services. According to UNESCO's report despite progress in female literacy, inequalities persist, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized groups. Socioeconomic barriers, cultural norms, and inadequate infrastructure limit access to quality education, impacting women's opportunities for social mobility and economic participation (UNESCO, 2020).

Collectively, these interconnected challenges underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address gender inequality and promote women's empowerment.

### 1.2.1 Implications of Gender Inequality:

Gender inequality, with its deep-seated implications for individuals and societies, manifests across various dimensions, shaping social, economic, and health outcomes. Social injustice is a pervasive consequence, reflecting broader patterns of marginalization and denying women and gender minorities equal rights and dignity. In the economic realm, the lack of women's participation holds back productivity and slows down economic progress by failing to leverage the diverse skills and capabilities they bring, thereby constraining overall advancement.

Moreover, the health and well-being of women and girls suffer due to gender disparities in healthcare access and exposure to violence, leading to adverse outcomes like maternal mortality and mental health issues (Zhu, N., & Chang, L., 2020).

These effects reverberate across generations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion that impede social mobility and exacerbate inequalities over time. Globally, gender inequality undermines efforts towards sustainable development, human rights, and social justice, affecting individuals across diverse regions and socio-economic strata. In the Middle East, where cultural, religious, and socio-political factors intersect, gender inequality is particularly severe. Patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles often constrain women's rights and opportunities, limiting their participation in public life and economic activities.

Legal and institutional frameworks in the region can reinforce these disparities, especially in areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and employment. Addressing gender inequality in the Middle East is not only crucial for advancing gender justice and women's rights but also for

promoting broader goals of peace, stability, and socio-economic development. Efforts to empower women, challenge discriminatory norms, and implement gender-sensitive policies are imperative for realizing the full potential of all individuals and fostering inclusive and equitable societies, both within the Middle East and globally.

### 1.3 Historical Context

The current state of gender inequality in the Middle East is deeply rooted in historical factors that have shaped social, cultural, and political dynamics over centuries. Understanding historical influences is crucial for contextualizing the status of gender relations in the region today. Several key historical factors have contributed to the perpetuation of gender inequality.

In the Middle East, traditional patriarchal structures have historically dominated societal organization, with power predominantly vested in men within familial and tribal frameworks. These deeply entrenched norms have limited women's autonomy and agency over generations. Islam's influence on gender norms is also significant, with interpretations of religious texts varying widely across Muslim-majority societies, leading to diverse practices regarding women's rights and roles. Additionally, 20th-century processes of modernization and nation-building brought about changes in social, economic, and political landscapes. While offering opportunities for women's advancement in certain contexts, these transformations also reinforced traditional gender roles and perpetuated inequalities in others.

### 1.4 Cultural, Religious, and Socio-Political Influences Shaping Gender Norms and Attitudes:

In the Middle East, gender norms and attitudes are influenced by a myriad of historical, cultural, religious, and socio-political factors. Cultural beliefs deeply rooted in history and local customs contribute significantly to shaping gender relations, with practices like honor codes, modesty expectations, and gender segregation impacting women's freedoms and opportunities across various aspects of life. Moreover, religious interpretations within Islam, Christianity, and Judaism shape perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities, often reinforcing patriarchal structures and

limiting women's rights and freedoms despite the potential for these religions to uphold principles of equity and justice (Zhu, N., & Chang, L., 2020). It is crucial to consider the influence of Islam across the region on gender dynamics is noticeable, permeating various facets of daily life, from family structures to legal frameworks, cultural norms to political institutions. Sharia law, derived from the Quran and Hadith, plays a central role in defining gender relations. This includes concepts such as hierarchy and complementarity between men and women, modesty and hijab, marriage and family law, legal and political participation, and education and work. Within Islam, there are two major sects: It is a Sunni state but its neighbor is Shiite state. Shiites, on the other hand, believes about 10-15% of Muslims rely on the rulings of the Islamic jurists and the community's aggregate opinion on a particular matter. Also unlike most mainstream branches of Islam, they do not recognize a clergy and adhere to the traditions of the first four caliphs with no delay. Sunni on the other hand accounts for 85-90% of Muslims while Shiites who are almost 10-15% of Muslims only recognize leaders from the Prophet Muhammad's family and particularly from Ali and those who came after him. The religious leaders in Shiism are the Ayatollahs who have a lot of power. In the case of the gender roles and women rights both Sunni as well as the Shiite writers have contributed to the definition of the role of gender in the Islam. These are attitudes that are influenced by not only religious beliefs but also cultural, social and political in different regions of the world (nasr, 2006)

Regarding the education and employment, most of the Sunni-majority countries have promoted and provided women's rights but the degree may differ. For instance, the role of females is relatively higher in Indonesia and Turkey, where women have access to education as well as involve themselves in the act of gaining employment.

Although Iran as the most allied Shiite-majority country has seen a distinct improvement in such indices, particularly in education where more than fifty per cent of university students are female. But their employment now is still not fully at par with those of men and their entrance in the world of work is still quite recent. It is imperative to address women's rights in some of the countries dominated by Sunni religion where women are restricted in terms of legal rights regarding marriage and divorce, and inheritance as compared to men. That being said, it is still important to note that changes to enhance women's rights are in progress in some parts. (Lewis, 2002).

The women in Shiite countries are politically, legally, and socially restricted within the context of marriage, divorce and taking inheritance. Religious leaders are useful in that they can prevent and

advance the reforms that are carried out when they approve the same. There has always been a contrast in the way Sunni as well as Shiite Islam deals with gender inequality, due to the differences in their beliefs and perception of religion and culture beside this, the society controlled by Sunni or Shiite belief always has patriarchal norms that make a difference between male and female roles and responsibilities. Female legal status and gender equality remains a challenge as these are often limited by traditional Islamic Sharia laws. Despite the generalizations by society on the condition of women in Islamic countries, there are currents for reform within both Sunni as well as Shia societies which demand equality of women. These movements strive to adopt more liberal interpretations of religious texts towards allowing for increased equality (Lewis, 2002). Muslim societies have lagged behind Western counterparts due to the gradual evolution of their treatment of women, which has been identified as a significant cultural boundary between the West and the Islamic world concerning gender dynamics, women's status, and perspectives on sexuality—a measure often linked with tolerance and egalitarianism. It is argued that while younger generations in the West have embraced more progressive views on gender and sexuality, Muslim nations have remained among the most conservative societies globally. Moreover, although surveys indicate support for democracy within Muslim societies, their reluctance to prioritize gender equality and sexual freedom suggests potential challenges to the sustainability of democratic ideals in these societies (Moghadam, 2003).

The socio-political context, characterized by authoritarian regimes, conflict, and social unrest, further compounds gender inequality, with instances of political instability and conservative backlash leading to setbacks in women's rights and increased repression of gender activism.

Globalization and the impact of mass media in the Middle East bring forth a myriad of new perspectives, which intersect with traditional values and religious doctrines, fostering intricate negotiations between tradition and modernity concerning gender and sexuality. Overcoming these challenges necessitates comprehensive strategies. Recognizing the interplay between social, cultural, economic, and political realms is vital, urging collaboration among diverse stakeholders such as governments, civil society organizations, religious bodies, and international entities. By grasping the historical underpinnings and contemporary dynamics of gender inequality, endeavors to advance gender justice and women's rights can be more strategic and impactful, ultimately fostering enhanced gender equality and societal advancement.



## 1.5 Legal Framework

Studying Gender inequality in the institutional concept will lead us to legal framework. While most countries have adopted laws promoting gender equality, implementation and enforcement often remain weak. Discriminatory provisions in personal status laws, for instance, regarding inheritance, marriage, and divorce, disadvantage women (OSMAN, 2023).

The legal framework concerning gender equality in the Middle East varies significantly among countries due to differences in legal systems, cultural contexts, and interpretations of religious principles. While some countries have made progress in enacting laws and regulations to promote gender equality, others continue to lag behind, maintaining discriminatory legal provisions that perpetuate gender inequality.

Constitutional guarantees of equality before the law, such as those found in Tunisia and Lebanon, signal advancements in recognizing gender parity, yet effective implementation remains a challenge. Family laws, rooted in patriarchal norms and religious beliefs, often pose obstacles to women's rights, as seen in Saudi Arabia's strict adherence to interpretations of Islamic law regarding marriage and divorce. Similarly, despite efforts to promote workplace equality through labor laws, disparities persist, with women in countries like Iran and the United Arab Emirates facing ongoing challenges in employment and wages.

Despite legislative efforts, significant hurdles persist in implementing and enforcing gender equality laws across the Middle East. Challenges include limited awareness and capacity among government entities and judicial authorities, entrenched social and cultural norms reinforcing patriarchal values, and barriers to accessing justice for women, exacerbated by economic constraints and social stigma. Additionally, political instability and authoritarian regimes in some countries hinder progress towards gender justice, as governments prioritize maintaining control over enacting meaningful legal reforms (Hutchings et al., 2010). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach encompassing legal reforms, awareness-raising initiatives, capacity-building efforts, and advocacy for social and cultural transformation. Strengthening institutional accountability and promoting a culture of gender equality are vital steps towards advancing women's rights and fostering inclusive development in the region.

## 1.6 Social and Cultural Factors

Social and cultural factors play a significant role in perpetuating gender inequality in the Middle East, shaping norms, traditions, and stereotypes that affect women's status and opportunities across various spheres of life. Traditional gender roles prescribe distinct responsibilities for men and women within Middle Eastern societies. Men are often expected to be breadwinners and heads of households, while women are tasked with caregiving and domestic duties, limiting their access to education, employment, and decision-making roles outside the home (Hutchings et al., 2010). Additionally, patriarchal structures, rooted in family and societal hierarchies, privilege men's authority and control over women's lives. Male guardianship systems, prevalent in some countries, grant male relatives legal authority over women's actions, mobility, and access to resources, reinforcing power imbalances and restricting women's autonomy and agency (OSMAN, 2023).

Cultural norms and expectations regarding women's behavior, dress, and interactions with men further shape opportunities and experiences in the Middle East. Modesty norms dictate women's dress and conduct in public spaces, often constraining their freedom of movement and expression. Moreover, honor codes deeply ingrained in many Middle Eastern cultures place pressure on women to conform to societal expectations and avoid behaviors deemed dishonorable. Stigmatization of women's sexuality and reproductive health adds to gender inequality by limiting access to reproductive healthcare and contraceptive methods. Discussions of sexuality are often taboo, and non-normative relationships may result in social ostracism or violence, hindering women's access to essential services and information (Hutchings et al., 2010). Stereotypes and discrimination based on gender contribute to unequal treatment and opportunities for women in the Middle East. Women may face biases in hiring, promotion, and educational opportunities due to perceptions of their competency compared to men. Additionally, stereotypes about women as caregivers and homemakers discourage their pursuit of careers or leadership roles outside the home (Moghadam, 2003). Moreover, inadequate legal protections for women's rights and enforcement mechanisms perpetuate gender disparities. Laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property rights may discriminate against women or fail to adequately protect their interests, prioritizing traditional or religious laws over women's rights.

Addressing these social and cultural factors necessitates challenging ingrained norms, traditions, and stereotypes while promoting gender-sensitive attitudes and behaviors. This includes promoting gender-equitable education and awareness programs, strengthening legal protections for women's

rights, empowering women and girls through education and economic opportunities, engaging communities and religious leaders in promoting gender equality, and encouraging critical reflection on gender norms to foster inclusive and equitable societies in the Middle East.

### 1.7 Economic Aspects

Gender inequality in the Middle East is deeply intertwined with economic factors, as disparities in access to employment, wages, and economic opportunities perpetuate and reinforce gender inequities. Understanding these economic dimensions necessitates examining both structural barriers and the intersection of economic factors with social and cultural dynamics. Women in the region often face lower rates of labor force participation due to cultural norms prioritizing their roles in the household, limited access to education and skills training, and legal barriers to employment (Moghadam, 2003). Even when women do participate in the labor force, they are often relegated to low-wage and informal sectors, perpetuating occupational segregation and wage disparities. Factors such as discrimination in hiring and promotion practices, limited access to capital and business networks, and cultural expectations further impede women's economic agency and entrepreneurship. Legal and institutional frameworks may also reinforce gender disparities, with laws governing inheritance, property ownership, and employment often discriminating against women or failing to adequately protect their economic interests. Limited access to education and skills training exacerbates economic inequalities, particularly for girls in rural and marginalized communities. Addressing these economic inequities requires multifaceted interventions that challenge discriminatory norms and practices, promote women's economic empowerment through education and skills training, and advocate for legal reforms. Recognizing the intersection of economic factors with social and cultural dynamics is essential for fostering inclusive and equitable economic growth in the Middle East and advancing gender equality.

### 1.8 Education and Health

Gender disparities persist in education and healthcare across the Middle East, impeding women and girls' access to crucial services and hindering their personal and societal development. Despite progress, enrollment rates for girls lag behind boys, influenced by cultural norms and economic constraints. Even when enrolled, girls face obstacles such as early marriage and household

responsibilities, contributing to higher dropout rates, particularly in rural areas (Moghadam,1999). Disparities extend to the quality of education, with limited resources and facilities impacting girls' academic performance and future prospects. Similarly, in healthcare, women and girls encounter barriers accessing essential services, including reproductive and mental healthcare, due to cultural taboos, legal restrictions, and stigma.

These disparities are influenced by a myriad of factors, including cultural norms, economic constraints, and legal frameworks. Traditional gender roles prioritize boys' education and men's health needs, while economic hardships often limit access to education and healthcare for girls. Legal and policy frameworks can either facilitate or hinder access to services, with discriminatory laws exacerbating inequalities (Moghadam, 2002). To address these disparities, comprehensive approaches are needed, addressing structural barriers, challenging discriminatory norms, and promoting gender-sensitive policies and programs. Ensuring equitable access to education and healthcare for all members of society requires concerted efforts to dismantle entrenched inequalities and promote gender equality across the Middle East.

## 1.9 Challenges and Opportunities

Identify key challenges and obstacles to achieving gender equality in the Middle East. Achieving gender equality in the Middle East faces formidable obstacles rooted in entrenched cultural norms, legal barriers, and socio-economic disparities. Traditional gender roles limit women's participation in public life and economic activities, while discriminatory laws prioritize men's interests, curbing women's autonomy. Persistent gender disparities in education and healthcare further exacerbate inequalities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage, particularly for women in rural and marginalized communities. Addressing these challenges demands a multifaceted approach, including policy reforms, advocacy, empowerment programs, community engagement, international cooperation, and media strategies. Progressive policies and legal reforms are crucial for safeguarding women's rights and ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Civil society organizations and grassroots initiatives play pivotal roles in challenging harmful stereotypes and promoting gender-sensitive attitudes, while international cooperation provides essential support for gender equality initiatives. Media and communication

strategies are also vital in fostering societal change towards a more equitable and inclusive society for all, regardless of gender.

### 1.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, we delved into the multifaceted nature of gender inequality in the Middle East, examining both general trends and institutional frameworks that perpetuate disparities. Our exploration encompassed historical, cultural, legal, and socio-economic factors, revealing how patriarchal traditions, colonial legacies, and socio-political transformations have shaped gender norms and institutional structures over time. Despite some progress, the region's legal and institutional frameworks often reinforce inequalities through discriminatory laws and inadequate enforcement mechanisms, particularly in economic spheres where disparities in access to employment, wages, and opportunities persist. These challenges underscore the complexity of achieving gender equality in the Middle East but also present opportunities for progress through comprehensive approaches such as policy reforms, advocacy efforts, grassroots initiatives, and international cooperation. (Ghanimi et al., 2022).

In the context of the thesis focusing on strategies for advancing gender equality in the Middle East, these findings emphasize the necessity of addressing underlying causes of gender inequality. Specifically, tackling entrenched cultural norms, reforming discriminatory laws, and promoting women's empowerment across various sectors emerge as pivotal avenues for action. Moreover, areas for further research such as intersectionality, the impact of conflict on gender dynamics, and the role of media in shaping gender norms offer valuable insights for future inquiry. Potential implications for policy and practice include advocating for legal reforms, implementing empowerment programs, engaging communities, and strengthening international cooperation to support gender equality initiatives in the region. Overall, this chapter underscores the significance of addressing gender inequality in the Middle East and provides insights into potential avenues for future research and action to advance gender equality in the region.

## Chapter 2

# Gender Inequality in Education and Employment

### 2.1 Introduction

Regarding education, gender imbalance is defined as disparity in enrollment and attendance, achievement, educational attainment, and educational and instructional involvement and engagement for the purpose of gender.

Sexism and prejudice still exist in modern society, and stereotyped gender roles based on historical data and traditional gender roles that affect enrollment rates as well as the dropout rate and the quality of education that is offered. Boys may fail to attend school due to drop out, early marriage, forced labor or frequent movement while girls may be pulled out of school by domestic issues such as early marriage, security challenges or early employment. Early marriage, particularly of girls, is a significant issue impacting gender inequality in education. It is worth considering the difference between the early marriage of girls and boys. Early marriage is significantly more common among girls than boys. Globally, about 12 million girls marry before the age of 18 each year, whereas the incidence among boys is much lower. This disparity is largely due to cultural norms and economic factors that prioritize the marriage of girls over boys. (UNICEF. 2019). Boys also do marry early, but the rates are substantially lower. Societal expectations often allow boys to continue their education and delay marriage until they are older. With regard to education early marriage severely impacts girls' education. Married girls are often expected to drop out of school to take on household responsibilities and childbearing roles. This interrupts their educational trajectories, limits their future opportunities, and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and dependence (Girls Not Brides.2020). While early marriage can affect boys' education, the impact is generally less severe. Boys are often able to continue their education and work simultaneously, though they may still face pressures that can hinder their academic progress (UNFPA .2020).

In many cases, education actually perpetuates gender prejudices through curricula that offer stereotyped visions of the roles of man and woman, the absence of female models and appropriate policies. The effect of this inequality is far-reaching, directly as well as indirectly influencing the

people and the society on large, because educated women have better chances of being employed and contributing to the development of healthier and educated families (International Labor Organization. 2020).

In addition gender inequality also in employment remains a significant challenge worldwide, manifesting in various forms such as wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and unequal access to opportunities. This pervasive issue is particularly pronounced in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where traditional gender roles and socio-cultural norms significantly limit women's participation in the workforce. Despite notable progress in educational attainment for women across the region, labor market outcomes remain starkly unequal (UN Women. 2020). According to the World Bank (2021), female labor force participation in the MENA region stands at approximately 20%, one of the lowest globally. This disparity is driven by a combination of legal, social, and economic barriers that restrict women's employment opportunities and reinforce gender-based discrimination in the workplace (World Bank. 2021). This chapter will explore the issue of gender inequality, addressing its manifestation in both educational and employment spheres.

## 2.2 Global Gender inequality in education

### 2.2.1 Access to Education

Education is frequently depicted as a fundamental entitlement of every individual. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) explicitly incorporates the provision of free and mandatory primary education as part of this fundamental right. Ensuring fair access to education for all individuals receives special attention within the CRC. Moreover, the CRC underscores the importance of making higher education available to everyone, even though there might be some limitations on how much can be provided ([Krafft and Alawode 2018](#)).

### 2.2.2 A Persistent Phenomenon

Gender inequality in education remains a persistent and pervasive challenge worldwide, with profound implications for individuals, communities, and societies as a whole. Despite significant progress in expanding access to education in recent decades, gender disparities persist in enrollment rates, academic achievement, and educational attainment, disproportionately affecting girls and

women in many parts of the world. Gender inequality has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond social and cultural realms to profoundly impact economic development and prosperity. In particular, gender disparities in education play a critical role in shaping individuals' economic opportunities and outcomes, ultimately influencing the broader economy ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

According to findings from international bodies, gender bias across multiple domains, including nationality changes, employment, familial legal obligations, education, household duties, unpaid domestic labor, domestic abuse, healthcare, and political participation, significantly impacts the lives of women and girls globally, exerting widespread and profound effects. ([Hashemian et al. 2022](#)).

### 2.2.3 The History

Throughout history, gender inequality in education has been pervasive, with educational opportunities predominantly reserved for elite males while females were often confined to domestic roles and limited access to formal schooling. During the middle Ages, religious institutions controlled education, providing limited opportunities for girls compared to boys. The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods saw debates about women's intellectual capacity, yet educational access remained unequal ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, social and educational reforms expanded access to schooling but perpetuated gender roles. The latter half of the 20th century witnessed progress towards gender equality driven by social movements, legislative reforms, and advocacy efforts, yet challenges such as cultural stereotypes and systemic barriers persist, highlighting the complex and ongoing nature of gender inequality in education (Moinifar-saadat , 2011).

### 2.2.4 Contributing Factors

Gender disparities in education are influenced by a multitude of factors that interact in complex ways, shaping individuals' access to educational opportunities and their experiences within educational systems. The key factors contributing to gender disparities in education are:



### 1-Socioeconomic Status (SES):

Socioeconomic status is one of the most significant determinants of educational outcomes, including gender disparities. Families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face economic barriers that limit access to quality education, including inadequate resources for educational materials, tutoring, and extracurricular activities. Girls from disadvantaged backgrounds may be particularly vulnerable to educational inequities due to intersecting factors such as poverty, limited access to healthcare, and household responsibilities that may impede their educational attainment and perpetuate inequalities by limiting girls' aspirations and opportunities for academic achievement ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

### 2-Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes:

Cultural norms and gender stereotypes play a pivotal role in shaping educational opportunities and outcomes for males and females. Societal expectations regarding gender roles and abilities can influence educational pathways, with boys often encouraged to pursue fields perceived as masculine (e.g., STEM), while girls may face subtle or explicit discouragement from pursuing certain academic or career paths. Gender stereotypes can affect teachers' expectations, classroom interactions, and curriculum content, contributing to differential treatment and academic performance between genders. Cultural norms that prioritize boys' education over girls' education in resource-constrained environments can further exacerbate disparities in enrollment and retention rates ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

### 3-Institutional Barriers and Discrimination:

Institutional barriers within educational systems, including discriminatory policies, practices, and environments, can perpetuate gender disparities. For example, inadequate facilities, such as lack of separate sanitation facilities for girls, can discourage female enrollment and retention in schools. Discriminatory disciplinary practices, gender-based violence, and harassment can create hostile learning environments that disproportionately affect girls' educational experiences. Additionally, gender biases in teaching materials, standardized tests, and curriculum content may reinforce traditional gender roles and limit students' aspirations and opportunities. ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#), [Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019](#)).

### 4-Policy Frameworks and Resource Allocation:

Policy frameworks and resource allocation decisions have a significant impact on gender disparities in education. Gender-blind policies that fail to address the specific needs and challenges faced by

girls and boys may inadvertently perpetuate inequalities. Conversely, targeted interventions, such as gender-responsive budgeting, affirmative action policies, and girls' education initiatives, can help address systemic barriers and promote gender equity in education. Adequate funding for education, including investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and support services, is essential for creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

#### 5-Family and Community Dynamics:

Family and community dynamics play a crucial role in shaping educational opportunities and outcomes for children. Gendered division of labor within households, with girls often shouldering disproportionate responsibilities for household chores and caregiving, can impact their time, energy, and ability to engage fully in education. Cultural norms regarding marriage, early marriage, and childbearing may also influence girls' educational trajectories, with early marriage often leading to school dropout and limited educational attainment for girls ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

#### 6-Access to Resources and Support Services:

Disparities in access to resources and support services, such as quality schools, trained teachers, educational materials, transportation, and healthcare, can exacerbate gender inequalities in education. Rural and marginalized communities, in particular, may face challenges in accessing educational infrastructure and support services, limiting opportunities for both boys and girls. Gender-responsive approaches to resource allocation and service delivery are essential for addressing disparities and ensuring equitable access to education for all students ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

Overall, these intersecting factors create a reinforcing cycle of disadvantage that disproportionately affects girls and other marginalized groups based on gender. Addressing gender inequalities in education requires a comprehensive approach that considers the interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, and policy factors and seeks to dismantle the structural barriers that perpetuate disparities in educational outcomes ([Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019](#)).

## 2.3 Gender (In) Equality and Economic Growth

### 2.3.1 Negative Impacts of Gender Inequality

Klasen and Lamanna have also examined how gender disparities in education affect economic growth. Several theoretical studies have identified a negative connection between gender inequality and economic expansion ([Klasen and Lamanna , 2003](#)).

Gender disparities negatively impact both income per capita achievements and the array of associated developmental or quality of life advantages. It is noteworthy that gender-based educational inequalities often manifest most prominently in economically disadvantaged nations and among marginalized income groups within these nations ([Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2015](#)).

### 2.3.2 Positive Impact of Gender Equality

When examining the intersection of gender and education, it becomes evident that disparities therein wield significant influence over socioeconomic dynamics, particularly income growth. For instance, a reduction in educational opportunities for females precipitates a decrement in the aggregate human capital stock, thereby exerting a palpable direct adverse impact on income expansion. Furthermore, these gender-based educational differentials intertwine with demographic trends and investment patterns, thereby precipitating an indirect influence on income growth trajectories. It's worth noting that enhancing female educational attainment not only fosters economic prosperity but also yields multifaceted developmental dividends beyond mere financial metrics ([Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2015](#)).

While gender inequality could result in decreased income growth compared to potential scenarios, there is no inherent correlation suggesting that higher income growth necessarily leads to diminished gender inequality. Recent reports have highlighted a positive correlation between economic growth and gender disparity in wages. It has been observed that women often find themselves concentrated in lower-paying occupations. Considering the link between gender inequality in education and wage disparities, one might also anticipate a positive correlation between income growth and differences between women and men in access to schooling ([Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2015](#)).

Conversely, employing Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS) estimations on datasets encompassing both developed and developing nations, it was determined

that diminishing human capital gender disparities directly impede economic growth. Additionally, gender inequality exerts an indirect influence by affecting population growth and investment patterns. Furthermore, attention was directed towards the ratio of literate females aged 15–24 to males in order to discern its impact on growth. The analysis revealed that gender inequality in youth literacy negatively affects economic growth, with a more pronounced effect observed in Arab countries. Conversely, an affirmative growth effect was identified stemming from the interaction between trade and gender inequality ([Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2015](#)).

It has been noted that "there is evidence suggesting that educating females, particularly in developing nations, yields societal benefits such as decreased fertility and infant mortality rates, enhanced family and child well-being, elevated life expectancy, and improved educational outcomes for children in terms of both quantity and quality" ([Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2015](#)).

#### 2.4 Gender Inequality in MENA Countries

Gender inequality in education persists across MENA countries, characterized by disparities in enrollment rates, educational attainment, and learning outcomes between boys and girls. Cultural norms and societal expectations often prioritize boys' education over girls', limiting girls' access to schooling and opportunities for higher education and participation in STEM fields. Despite efforts to promote gender equality in education through policy reforms, implementation challenges and resource constraints hinder progress ([Salehi-Isfahani et al. 2014](#)).

Gender disparities in education have significant economic and social consequences, contributing to cycles of poverty and inequality, hindering economic growth, and perpetuating broader social challenges such as gender-based violence and early marriage. Addressing gender inequality in education requires comprehensive approaches that challenge discriminatory norms and practices, promote gender-sensitive policies, and ensure equitable access to quality education for all individuals across the MENA region ([Klasen and Lamanna , 2003](#)).

The ability of young individuals in the MENA region and worldwide to achieve a higher level of education significantly influences their lifelong journey, encompassing shifts towards employment and establishing a family. Yet, access to higher education isn't uniformly accessible to everyone. This study highlights significant disparities in the opportunity to pursue higher education across Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia.

The primary factors contributing to inequality were consistent across nations: the educational background of parents. It was discovered that a significant portion of the disparity in accessing higher education occurred prior to reaching the higher education level.

A key discovery from this study is that, despite policies advocating for free public education, equal opportunities in higher education are not widespread in the MENA region. The provision of free higher education actually serves as a regressive policy, disproportionately benefiting the wealthy. As nations globally discuss strategies to tackle inequality and enhance higher education accessibility, caution should be exercised regarding the implementation of free higher education. One possible way in which free higher education might exacerbate inequality is by diverting resources away from earlier educational levels when higher education becomes tuition-free ([Krafft and Alawode 2018](#)).

#### 2.4.1 Existing Evidence on Inequality in Education

Inequality of opportunity begins even before children start primary school, with significant disparities observed in enrollment rates for early childhood care and education (ECCE) in the MENA region.

Analyzing data from the 2000s across seven MENA countries revealed that, although disparities based on gender and background exist in all the countries studied, some countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan exhibit the lowest likelihood of vulnerable children never attending school. In the studied countries, most advantaged children proceed to secondary education. However, significant disparities emerge, particularly evident in the transition to secondary education, which may impact future access to higher education. Additionally, educational achievement disparities are observable across primary and secondary levels ([Krafft and Alawode 2018](#)).

In MENA, assessing inequality of opportunity in higher education is challenging due to the diverse living arrangements of higher education-aged youth, making it difficult to gauge background influence. Nevertheless, parental education, particularly that of mothers, plays a crucial role in determining access to higher education. Moreover, the presence of private higher education institutions could impact accessibility. In Egypt and Jordan for instance, enrollment in private higher education is more prevalent among men than women, varies across regions, and is influenced by socio-economic status (Moinifar-saadat, 2011).

## 2.5 Education Gender inequality in Iran

The adverse impact on the status of women is particularly pronounced in less developed nations, including Iran. According to the World Economic Forum's 2019 rankings on gender discrimination, Iran stood at 148th out of 153 countries, behind Saudi Arabia, which is notorious for its discriminatory legislation against women. Additionally, the 2019 report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, assessing 120 countries based on gender equality index, revealed Iran's rankings in various discriminatory areas: 118th in familial discrimination, 78th in women's access to physical health, 34th in women's access to financial and productive resources, and 118th in civil liberties (Moinifar-saadat , 2011).

In this context, the issue of gender equality and providing equal opportunities for men and women not only fails to gather attention from Iranian officials but also entails an official approach that perpetuates control and dominance over women, encompassing legal, cultural, and social dimensions. A significant portion of the population in Iran acknowledges and accepts the disparity between the statuses of men and women, both legally and conventionally. This acceptance is evident in various aspects such as inheritance laws, regulations concerning blood-money, paternal custody and guardianship rights, the unilateral right to divorce granted to men, ownership of a woman's body by her husband, and the requirement for a woman to obtain her husband's permission before leaving the house ([Hashemian et al. 2022](#)).

In recent decades, there has been a rapid increase in educational investment and achievement among women. In many developed countries and numerous developing nations, women have surpassed men in both secondary and tertiary education attainment (UNESCO, 2018) ([Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019](#)).

As the level of education among women increases, so does their participation in the workforce. Consequently, with the rising number of well-educated women globally, more women have begun to pursue paid employment, leading to a commonplace scenario of balancing work and family responsibilities in adulthood.

## 2.6 Women's Presence in Universities in Iran

In Iran, there has been a consistent increase in the enrollment of women in institutions of higher education since 1989 (Kazemipour, 1999). However, some contend (Shavarini, 2006) that investing

in women's college education is inefficient for the nation as the majority of college-educated women (approximately 75-80%) do not enter the labor market.

The reports indicate that only 20% of students who took the national university entrance exam were able to secure spots at prestigious public tertiary education institutions. Others, if they can afford it, may opt for courses at private universities in the country. In 2018, approximately 1 million individuals registered for the exam, with female students comprising 59% of all participants (Teheran News, 2018). Winning admission to a public university is viewed in Iran as a privilege reserved for a highly selective group considered the best of the best, granting access to superior social and economic opportunities. Data from the early 2000s revealed that out of 152,000 students who passed the entrance exam in 2001, 60% were women (Shavarini, 2005). The gender gap has since continued to widen, with 62% of exam passers being women in 2003 (Shavarini, 2006). Following the revelation that women outnumbered men in the national exam, not only were these the last results officially published, but they also prompted the implementation of gender quotas in public academia (Moinifar-saadat , 2011).

## 2.7 Educational Achievements of Women in Iran

### 2.7.1 Challenges and Barriers

In the ensuing years, the Iranian parliament enacted legislation that limited the availability of over 70 courses to female students. This included disciplines like engineering, technology, and mathematics, which were deemed as wasteful of resources given the belief that many educated Iranian women would not enter the workforce to contribute back to society. Additionally, women were barred from enrolling in courses perceived as "Western" or conflicting with religious principles in Iran, particularly in social sciences, psychology, law, and management. National clerics also voiced concerns about the societal repercussions of excessive education in these fields, citing potential negative impacts on family life. Despite these challenges, Iranian women remained undeterred in their pursuit of higher education ([Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2015](#)).

However, Iranian men do not face the same pressure to pursue higher education since obtaining a college degree does not significantly improve their financial prospects as it does for women. The demand for skilled labor in the Iranian job market, which typically requires a college education, is

limited, and furthermore, men often have preferential treatment over women in many sectors of employment. Thus, for women, obtaining a university education becomes one of the few viable avenues to shape their future. Many Iranian women do not view college as a means to acquire practical skills and knowledge. Instead, for them, university education represents intangible benefits. It offers a sense of freedom from familial constraints and may also enhance their desirability in the marriage market by increasing their perceived value.

Traditionally, girls and women in Iran have faced disadvantages in education and employment, mirroring trends seen globally. However, initiatives implemented during the Shah's era and subsequent post-Revolution reforms have yielded mixed results for women's education in Iran. While there has been an increase in girls' and women's enrollment in education over time, the educational landscape has remained largely unfavorable to women. Post-Revolution, education has been utilized to promote Islamic values and traditional roles of motherhood and wifehood. Similarly, achieving equality in employment beyond the home, including job types and pay, remains an ongoing challenge. Both entrenched traditional values and limitations in the types and levels of education accessible to women have contributed to their employment situation in Iran. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 significantly altered Iran's socio-economic and political structures, consequently impacting women's status in terms of education and employment (Bina, 2002).

Iran reflects the global issue of gender inequality, evident in various aspects including nutrition disparities. Data from 1991 indicated that malnutrition rates among girls were nearly double those of boys, whether in urban or rural settings. In 1991, 13.5 percent of rural girls and 11 percent of urban girls were malnourished, compared to 7 percent of rural boys and 6 percent of urban boys (Bina, 2002). Likewise, gender disparities persist in education and employment in Iran, although there have been shifts following the Islamic Revolution (Moinifar-saadat, 2011).

In numerous Islamic countries, including Iran, there is a persistent significant gap between female and male literacy rates, alongside high overall levels of illiteracy. The Islamic world, particularly the Arab regions, has consistently exhibited some of the highest rates of female illiteracy, minimal educational opportunities for girls, and limited female participation in paid employment. Despite variations in women's literacy rates across countries and regions, women in the Arab world remain a minority within student populations. Across all Islamic countries, male literacy rates consistently surpass those of females. Even in countries where reform efforts have been initiated, substantial disparities persist between male and female literacy rates, as well as significant mismatches between the type of education provided for women and the socioeconomic needs of Arab societies.



Factors contributing to these disparities include persistently unfavorable family attitudes toward female education, particularly prevalent in rural areas where the majority of the Muslim population resides, and high female dropout rates due to inequalities between urban and rural education systems ([Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019](#)).

Moreover Marriage stands out as a crucial social determinant affecting women's access to education. According to 1991 statistics from Iran, 2.2 percent of girls aged 10-14 were already married, compelling them to assume roles as wives and mothers before completing their education (Ghiasi, 2000). Additionally, one in every 25 marriages within this age group ended in divorce. Approximately 50 percent of Iranian girls were married before turning 19 (Bina, 2002), a circumstance that not only heightens family vulnerability but also compromises their potential as nurturing mothers capable of fostering their children's development. Early marriage, in particular, has profound implications for educational attainment among Iranian women but beside that there are other dire consequences of early marriage.

Early marriage often forces young girls to abandon their studies prematurely. According to a study by UNICEF, married girls are more likely to drop out of school compared to their unmarried peers (UNICEF. 2019). This interruption in education limits their future economic opportunities and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and dependency. In Iranian society, cultural norms and expectations significantly influence the role of women, often prioritizing marriage and motherhood over education. Research indicates that these societal pressures result in girls being removed from school to prepare for domestic roles as wives and mothers, which undermines their educational prospects and personal development (Girls Not Brides. 2020).

Early marriage is also associated with adverse health outcomes, including early and repeated pregnancies, which can further impede a woman's ability to continue her education. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that young brides face higher risks of pregnancy-related complications, which can be a significant barrier to education (World Health Organization. 2014). Additionally, economic hardships often drive families to marry off their daughters at a young age. This practice is sometimes seen as a strategy to alleviate financial burdens. However, it ultimately restricts girls' access to education and perpetuates economic inequality. Studies have shown that educated women are more likely to contribute to the economy and uplift their families from poverty (UNFPA. 2020).

While Iranian law has set the legal age for marriage at 13 for girls with parental consent, many girls marry even younger. Efforts to raise the legal age of marriage and enforce existing laws more strictly are essential to improving girls' educational outcomes. According to Human Rights Watch, stronger legal frameworks and enforcement are critical to preventing early marriages and ensuring girls remain in school (Erfani, A. 2011).

Addressing early marriage in Iran is pivotal to enhancing women's access to education. Comprehensive strategies involving legal reforms, community education, and economic support for families can help mitigate the impact of early marriage on women's education (Human Rights Watch. 2019). By prioritizing education for girls, Iran can make significant strides towards gender equality and socio-economic development.

### 2.7.2 Benefits

Educational achievements enable women in Iranian society to garner respect within their communities and attain independence, including financial autonomy, although this may not necessarily translate into immediate employment. These opportunities are often scarce for women in Iran. Nevertheless, research indicates that educated mothers in Iran positively impact the educational outcomes of their children. A one-year increase in a mother's schooling correlates with nearly a year of increased education for her child in rural areas and almost half a year in urban areas. Therefore, the development of human capital serves as another important intangible benefit to consider ([Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019](#)).

## 2.8 Progress of Women's Education in Iran

Gender discrimination in education is palpable in Iran's history. The establishment of the first special school for girls in 1922 underscored the educational disparity, with only 7,239 girls enrolled compared to 35,000 boys that year (Bina, 2002). By 1965, the disparity persisted, with 22 percent of men and only 3.7 percent of women being educated. However, significant progress was noted by 1991, with 81 percent of men and 67 percent of women receiving education (Ghiasi, 2000). Despite this improvement, the number of educated women consistently lagged behind men. Rural women faced even greater challenges, with only 50 percent being educated in 1991 (Ghiasi, 2000).

Presently, around 15 percent of rural girls aged 6-9 do not attend school, a concerning figure signaling persistent barriers to education despite some progress (Bina, 2002).

Around 1995, roughly 20 years after Iran's Islamic Revolution, the National Report on Women observed significant advancements in women's education. Over this period, Iranian women had narrowed the educational gap with men, particularly among the younger generation. While disparities in math and science persisted, high school girls excelled in reading and writing, taking more academic credits on average. Moreover, females were more likely to pursue higher education after high school, with comparable graduation rates to males. Since the revolution in 1979, the number of female students in Iran had surged across secondary schools, colleges, and universities. Additionally, there was a noticeable increase in Iranian women's participation in higher education professions, both in administrative and faculty roles.

By 1995, significant progress had been made in the educational achievements of women in Iran, as evidenced by data from the National Report on Women (Nabavi, 1995). A comparison between the academic years 1987-1988 and 1992-1993 revealed remarkable increases in the number of female graduates across various fields of higher education. These included a 119 percent increase in social sciences and humanities, a doubling of graduates in basic sciences, a 230 percent rise in agricultural and veterinary sciences, a 70 percent increase in technical and engineering fields, and medical sciences, and a striking 246 percent increase in arts graduates. Moreover, the number of women graduating from universities nearly doubled during this period, accompanied by a significant rise in the number of female staff members, which almost doubled as well. In 1995, women held notable positions within academia, with percentages ranging from 5.7 percent of professors to 36.9 percent of university instructors. The National Report on Women in Iran (Nabavi 1995) highlighted the increased opportunities for Iranian women to pursue higher education, thanks to the removal of many educational barriers they previously faced. This progress allowed female secondary school graduates to access university education in fields aligned with their talents and abilities. The report attributed this advancement to various factors, including the provision of gender-segregated educational facilities, which facilitated women's education across different fields. This shift also influenced religious beliefs, leading to a decrease in the gender gap within educational institutions. Additionally, the report noted that by 1995, female students in Iran demonstrated academic performance five percent higher than their male counterparts. This educational development also had a profound impact on women's employment opportunities and their overall position within Iranian society (Ghiasi, 2000).

Some of the advancement in women's involvement in education from 1977 to 1992, can be seen in Table 1. The proportion of girls enrolled at the primary level increased from 38 percent in 1977 to 47 percent in 1992, while at the secondary school level, it rose from 36 to 42 percent during the same period. Similarly, at the high school level, the percentage of female students increased from 40 in 1977 to 44 in 1992. However, participation rates for women in university and technical/professional education have remained relatively stable. In 1977, women comprised 30 percent of university students, decreasing slightly to 28 percent by 1991. Likewise, women constituted 20 percent of technical/professional students in 1977, decreasing marginally to 19.7 percent in 1992. These realms of higher and professional education have predominantly remained male-dominated (Iravani, 2010).

According to UNESCO data, adult literacy rates in Iran, for individuals aged 15 and above, have risen from 63.2 percent (72.2 for males and 54 for females) in 1990 to 76 percent (83 for males and 68.9 for females) in 2000. Similar progress is observed in youth literacy rates in Iran, with rates for the age group 15-24 increasing from 86.3 percent (91.7 for males and 80.8 for females) in 1990 to 93.8 percent (96.2 for males and 91.3 for females) in 2000 (UNESCO, 2002: 218). Despite significant advancements in female literacy rates across both the total population and youth demographic in Iran during the 1990-2000 decade, women still trail behind men in literacy. However, there's a positive trend as the gap between male and female youth literacy rates notably decreased, with only a 4.9 percentage point difference in 2000. (Iravani, 2010).

<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>1977</b>	<b>1992</b>
Primary school	38 .0	47.0
Secondary school	36.0	42.0
High school	40.0	44.0
University	30.0	28.0
Technical & Professional	20.0	19.7

Source: Amini 2001

Table 1: percentage of women enrolled in different levels of education in Iran in 1997 and 1992. (Amini, 2001)

UNESCO data reveals a notable increase in adult literacy rates in Iran from 1990 to 2000, with rates rising from 63.2 percent to 76 percent. Similar improvements were observed among youth aged 15-24, with literacy rates climbing from 86.3 percent to 93.8 percent during the same period. Despite significant progress in female literacy rates over the decade, women still trail behind men in literacy. However, there's a positive trend as the gender gap in youth literacy rates narrowed to just 4.9 percentage points by 2000 (Iravani, 2010).

In summary, Iran's efforts towards gender equality in education and employment have seen progress alongside persistent challenges. Despite initiatives during the Shah's era and post-Revolution reforms, women continue to face barriers in accessing education and entering the workforce. Traditional gender roles and societal attitudes, especially prevalent in rural areas, hinder women's educational attainment and contribute to high dropout rates (Iravani, 2010). However, there have been notable advancements, including increased literacy rates and greater female participation in higher education. Yet, achieving full gender equality remains an ongoing struggle in Iran.

## 2.9 Gender Inequality in Employment and Labor Market Participation

Labor market participation or its range can be illustrated as a worker's comprehensive participation in paid work or pursuing jobs, within formal or informal sectors. This involvement covers a variety of activities, from the traditional ones, such as paid employment, self-employment, unpaid family labor, and those periods of unemployment. Several variables can be pinpointed as the drivers of labor force participation rates that are demographic traits, education level, economic conditions, social influence and cultural values. Inequalities in the labor market owing to the lack of gender representation mostly stem from unfair distribution of chances and resources, as well as popular notions about what gender should do in the economy. These gaps are simply the manifestation of the wider gender inequality that exists in the society where women are still faced with difficulties that prevent them from getting into or advancing in their careers. Gender gap elimination in the labor market is a key factor as far as women's empowerment, as well as promotion of gender-balanced economic growth, is concerned. Through providing women with job opportunities which will contribute to their economic emancipation and uplift household income, the community can

be positioned on the higher standings of socio-economic development and will create a balanced and more thriving economy for everyone (Bergh, 2007).

The importance of women's employment both on an individual and societal scale is widely acknowledged. It correlates with enhanced perceived health (Schnittker,2007), better child welfare (Smith, 1985), and heightened political involvement among women (Moghadam,2003). Women in positions of political authority tend to prioritize legislation addressing women's concerns, such as education, healthcare, pay equity, anti-discrimination measures, and affirmative action. Moreover, women's employment contributes to national economies by tapping into an underutilized financial asset and expanding the talent pool (Moghadam, 1998). Consequently, the proportion of women engaged in paid non-agricultural work is a key indicator of gender equality and women's empowerment, as recognized by the World Bank in 2003 ([Price 2015](#)).

### 2.9.1 Exploring Diverse Contributing Factors

The gender inequalities in the labor market are shaped by a combination of many factors which are interlinked in the social, economic, cultural and institutional realms.

First of all, a direct correlation exists between the educational differences and labor market inequalities between both men and women. Lack of education of women can become cause of low level of qualifications and skills. It reduces possibility to get a worthy job. Thus, women's potential is usually wasted. Secondly, hiring practices that are discriminatory are the things that cause gender inequalities in employment. Biasing gender stereotypes creates the grounds for the unfair evaluation of applicants and limits the women promotion aspirations for advancement in their careers. The wage difference between men and women is another example and often women are paid less, no matter if they do the same job. This gap is driven by a number of issues such as occupational segregation, unequal access to higher-paying positions and discrimination in the pay negotiations ([Dieckhoff et al. 2015](#)).

Last but not the least, women are occupied with unequal sharing of unpaid work, such as caretaking of family, which also limits their participation in the labor market. A great amount of time and energy that necessary for the management of household tasks and inevitably limit women to obtain employment and ascend in the career. Apart from that, the lack of funding, especially credit and business capital, goes against the entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities of women, thus, widening the economic gap. Moreover, laws, institutions, and sorting mechanisms which are

practically discriminative help to strengthen the gender inequalities in the labor market. Constraints that adjacent women face in their access to jobs, own property and participate in the mainstream economy reduce their economic emancipation and, in return, limits their active role in the formal work sector ([Emerson and Hartman 2006](#)) .

Finally, according to Emerson and Hartman, the long-established social norms and cultural traditions concerning gender roles are the factors that influence people's perceptions of women's employment. The traditional understanding of gender roles is centering women's jobs at home on taking care of the household, return as housewives to ditch the idea of working paid job outside the house. Tackling the multidimensional problems that aggravate inequality calls for holistic approaches and strategies, which should include work on educational inequalities, securing gender equality in working environments, implementing equal pay for men and women, insistence on the matter of the question of sharing unpaid care responsibilities among different family members, a review of the legal frameworks, and a challenge of the gender-stereotypes. Through the analysis of these reasons, the societies can create more inclusive and just labor markets that allow women to participate and prosper in full capacity ([Emerson and Hartman 2006](#)) .

## 2.10 Gender Inequality in Employment in Mena Countries

### 2.10.1 Overview of the significance of labor market participation and gender

Eliminating gender inequalities at work, in particular, is part and parcel of the union efforts in the Middle East towards the accomplishment of the goals of sustainable growth and inclusive development. Enabling women actively integrate into the labor market makes the region using all its resources most effectively and, this in turn, makes it possible to increase productivity and promote innovations. Besides, the promotion of gender equality in the labor market is not only a matter of economic necessity but also a human right which is the basic human right for the foundation of inclusive and equitable societies ([Dieckhoff et al. 2015](#)).

The Middle East to the specific one faces complicated issues and fundamental chances of between labor market participation and gender discrimination. The involvement of workers to the market is one of the most critical elements that can be used for development and prosperity of the place in the future, as it improves efficiency and innovation of the working sector. Nonetheless, the gender

gap is still alive and kicking, thus the women are not able to fully participate in the labor market and their economic status is decreased (Ross, 2008).

Women's work options in Middle East are narrowed down by socio-cultural norms and customs, legal procedures, and gendered social organization restricting their access to employment and creating gender disparities in the labor market. A successful advancement in the realm of education and healthcare has come at the cost of women facing new challenges, including the barriers of limited access to good jobs, the gender pay gap and the bias of recruitment and promotion.

Despite significant advancements in human development in recent years, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has the lowest women's employment rates globally. Studies indicate that gender-equal attitudes play a crucial role in understanding women's employment levels (Price 2015).

In the past half-century, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has seen significant shifts in its population and quality of life. Women are marrying later, and the number of children per family has decreased from around 7 in 1960 to 2.7 in 2012. Women have achieved remarkable progress in education as well: most countries in the MENA region boast high or universal primary school enrollment, gender disparities in secondary education have diminished in many areas, and women are now significantly more inclined to pursue higher education compared to previous years. Yet, despite the ongoing economic and social modernization in the MENA region, it stands out for having the lowest female participation in the formal workforce globally (Ross, 2008). Attitudes regarding women's employment play a significant role in understanding the variations across nations in female employment rates, occupational segregation by gender, and the employment trends among women.

### 2.10.2 Global Development Targets and Gender Equality

The significant underrepresentation of women in the workforce and their low employment rates are commonly perceived as a lost chance for economic growth and development (Romie and Bertsch 2013). According to a joint report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2011, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have made significant strides in enhancing women's educational attainment. Over the past decade, nearly all MENA countries have closed at least 90 percent of the gender gap in education. However, this progress in education hasn't been matched by similar increases in female



labor force participation rates. Only about 33 percent of women of working age are part of the labor force in the region, compared to 56 percent in global low- and middle-income countries and 61 percent in OECD member countries. Moreover, in all MENA countries (excluding the Palestinian authority), women who do participate in the labor force consistently experience higher rates of involuntary unemployment than men (Romie and Bertsch 2013).

In countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, and Egypt, the gender disparity in unemployment is most pronounced. In these nations, the rate of involuntary unemployment among women is nearly four times higher than that among men. Reports from the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD) in 2006, OECD data from O'Sullivan et al. (2011), and insights from the United Nations Development Programme by Chaaban (2010) suggest that the labor market challenges faced by women in the MENA region may be attributed to prevailing cultural attitudes, gender-specific laws, and inadequate support services (Romie and Bertsch 2013).

In the regions of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, women face systemic discrimination entrenched in both legal frameworks and societal norms. These regulations and practices restrict women from fully engaging in public life and hinder their ability to compete equally in the labor market.

Underutilized female potential, evidenced by lower levels of education, employment opportunities, wages, and access to productive resources, suggests that the allocation of resources across the economy is not optimal. Timmer and McClelland (2004) argue that a major factor hindering significant economic advancement in the Muslim world is the relegation of women to a subordinate position within society, leading to a diminished utilization of the talents and energies of half of the population.

Despite significant advancements in education and health, women in the region continue to encounter gender discrimination that hampers their ability to fulfill their potential. This discrimination is ingrained to varying extents in cultural norms, governmental policies, and legal systems across different countries. Family laws in the region often institutionalized discrimination against women and girls, positioning them as subordinate to men within the family structure, a hierarchy that extends into the realms of economy and society. For instance, Korinek (2005) presents findings indicating that women face barriers in transitioning to higher-skilled, better-paying jobs during periods of trade liberalization due to limited access to resources, advanced education, and time (Romie and Bertsch 2013).

### 2.10.3 The Empirical Evidence

The Middle East is a good example of the existence of gender differences in labor market participation, which is well-supported by empirical evidence. Women generally enjoy lower rates of labor force participation than men due to the fact that many prevailing societal attitudes and cultural norms not only hinder, but also exclude women from partaking in jobs or career outside the house. This male-female gap is more explicit in some Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which could further curtail women's opportunity on the labor market because of the legal restrictions and the social norms ([Romie and Bertsch 2013](#)).

Besides, women in the Middle East are often the victims of occupational segregation which means that they are mainly concentrated in certain sectors such as education, healthcare and administrative support while men are usually in the construction, manufacturing and engineering industries. The segregation becomes a starting point for unequal payment and lack of chances for future career advancements, which in turn results in always present economic imbalances among sexes. Furthermore, women mainly take part in the informal sector in the Middle East, which is not safety for their job and social benefits, so that these women face the risk of poverty and security issues. Although the educational level and the rate of female participation in the workforce have increased, women still suffer from the wage gap which is the result of the segregation of certain occupations and discrimination in the process of negotiating the wages. The culminating aspect in more women to move ahead in their work careers becomes another obstacle of women access into the labor market. Female workers are faced with twofold challenges. First, they are deprived of the opportunities for leadership positions, mentorship programs, and vocational skill acquisition as a result of organizational restrictions and cultural stereotypes as well as societal expectations. The legal and cultural limits, such as the laws of male guardianship and the dress code, also make it more difficult for women to participate in the labor market in some of the Middle Eastern countries ([Dieckhoff et al. 2015](#)).

Moreover, there may be a problem of skills and labor market requirements of women not matching even though the levels of female education are increasing. A widening gap in the employment and rank can be expected for women. This leads to the growth of unemployment or underemployment within the educated women group. Eliminating these inequalities involves comprehensive actions and reforms which help in retrofitting the culture of gender equity provide women with equal opportunities and an environment where they can be productive and contribute in the development of the economy ([Dieckhoff et al. 2015](#)).

## 2.11 Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in Employment in MENA

### 2.11.1 Theoretical Background

Traditionally, when examining women's employment and attitudes toward gender equality in the MENA region, the cultural perspective often centered on the role of Islam. According to this view, women's limited employment opportunities were attributed to their inferior status and the absence of gender parity, which were believed to be influenced by Islamic laws, norms, and paternalistic attitudes (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2003). However, recent studies propose an alternative viewpoint: while Islam may not exert a significant impact on gender egalitarianism compared to other religious traditions, high levels of personal religious devotion (common in Islamic societies) might hinder gender equality (Seguino, 2010). Moreover, recent research indicates that conservative policies concerning women's legal rights may be more characteristic of the MENA region itself rather than exclusively of Muslim societies (Price 2015).

Another rationale for the low levels of women's employment in the MENA region revolves around economic factors. According to modernization theorists, countries undergo a series of developmental stages, with higher levels of development typically associated with cultural shifts towards greater gender equality (refer to Inglehart and Norris, 2003). The elevated unemployment rates in MENA could also contribute to the limited presence of women in the workforce (as indicated by Moghadam, 2003). More recent studies have proposed that the substantial dependence of many MENA nations on oil fosters an economic (and cultural) environment that does not favor women's participation in employment (Price 2015).

The demographic makeup of a population, such as total fertility rates and the proportion of women in higher education, can also impact attitudes towards women's employment. As women's educational attainment rises and gender disparities in literacy rates diminish, it is expected that attitudes towards gender equality in employment will become more egalitarian.

Another explanatory category centers on political factors that could influence women's employment rates. The MENA region's low levels of democracy might account for the restricted gender equality observed (Inglehart et al., 2002). Additionally, the representation of women in national legislatures is another political factor likely to affect gender attitudes (Price 2015).

### 2.11.2 The Importance of Attitudes

Various elements influence the employment rates and trends of women across different countries, ranging from demographic factors like the age distribution within a society to economic indicators such as unemployment rates. Additionally, attitudes regarding women's equal access to job opportunities, often termed as gender ideology or norms, play a significant role and are a crucial aspect of women's societal status, impacting their employment prospects.

Yet, although it seems reasonable to anticipate differences in gender role attitudes across nations, there is limited empirical data on the extent of these variations and the factors influencing gender-equal beliefs at both societal and individual levels.

These cultural beliefs hold significant importance as they can either challenge or uphold social disparities between genders, along with influencing the legal rights and institutional authority allotted to each gender. Gender ideology correlates with specific outcomes in political, economic, and cultural domains (Price 2015).

### 2.12 Gender Inequality in Iran

Gender disparities and inequalities arising from educational achievements and participation in the labor force remain prevalent and enduring. Despite potentially being rooted in stereotypes, they continue to influence fundamental rights such as access to education and employment opportunities for both men and women. These factors directly impact the extent of economic and social engagement, empowerment, and overall success for individuals of both genders (Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019).

The 21st century witnesses rapid technological advancements and innovation, driving unprecedented societal transformations. In this context, unique skills and talents are essential for fostering sustainable growth, necessitating efforts to create an inclusive environment. Failure to do so across public and private spheres, including business and education, would not only result in untapped talent but also hinder adaptation to ongoing changes and modernization. Economists underscore the pivotal role of three assets—fixed capital, human capital, and labor force—in economic growth, emphasizing the connection between economic development and gender disparities in fundamental human domains such as health, education, employment, and compensation (World Economic Forum, 2018).

They stress the correlation between economic growth and gender disparities across fundamental aspects of human life, including health, education, employment, and compensation. Some scholars

argue for the positive impact of gender inequality on economic development, while others (Lagerlöf, 2003) demonstrate its negative effects. They propose that the evolution of Europe, particularly in economic and social terms, in recent centuries has been linked to gradual changes in gender equality and the advancement of egalitarian societies. Undoubtedly, the relationship between gender equality (or inequality) and economic growth has been a subject of extensive debate in various contexts, irrespective of geographic location or socioeconomic conditions.

## 2.13 Female Labor Force Participation

### 2.13.1 FLFP in the world

Recent economic analyses (Ferrant, 2015) suggest that only when women and men equally participate and contribute to transformative global processes can economies and societies thrive. Gender inequality not only impedes economic growth but is also influenced by economic progress. Economic development is believed to mitigate gender disparities by removing barriers to women's entry into the job market, consequently reducing their unpaid caregiving workload, and by reshaping institutional norms (Ferrant, 2015). This underscores the interconnectedness between economic growth and gender equality. Numerous studies on women's employment highlight the critical role of economic development in advancing gender equality.

Gender disparities are frequently examined through the lens of economic opportunities available to and utilized by women and men, with one aspect being their involvement in the labor market. Over recent decades, the number of women engaged in paid work has steadily increased worldwide. In 1994, the global female labor force participation rate peaked at 51.5% for those aged 15 and above, slightly declining to 48.7% by 2017. An analysis conducted by Çağatay and Özler in 1995 explored the correlation between women's work, their representation in the labor force, and long-term economic growth. The study found that demographic and cultural factors significantly influence the degree of feminization in the workforce. Female labor force participation serves as both a crucial driver and outcome of growth and development, impacting not only economic metrics but also individual empowerment.

Women consistently work fewer hours in paid employment over their lifetimes compared to men, regardless of their educational level. Consequently, the return on investment in education tends to be much higher for men, who are able to fully capitalize on their university degrees. However, there have been notable changes in this dynamic, with female labor force participation experiencing

significant growth worldwide in recent decades. Women are increasingly occupying positions commensurate with their qualifications and educational attainment, as highlighted by (Romie and Bertsch 2013). Since the 1980s, there has been a positive trend among highly educated women, who are more inclined to participate in the workforce. Moreover, since the mid-1980s, when enrollment and participation rates became subjects of socio-demographic and economic analysis, researchers have observed a positive correlation between female labor force participation and the ratio of women to men in tertiary education enrollment.

### 2.13.2 FLFP in IRAN

At first glance, women in Iran comprise nearly half of the population and generally possess higher levels of education compared to men. However, their presence in the workforce and political arenas is notably lacking. Less than two out of every ten women are actively engaged in the workforce, and a mere 16% of legislators and senior positions are held by women in Iran. The most glaring example of gender disparity is observed in political decision-making, where only 3% of seats in the Iranian parliament are occupied by women (Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019).

Based on World Bank data, the rate of female employment in Iran was recorded at 10% in 1990 and increased to 17% by 2017. The substantial pool of well-educated women in Iran is regarded as an "untapped source of growth and productivity gains" according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2018. The IMF report highlights that a greater number of Iranian women engaging in the job market could lead to significant enhancements in the country's GDP, productivity, tax compliance, and other areas.

Halving the gender pay gap has the potential to increase GDP by up to 26% according to the IMF in 2018. Achieving this could involve addressing various challenges faced by women in Iran, including legal barriers to workforce participation, the pervasive gender wage gap as a stark indicator of workplace discrimination, and the lack of childcare subsidies for low-income working mothers.

In Iran, religious beliefs and ethnic biases significantly influence societal attitudes toward women's employment. Restrictions on women's access to certain occupations are present in the constitution, labor law, and civil law, as noted by Shavarini in 2006. Such cultural attitudes and policies pose threats to women's opportunities for labor market entry and the potential improvement of their quality of life (Shavarini, 2006).

Despite a considerable number of educated women in the Iranian workforce, female employment rates remain low. Only one in four women with a university degree holds a paid job, and this likelihood is even smaller for women without higher education credentials, as highlighted by Burkova in 2017. In 2017, female labor force participation (FLFP) stood at approximately 17%, a level lower than in countries with similar income per capita, including those within the Middle East and North Africa region, as outlined by the IMF in 2018.

Iran is often regarded as a country that has made strides in closing its gender gap concerning educational achievement, despite the fact that women face restrictions in accessing certain university courses or encounter gender-based limitations. Currently, there has been a minimal creation of new jobs in the Iranian private sector, which traditionally provided more employment opportunities for women compared to the public sector. Moreover, the country's heavy reliance on oil extraction and trade exacerbates the challenge of shifting this trend in employment opportunities for women.

According to reports from the IMF in 2018, although nearly six hundred thousand jobs were generated in Iran in 2017, the majority of these positions were geared towards low-skilled or agricultural workers, failing to align with the aspirations and skill sets of university-educated Iranian women. This discrepancy may lead to increased frustration among highly skilled women. Particularly concerning are the laws being enforced in Iran that emphasize the value of women as homemakers and recommend careers such as midwifery, medicine, or teaching as being most suitable for them.

In Iran, certain professions like laboratory science, electronic engineering, pharmacy, counseling, and translation have been deemed unsuitable for women due to perceptions of physical frailty, as noted by Sedghi in 2007. Additionally, societal constraints and gender discrimination contribute to women being more commonly employed in humanities and social sciences fields, which historically carry lower pay and prestige. Statistics from 2006 reveal a significant gender disparity in university course selection, with Iranian men three times more likely to enroll in engineering courses compared to women (40% versus 13%). Conversely, women were over twice as likely as men to opt for subjects in arts, humanities, education, or health-related fields, comprising 12% of men and 27% of women.

Entrepreneurship is viewed as a significant driver of economic growth in Iran, according to Faghih in 2017. Typically, the typical Iranian entrepreneur is young and male, with approximately 67% of emerging entrepreneurs in Iran characterized as risk-takers. While both male and female

entrepreneurs engage in networking within private circles, men tend to engage more extensively in public networking. Men often pursue entrepreneurship to elevate social status and increase family income, while women are motivated by personal aspirations, self-fulfillment, and a desire for empowerment, as highlighted by studies conducted by Jaimie, Sullivan, Chan Halbrendt, and Qingbin in 1998, and Hisrich, Peters, and Shepherd in 2005. Iranian female entrepreneurs prioritize financial security and stability alongside their entrepreneurial endeavors.

In Iranian civil law, the husband typically bears the economic responsibility for sustaining the family, covering expenses such as alimony, education, and training for children, as noted by Burkova in 2017. Furthermore, traditional gender roles dictate that the male assumes the role of the head of the family within marital relationships. The Iranian constitution acknowledges the spiritual and material value of women's roles in the family, emphasizing their contributions to childcare, household management, and their work at home. Additionally, it suggests promoting the employment of women, particularly in cultural, social, and administrative positions, to advance social justice and excellence. Another example of legal regulation regarding women's roles in Iran is seen in the draft bill titled "The Comprehensive Population and Family Excellence Plan" documented by Human Rights Watch in 2015. This bill proposes incentive packages to encourage marriage and childbearing but contains discriminatory provisions favoring married men with children in hiring practices, with no mention of women's occupations in law and political activities. The underrepresentation of women in political and managerial positions underscores their exclusion from decision-making processes in Iran, indicating a lack of recognition of their role in the development process, as highlighted by Rostami-Povey in 2016 ([Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019](#)).

#### 2.14 High Employment Gap & Low Education Gap in Iran

Iran, among various nations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) zone, has experienced a significant shift in the gender education gap since the early 2000s. According to Schwab et al. (2014), there has been notable progress (Schwab et al. 2014). By 2006, women's enrollment in higher education in Iran surpassed men's by 11 percent. However, despite this educational advancement, the gap between male and female employment in Iran is growing, as noted by Greig et al. (2006) (Greig et al.2006).



The trend shows that more women are choosing to remain at home rather than joining the workforce (Greig et al., 2006). In 2015, only 18 percent of women in Iran were participating in the labor force, as reported by Bekhouche et al (Bekhouche et al. 2015). Surprisingly, despite increasing levels of education among women, the female labor force participation rate in Iran has nearly halved since 2006 (Greig et al., 2006). Although a higher proportion of Iranian women now complete tertiary education compared to men, the country ranks among the five nations with the lowest female labor force participation rates worldwide.

It's evident that policies supporting women's access to higher education can have a positive impact on their participation in the labor force. Advocates of this viewpoint suggest that addressing the educational disparity between genders through policy reforms will create more opportunities for women in the workforce. This argument is supported by the trend observed in many Western nations, where increased female enrollment in higher education has corresponded with higher workforce participation rates. However, the example of Iran illustrates that not all countries have experienced a similar progression (Saman Rejali, 2016).

According to the article by Rejali, three primary factors contribute to the phenomenon of more women graduating from higher education institutions in Iran without a subsequent increase in their participation in the workforce. Firstly, deeply ingrained gender ideologies have created a societal division between public and private spheres, limiting women's roles primarily to the household, especially when the household doesn't rely on a second income. Secondly, even if women desire to enter the workforce, occupations are often stereotyped as either suitable or unsuitable for women, reinforcing gender biases. Thirdly, societal stigma against women in traditionally male-dominated professions is compounded by the practice of favoring connections in job placements, which hinders many qualified women from securing employment in their fields of study (Saman Rejali, 2016).

Some of these factors, like the influence of gender ideologies and the division between public and private spheres within households, are applicable beyond Iran and can be generalized to the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region- as discussed before-. These factors should be carefully considered in future policy efforts aimed at reducing the gender gap in labor force participation throughout the region.

Previously stated, closing the employment gap is an urgent step which must be taken.

As discussed before, narrowing the employment disparity has a favorable impact on a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (the economist, 2011).

Rejali also noted the importance of eliminating the employment gap. According to his paper Analytical studies demonstrate that economic output rises as the gender gap in employment diminishes. For instance, in the United States, having women in the workforce results in a GDP that is 25 percent higher compared to when they are not participating. Closing the remaining employment gap could potentially increase the US GDP by 9 percent. Additionally, encouraging women to join the workforce can address labor shortages. Furthermore, increased female labor force participation has a positive influence on the representation of women in senior roles, which in turn is associated with improved company performance. Lastly, women's integration into the workforce can enhance their involvement in the political sphere in terms of collective action, thus reinforcing women's rights (Saman Rejali, 2016).

Despite the policies under Ahmadinejad's presidency, there has been a significant increase in investments aimed at enhancing women's educational attainment in Iran and across the broader MENA region over the past decade (Schwab et al. 2014). Presently, Iran boasts a higher proportion of women enrolled in tertiary education compared to men. However, despite these strides in education, there remains a notable disparity in economic participation. While educational achievement levels are commendable in Iran, there's a stark contrast in workforce involvement (Figure 1). Fennell (2008) emphasizes the importance of examining the impact of education on the composition of the workforce. Unfortunately, in Iran's case, the female labor force participation rate has dramatically declined from 39 percent in 2006 to a mere 18 percent in 2015 (Greig et al 2006, Bekhouche et al., 2015). Conversely, male workforce participation has remained relatively stable over the past decade, ranging between 74 and 77 percent. Furthermore, a similar trend of gender inequality is reflected in the wage gap, with women earning approximately 17 cents for every dollar earned by men (Bekhouche et al., 2015). These indicators position Iran among the five countries with the lowest levels of female workforce participation (Schwab et al., 2014).

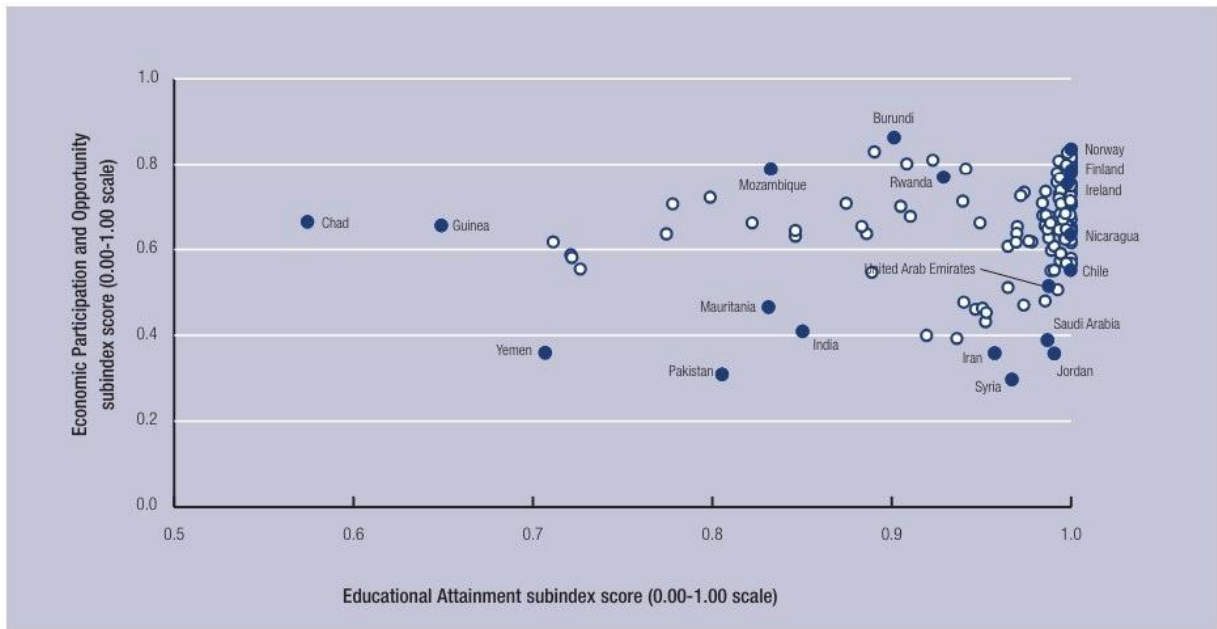


Figure1: workforce involvement according to educational attainment (global gender gap index, 2014)

On a regional scale, the combination of a narrow education gap and a wide employment gap seen in Iran is not an isolated occurrence. Similar trends are evident in other countries throughout the MENA region, such as Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Globally, 17 countries have notably struggled to narrow the economic participation and opportunity gap between genders. In each of these nations, less than half of this gap has been closed, with 11 of them located in the MENA region. Among these, Iran, Yemen, Jordan, and Syria occupy the bottom five positions in terms of progress made in closing this gap (Saman Rejali, 2016).

## 2.15 Unveiling the Factors High Employment Gap & Low Education Gap in Iran

What factors might contribute to the disparity between the higher number of women graduating from Iran's higher education institutions compared to men, yet only 23 women being hired for every 100 equally educated and skilled men (Schwab et al., 2014)? Despite Iran's narrow education gap, this does not notably influence its wide employment gap. Several other factors, aside from education, could elucidate why Iranian women with advanced degrees do not transition into the country's workforce.

1- To comprehend why educated Iranian women may choose to stay home instead of pursuing employment, it's essential to challenge the assumption that women pursue higher education solely

for career prospects. In Iran, there are various other reasons why women pursue university education. One alternative explanation is that obtaining higher education is viewed as a necessary prerequisite for marriage among women in Iran. According to Haghghat-Sordellini (2011), Iranian families often encourage their daughters to pursue higher education because obtaining a degree enhances their prospects of marrying a suitable partner with a similar or higher social status. This, in turn, contributes to the family's overall social standing (Saman Rejali, 2016).

Another attraction of higher education for Iranian women is the opportunity it provides to engage in activities between completing high school and getting married, while also serving as a platform for men and women to interact (Saman Rejali, 2016).

Given the restricted rights of women in Iran, attending university is increasingly perceived as the sole entitlement available to women within society. With freedoms being severely restricted, the "Islamic packaging" of higher education has led these institutions to be perceived as the sole "viable" avenues through which women can modify their public roles and status Haghghat-Sordellini (2011)

2- Despite universities promoting more gender-equitable perspectives, Iran remains predominantly patriarchal Haghghat-Sordellini (2011). Consequently, the prevailing belief is that men are the primary breadwinners responsible for providing financial support to their families. Hence, although many women pursue university degrees either to enhance their marriage prospects or to meet their future spouses, they often don't perceive a necessity to seek employment upon graduation unless the male breadwinner is unable to meet the household expenses. As highlighted by Haghghat-Sordellini (2011), there's little incentive for women to work outside the home, as regardless of their employment status, they are still expected to shoulder all domestic responsibilities (Olmsted, 2011). In numerous MENA countries, including Iran, the government sees reinforcing this public/private divide and patriarchal gender norms as more advantageous. Consequently, women are confined to domestic roles, where they continue to perform unpaid labor as homemakers and mothers, while men remain the primary providers (Becker, 1991).

3- In Iran, the patriarchal societal framework significantly influences the employment opportunities available to women, prioritizing men as primary breadwinners responsible for supporting dependents (Haghghat-Sordellini, 2011). This bias is further compounded by the gendered perception of occupations, where certain jobs are deemed more suitable for men, creating a scenario where higher education is a prerequisite but not sufficient for women seeking employment.

Several factors contribute to the gendered limitations on women's employment.

Firstly, men have access to a wider range of job opportunities, including male-only roles like taxi drivers or security guards, which do not necessitate college degrees, while female-friendly occupations are comparatively scarce (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011). Secondly, educated women face challenges in securing technical jobs due to the perception that men are more competent in these fields. Thirdly, employers often prefer to hire men due to concerns about societal acceptance of women's authority, reflected in the low female-to-male ratio in leadership positions (Schwab et al., 2014). Fourthly, women may encounter barriers due to a lack of connections, which are crucial for job procurement in Iran, or they may struggle to find relevant work, particularly in fields like humanities and social sciences.

In addition to the absence of suitable employment regulations (Vice Presidency, 2014), the patriarchal framework of society can foster an unwelcoming workplace atmosphere for women who opt for careers in the public domain. In such instances, an outcome of female labor force participation can be the exploitation of female workers by their employers.

## 2.16 Unravelling the Puzzle of Low Female Force Participation in Iran

### 2.16.1 The political-economic aspects

In Iran, the female labor force participation rate has decreased by over 30%. Laudati and Pesaran (2021) attribute this decline to the impact of trade and financial sanctions on the country's economy. The overall employment rate has dropped, with a particularly noticeable decrease in female labor force participation during times of heightened international pressure. Karshenas and Moghadam (2023) acknowledge the role of sanctions in this decline, along with the broader financial crisis faced by the government. However, they suggest that other significant factors influencing the low female labor force participation include insights from economic theory, feminist political economy, and institutionalism.

Considering Iran as a vast country with diverse regional characteristics including ethnicity and religiosity, it exhibits varied patterns of female labor force participation (FLFP) over time and across different regions. Several significant factors contribute to these patterns. Firstly, the rapid expansion of economically privileged para-statal institutions, controlled by the core clerical state, has diminished the financial resources of the central government, impacting women's employment opportunities. Secondly, the imposition of long-term U.S. sanctions and Iran's economic isolation

have influenced FLFP cycles. Economic isolation, combined with monopolistic control over industries by para-statal, has led to the growth of uncompetitive sectors, limiting female labor demand. However, the emergence of small private enterprises and high-tech services has created employment opportunities for educated women. Thirdly, the labor market institutions of the Islamic Republic have fostered a highly dualistic labor market, with women predominantly relegated to low-productivity, low-wage informal sectors, particularly affecting married women. Lastly, the masculinist ideology of the Islamic regime, reflected in discriminatory laws and practices, perpetuates formal and informal gender discrimination in the labor market. Additionally, substantial subsidies are provided to support patriarchal one-breadwinner households, further entrenching gender disparities in employment (Karshenas and Moghadam 2023).

### 2.17 Gender Pay Gap

Gender disparities are often attributed to differences in access to education, legal systems, and financial services, as highlighted by Hakura, Hussain, Newial, Thakoor, and Yang in 2016. Such inequalities can lead to lower representation of women in the job market, lower wages, and reduced political influence. The shifting landscape of employment, particularly with the rise of specialized jobs and the decline of middle-skill roles, has impacted the income levels of female workers. Ge, Isaac, and Miller's 2018 study on college graduates in the USA revealed that attending elite schools can significantly influence later-life outcomes, especially for women, with advanced degree attainment correlating with higher earnings but a reduced likelihood of marriage, likely due to higher partner expectations. Workplace segregation, both horizontal and vertical, persists, contributing to ongoing inequality in paid work, as discussed by Kompa and Witkowska in 2018. However, simplistic comparisons of earnings or productivity between genders may not capture the full extent of gender disparities.

Gender discrimination extends beyond mere differences in pay between men and women. It can manifest in various forms such as biased recruitment practices, occupational segregation, or human capital discrimination, where access to training and development opportunities is unequal, hindering the growth of human capital, as discussed by Kompa and Witkowska in 2018. Gąciarz in 2007 identifies several key factors contributing to gender discrimination, including the perception of women as "high-risk" workers who may prioritize maternal duties over work, perpetuated by the stereotype of men as family breadwinners. Additionally, gender stereotypes

limit women to traditionally feminine professions, often characterized by low pay, and contribute to barriers like the "glass ceiling" or "sticky floor," as observed by Zuo and Tang in 2000.

In Islamic tradition, women's labor encompasses three spheres: the household, formal employment, and the shadow economy. Family values and reproduction are prioritized over other occupations for women, as emphasized by recent government initiatives in Iran that commend mothers for their role in childbearing and childrearing. Official discourse emphasizes women's roles as educators of the Islamic community and highlights the significance of motherhood, perpetuating the idea of devout and pious mothers, as noted by Sedghi in 2007. Despite this elevated social position, Iranian women face economic violence, with limited access to formal employment leading to dependence on partners or relatives, restricted access to financial and healthcare services, and exclusion from decision-making processes, as reported by the Financial Tribune in 2017. Consequently, many women are compelled to seek paid work in the informal sector where there are fewer restrictions on their employment opportunities. While official reports suggest a formal employment rate for women of 13-16%, economists argue that this is significantly underestimated, as it does not account for informal or part-time work, which may be twice as prevalent. Iranian statistics reveal that 12% of households rely on women's contributions to the household income, and some women serve as sole breadwinners due to factors like husbands' addiction or absence, which often go unreported. Many of these informal jobs, typically in the service industry or small private enterprises, pose significant health and safety risks and offer below-standard pay and no benefits, as highlighted by the IMF in 2018.

According to the IMF in 2018, the shadow economy in Iran accounted for one-third of the country's GDP in 2016. Shahindokht Molaverdi, the vice president for women and family affairs, highlighted access to employment as a significant demand among Iranian women, as reported on the department's website. However, despite these efforts, Iran ranked 142nd out of 149 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2018 Global Gender Gap report, indicating a significant gap in gender equality compared to most other nations. Although Iran has made strides in closing the gender gap in education, it continues to face challenges in wage equality, labor force participation rates, and access to professional job markets ([Simkowska-Gawron and Momenfar 2019](#)).

## 2.18 Iranian women's LFP

### 2.18.1 Patterns and Trends

Married women represent the dominant group in Iran's Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) patterns, reflecting the country's high marriage rate. Over the period from 2005 to 2020, FLFP rates in urban areas remained relatively stable, around 14%. However, there were notable fluctuations within this timeframe: a peak of 15.5% in 2009, a decline to 12.8% in 2014, a rise to 15.5% in 2018, and then a drop to 14.1% in 2020. Similar cyclical shifts were observed in male participation rates during this period. This highlights the influence of economic cycles on labor force participation, a factor often overlooked in FLFP discussions.

Figure 1 illustrates the average Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) rates from 2005 to 2020 across different age groups in Iran, alongside data from Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, and Korea, sourced from the ILO's Global Wage Report 2018. Noteworthy aspects of Iran's FLFP depicted in Figure 1 include: (a) consistently lower participation rates across all age groups compared to the comparator countries, and (b) a significant decline in Iranian women's participation rates starting around the 25-30 age group, persisting until retirement age. Figure 2 confirms the recurrence of this trend throughout the years from 2005 to 2020. (Karshenas and Moghadam 2023)

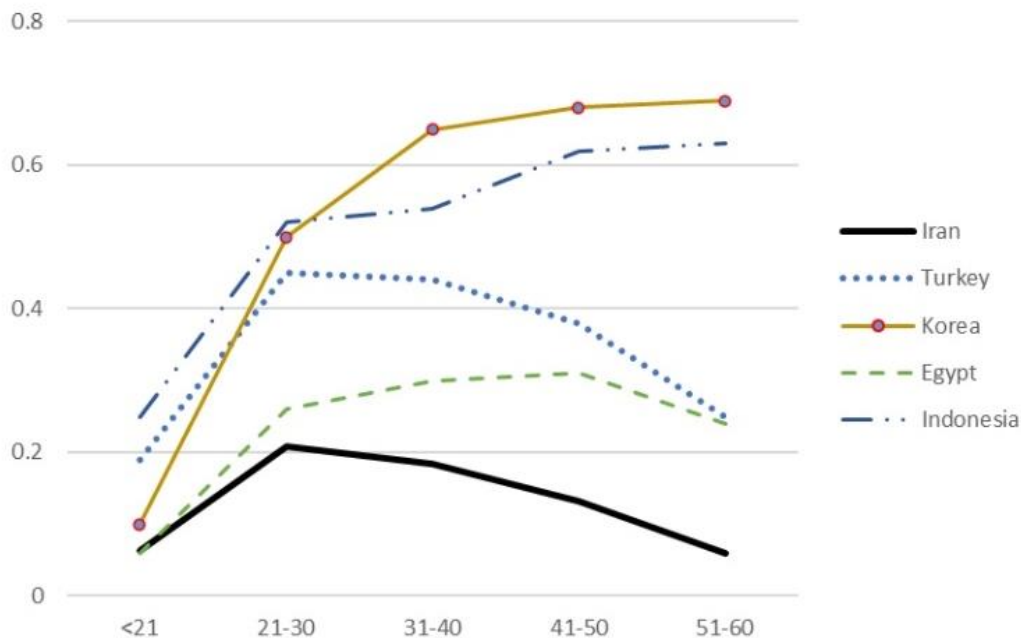


Figure 2: Female labor force participation in Iran and other countries, 21-60 age groups



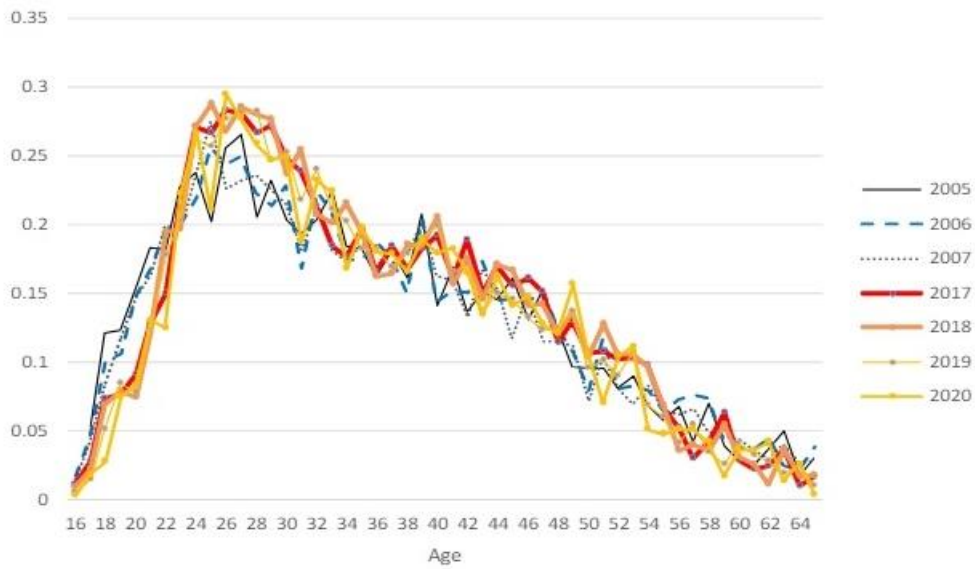


Figure 3: FLF by age and period, 2005-2020 (HIES, SCI)

Another notable feature is the limited involvement of women with education levels below secondary schooling. Table 2 illustrates FLFP trends categorized by education and marital status. It is evident that women with educational attainment below university level exhibit notably low labor force participation, especially among married women. This finding holds significance as the majority of working-age women in Iran possess educational qualifications below the secondary level (Karshenas and Moghadam 2023).

Figure 3 illustrates participation rates among unmarried and married women, alongside the proportion of married women across different age groups from 2005 to 2020. Unmarried women exhibit significantly higher participation rates, peaking between 50-60%, while married women's rates barely exceed 10% on average. As more women marry within the 20-30 age range, participation rates among married women decline, contributing to an inverted-V curve pattern.

Notably, the lower participation of married women compared to men is not due to educational differences, as both genders have achieved parity in secondary and university education (Karshenas and Moghadam 2023).

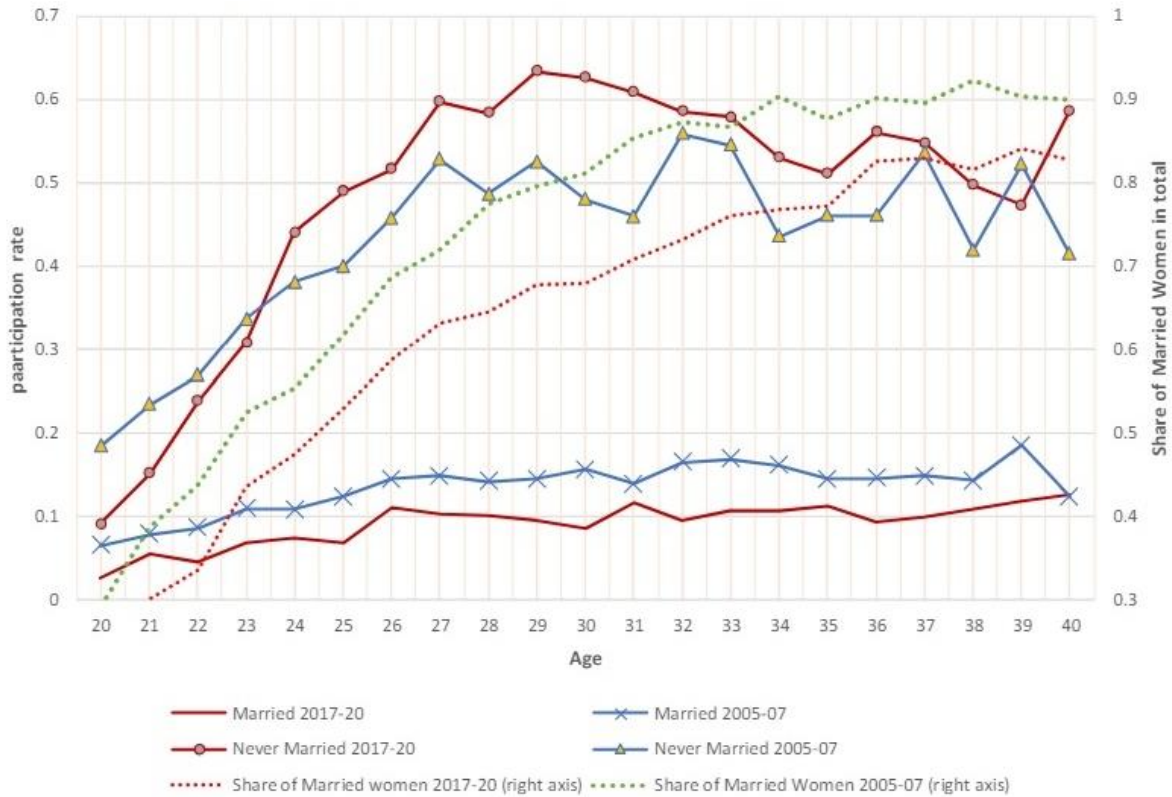


Figure 4: Labor force participation of married and never-married women and share of married women by age, 2005-7 and 2018-20 average (HIES, 2005-2020, SCI, Markas Amar)

### 2.19 Employment Frameworks

The discussion surrounding the limited rates of self-employment among women delves into various factors, including discriminatory practices and structural challenges within the economic landscape. The limited prevalence of self-employment has been attributed to discriminatory practices across various spheres, such as challenges in accessing credit, obtaining official business licenses, and restricted wealth accumulation due to unequal inheritance laws and other discriminatory regulations. (Khosravi, 2017) Additionally, factors such as high costs and limited space in densely populated urban areas, as well as the absence of vocational training opportunities for women, could further contribute to this trend. The low and decreasing proportion of self-employed individuals among total female employment raises concerns, as self-employment typically offers more flexible working arrangements that can alleviate some of the fixed costs associated with Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) compared to wage employment (Karshenas and Moghadam 2023).

The proportion of women employed as wage workers in urban areas increased notably from 2005 to 2020, reaching over 82%, while the percentage of male wage workers fluctuated between 60-70% during this period. Concurrently, there was a significant decrease in women's employment in government positions, alongside a rise in their engagement in the private sector. The decline in government employment for both genders, from 56% to 34% for women and from 33% to 19% for men, is attributed to financial pressures on the government, partly due to U.S. (Karshensa, Moshaver, 2012) sanctions and the influence of tax-exempt parastatal institutions (bonyad). Government expenditure as a share of GDP dropped substantially from 22% in 2005 to 10% in 2020, impacting both employment opportunities and wages within the government sector.

Due to limited opportunities in the public sector, women in the MENA region have increasingly turned to the private sector for employment, despite weaker labor protections. Figure 5 illustrates that the rise in female employment between 2005-2020 is solely attributable to increases in private sector employment, which followed cyclical patterns coinciding with U.S. sanctions. Meanwhile, government employment trends remained relatively stagnant. By 2020, female government employment had slightly decreased compared to 2005, despite a notable increase in the proportion of university-educated employees. The decline in government employment for women without university education averaged 40%, indicating a negative annual growth rate of -3.4%.

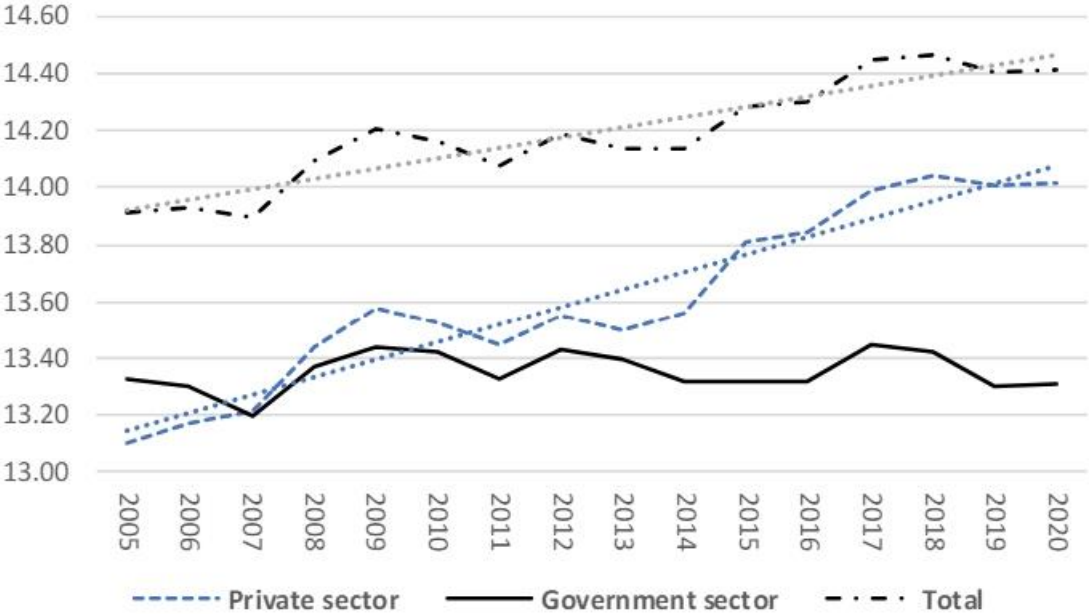


Figure5: Women’s employment trends, 2005-2020(HIES, 2005-2020, SCI)

All above discussions highlight the challenges faced by women in accessing self-employment opportunities in the MENA region, attributed to discriminatory practices and structural barriers such as limited access to credit and vocational training. Despite the potential benefits of self-employment, the proportion of self-employed women remains low, raising concerns about economic inclusivity. Conversely, there has been a notable increase in women's participation in wage employment in urban areas, alongside a decline in government positions. This shift towards the private sector, influenced by factors like U.S. sanctions, underscores the evolving employment landscape for women. However, concerns persist regarding weaker labor protections in the private sector. Efforts to address these challenges and ensure equitable opportunities for women across sectors are crucial for fostering sustainable economic growth and gender equality in the region (Karshenas and Moghadam 2023).

## 2.20 Conclusion

The intertwining of political economy and institutional characteristics within the Islamic Republic of Iran creates a detrimental cycle that hampers Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) and impedes economic advancement.

The tightening of public finances due to the expansion of institutions overseen by the theocratic central state has resulted in a deprivation of essential public services within the economy. Simultaneously, reduced spending on crucial sectors like healthcare, education, and other social services, which typically employ a significant number of women, has led to a decline in female employment within the public sector. This trend has contributed to a decrease in Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP).

A growing proportion of educated young women, facing unemployment or employment in low-wage, low-productivity sectors with significantly lower wages than men, often exit the labor market upon marriage and childbirth. Economic isolation, discriminatory legislation, and the government's masculinist ideology are additional significant factors contributing to low Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) and economic regression. The reliance on price subsidies for essential goods and direct cash transfers to support patriarchal family structures only exacerbates this detrimental cycle (Khosravi, 2017).

However, "external" factors and influences cannot be dismissed. Particularly in Iran's context, the economic crisis resulting from U.S.-imposed sanctions, especially under Trump's "maximum pressure" sanctions, exacerbated the masculinist inclinations of the Islamic regime, further disadvantaging women. In line with existing scholarship, it is clear that sanctions disproportionately impact ordinary citizens over political elites and economists who have extensively studied the ramifications of sanctions on women's employment and overall citizen welfare (Karshenas and Moghadam ).

The report of the World Bank in 2012, highlighted the economic repercussions of women's exclusion from paid employment. According to a 2012 report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Asia-Pacific region incurred annual losses ranging from USD 42 to 47 billion due to women's restricted access to employment, surpassing losses of USD 16 to 30 billion per year attributed educational inequality (UN-ESCAP 2012) . Estimates specific to Iran suggest that, on average, each country in the MENA region experienced a net GDP loss of approximately 32 percent between 1980 and 2010 due to the low women labor force participation (FLFP) rates.

For a nation like Iran, struggling with both sanctions and slow economic growth, it is illogical to withhold economic opportunities from its educated female populace. However, effecting change requires fundamental institutional overhauls. At a minimum, reforms must address wage-setting mechanisms and family laws that undermine women's rights in both public and private spheres, perpetuating conservative perceptions regarding women, employment, and family roles. Following recent protests, the likelihood of such institutional transformations occurring through either radicalized social movements or government policy reforms remains uncertain.

## Chapter 3

### Self Employed Women

#### 3.1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship drives positive change by not only enhancing individual prosperity but also reshaping the entire economic landscape, generating new growth opportunities and shaping the future (Giglio, 2021). It equips individuals to transform their innovative concepts into thriving businesses, create more jobs, and spur economic development (Saeedikiya and Aeeni, 2020). [\(Nigam and Shatila 2023\)](#) Entrepreneurship is recognized as crucial for regional and national development and is promoted by policymakers worldwide to stimulate economic growth. This is achieved through the creation of innovative products and services, which generate new markets and jobs. Globally, there has been an increase in policy interventions encouraging new venture creation at state, regional, and local levels, contributing to sustainable growth and wealth creation. Since women constitute approximately half of the global population their growing involvement in economic activities is widely believed to shift the power dynamics within households, enhance their access to financial resources, promote their participation in decision-making, and expand their opportunities for civic engagement (Altan-Olcay, 2015).

Despite these advancements, a significant gender gap persists, with relatively few women participating in entrepreneurship (Luckerath-Rovers, 2013). This disparity is even more pronounced in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where studies on women's business aspirations are still in their early stages, highlighting the particularly low number of female entrepreneurs in the region. This is the reason why Understanding self-employed women in the context of gender injustice is important. A concept can help in understanding the barriers faced by self-employed women in turn help in policy changes and legal improvement for self-employed women and therefore improving their status and agency in the society. This type of research provides academic value and contributes to more appropriate educational initiatives for women entrepreneurship advancement. This also supports global development objectives in terms of Women's Economic Empowerment and Gender Equality, to foster longer and sustainable development, creating a fair and more inclusive society.

### 3.2 Definition of Entrepreneurs

The definition of an entrepreneur is not universally agreed upon among university researchers (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999). An entrepreneur is typically seen as someone who can identify and assess business opportunities, gather the necessary resources, and take actions to ensure their success (Blawatt, 1995). Timmons (1990) describes an entrepreneur as an individual who starts and runs a business with the aim of growing and profiting from it, characterized by innovation and strategic management practices. This definition emphasizes the importance of starting a business from scratch. However, Lavoie (1988) expands this definition to include those who purchase or inherit shares of a business. He defines a female entrepreneur as "a woman who, alone or with partners, has founded, purchased, or inherited a business, assumes its financial, administrative, and social responsibilities, and participates in its daily management."

According to Lavoie and Timmons an entrepreneur is both the owner and manager of a business (Lavoie, 1988; Timmons, 1990). Consequently, a woman entrepreneur can be defined as any woman who, either alone or with partners, has established, purchased, or inherited a business, takes on the financial, administrative, and social decision-making responsibilities, and is involved in its management and growth for profit.

### 3.3 Gender Inequality

Entrepreneurship plays a vital role in reducing poverty in developing economies. However, inequality can undermine these efforts by affecting the overall levels of entrepreneurship within a society. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) support entrepreneurship as a means to lift women out of poverty and help eradicate gender inequality. Economic inequality, defined as the uneven distribution of financial resources, is critical for business success. Access to financial resources facilitates credit and equity capital, acquisition of necessary resources, and helps start-ups overcome initial challenges. Thus, varying degrees of inequality across nations can lead to different levels of entrepreneurship.

There are notable differences in entrepreneurial levels between men and women, with women engaging in fewer entrepreneurial activities, having lower growth expectations, and owning smaller businesses compared to men. Globally, men are more likely to establish innovative, growth-oriented organizations. Since inequality significantly influences entrepreneurial activities,



addressing "gender inequality" is essential to understand and bridge the gender gap in entrepreneurship.

Various international organizations offer measures and rankings for global gender inequality. In 2010, the UN introduced the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which indicates the percentage of potential human development lost due to gender inequality and quantifies its cost. The World Economic Forum (WEF) also assesses gender equality through its Global Gender Gap Index, relating it to health, economic opportunities, and political empowerment. According to the latest WEF report, gender inequalities have increased in the MENA region since 2008, placing it in the bottom quartile globally. Key comparisons include labor force participation, with a global average of 54% for women (compared to 81% for men). Additionally, women earn significantly less than men—50% less on average—despite working longer hours and performing most unpaid labor, such as childcare.

Political empowerment for women has seen a slight increase, with women holding 23% of parliamentary seats worldwide on average. However, only two countries have achieved gender parity in parliamentary representation, and only four have parity in ministerial roles. The WEF predicts that gender inequality in the MENA region will likely rise further due to technological advancements from the fourth industrial revolution, which are expected to disproportionately affect sectors with a predominantly female workforce.

### 3.4 Barriers and Obstacles Entrepreneur Women Face

Without the necessary knowledge about entrepreneurship, women may struggle to make well-informed decisions, lack self-confidence, and be less motivated to start a business (Dong et al., 2021). Additionally, women often face challenges in securing financing, which can further impact their motivation to launch a company. A lack of social and professional networks can also discourage women from taking the risk of starting their own businesses. Developing dynamic capabilities is crucial for enhancing women's entrepreneurial intentions. Women entrepreneurs with strong dynamic capabilities, such as recognizing emerging business opportunities and adapting to volatile market conditions, are more likely to stay committed to their ventures. While challenges like insufficient knowledge and experience are common when starting a new business, dynamic capabilities can help women entrepreneurs overcome these obstacles. Those with well-developed



dynamic capacities are better equipped to respond to changing market conditions and adjust their business strategies accordingly. ([Nigam and Shatila 2023](#))

#### 3.4.1 Theoretical Framework and Development

One barrier to women's start-up intentions is the lack of funding, as investors often perceive women entrepreneurs as riskier. Women may struggle more to secure funding due to insufficient networks, unlike their male counterparts (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). Additionally, women entrepreneurs may have difficulty accessing the networking opportunities needed to launch and grow their businesses (Patra and Lenka, 2022). This lack of capital can hinder their ability to develop an enterprise strategy, secure physical space, purchase equipment, and hire employees, making it more challenging to implement business plans (Shah et al., 2021).

#### 3.4.2 The Impact of Knowledge on Women's Entrepreneurial Start-Up Intention

Women entrepreneurs often face difficulties in advancing their education and careers due to gender prejudice and discrimination. However, if provided with the resources for education and professional development, they can better prepare themselves for business success (Shah et al., 2021).

Although research on the impact of human capital on entrepreneurial activity and decision-making has primarily focused on men, studies on the influence of education on women's entrepreneurial aspirations are still in their early stages. According to Nigam et al. (2022), entrepreneurs with high levels of general and specialized human capital are more likely to succeed compared to those with lower levels. Hessels and Terjesen (2008) described this as "entrepreneurial human capital," which is based on an individual's education, training, and work history. Mayr et al. (2020) noted that a lack of knowledge significantly affects entrepreneurs' readiness and ability to launch and sustain a business. Without a proper understanding of the industry, market, or financial aspects, entrepreneurs may be less willing to take the risks associated with starting a firm. Additionally, insufficient knowledge can make it harder for entrepreneurs to develop a robust business strategy, secure funding, and successfully establish a new venture (Mosquera and Da Palma, 2020).

Insufficient knowledge can lead to poor decision-making among women entrepreneurs, potentially damaging their self-esteem (Setini et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for them to acquire as much information as possible (Patra and Lenka, 2022). These factors may collectively discourage individuals from pursuing entrepreneurship (Saeedikiya and Aeeni, 2020). According to

Mashapure et al. (2022), a lack of knowledge can negatively impact decision-making among women entrepreneurs, resulting in subpar performance or even business failure (Setini et al., 2021). Women entrepreneurs may struggle with decision-making because they lack understanding of financial management and legal requirements, as well as the risks and responsibilities associated with business ownership (Mashapure et al., 2022). Moreover, they may face challenges in accessing necessary tools and support for informed decision-making and business expansion if they are unaware of available networking and mentoring opportunities (Patra and Lenka, 2022). Based on existing research, it is apparent that women in Lebanon are less likely to embrace an entrepreneurial mindset due to knowledge gaps, leading to the formulation of our initial hypothesis. ([Nigam and Shatila 2023](#))

### 3.4.3 The Impact of Networking on Women's Entrepreneurial Start-Up Intention

Networking can significantly influence women's entrepreneurial intentions by providing access to valuable resources, knowledge, and support. Benefits include connecting with potential customers, partners, and investors; gaining industry and market insights; forming relationships with experienced businesspeople and mentors; and meeting prospective collaborators and team members. Women, in particular, can gain from networking by obtaining data, support, and opportunities, which helps mitigate issues like lack of self-confidence and social isolation. Additionally, networking enables individuals to discover and utilize new opportunities, resources, and best practices essential for starting and maintaining a business. Through networking, women can identify and pursue new business opportunities and establish crucial relationships and support networks necessary for launching their ventures.

Women entrepreneurs encounter challenges that networking can help alleviate (Dong et al., 2021; Gashi et al., 2022). Networking with other entrepreneurs can provide women with essential knowledge and support for launching and growing their ventures (Patra and Lenka, 2022). Expanding their professional and personal networks can enhance their chances of success and increase their determination to start businesses. However, women often face difficulties in making connections due to the tendency towards segregated networks (Brass, 1985). Aldrich (1989) and Brush and Hisrich (1991) noted that women typically associate with other women in their networks, which can be problematic since men generally dominate entrepreneurial networks. Setini et al. (2021) observed that men's failure to build networks with other business owners and mentors can

hinder their professional growth and access to crucial resources (Dong et al., 2021). Hattab (2012) defined social capital as networks and relationships that assist women entrepreneurs in finding mentors, partners, and investors, facilitating knowledge exchange, effective business strategies, and increasing entrepreneurial intention. A significant barrier for women starting businesses is the lack of access to finance and investors. This leads to our second hypothesis. ([Nigam and Shatila 2023](#))

#### 3.4.4 The Impact of Funding on Women's Entrepreneurial Start-Up Intention

Access to funding can significantly impact women's entrepreneurial intentions, providing the necessary means to launch and grow their businesses (Dong et al., 2021). Without sufficient financial resources, women entrepreneurs may struggle to develop a business strategy, secure a location, purchase equipment, and hire employees, making it challenging to start their ventures (Giglio, 2021). Nwagu and Onwuatuegwu (2021) identify lack of funding as a major obstacle affecting women's intentions to start businesses, as women have less access to venture capital and other traditional financing sources compared to men (Dong et al., 2021). This disparity can make attracting investors more difficult due to perceived additional risks and assumptions about women's financial and management skills (Patra and Lenka, 2022).

Consequently, women entrepreneurs may need to be more innovative and resourceful in securing financial support, utilizing crowdfunding, grants, incubators, and creative fundraising strategies (Nwagu and Onwuatuegwu, 2021). Without adequate funding, women-led businesses may struggle to invest in equipment, advertising, and salaries (Coleman et al., 2019), leading to feelings of financial insecurity and reducing motivation and confidence to start and grow their businesses (Shah et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2021).

Access to sufficient capital can profoundly influence women's entrepreneurial intentions, allowing them to test the market, develop viable products, and expand their firms. Adequate funding enables investments in research and development, manufacturing, marketing, and sales (Patra and Lenka, 2022). Women entrepreneurs with enough funding can hire consultants, participate in training and networking opportunities, and invest in necessary hardware and software, aiding business growth with the support of dedicated teams (Mashpure et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2021; Mosquera and Da Palma, 2020). This financial stability can attract more customers, partners, and future employees, helping the business to launch, test its market, and expand if successful (Shah et al., 2021).

Overall, women often need to spend more money than men while having fewer resources to succeed in their careers without facing sexual or physical harassment. Those lacking the financial means for necessary paperwork and information are excluded from participating in the global economy. The research also indicates that women encounter prejudice from various institutions, including suppliers, banks, and governmental and non-governmental organizations. Empirical analysis shows that dynamic capabilities, networks, and sufficient financing are crucial for women-led businesses to launch export operations. However, they are often protected from the impacts of technological advancements, changing business climates, and new laws and regulations. The survey concluded that the main obstacles for women in Lebanon starting their own businesses are a lack of networking opportunities, financing, and education. [\(Nigam and Shatila 2023\)](#)

### 3.5 Gender Inequality: Entrepreneurship Development in the MENA Region

Entrepreneurship is recognized as crucial for regional and national development and is promoted by policymakers worldwide to stimulate economic growth. This is achieved through the creation of innovative products and services, which generate new markets and jobs. Globally, there has been an increase in policy interventions encouraging new venture creation at state, regional, and local levels, contributing to sustainable growth and wealth creation.

Aligned with these trends, more women are starting or owning businesses. However, entrepreneurship rates vary significantly between countries, with differing numbers of men and women entering freelance activities and continuing business ventures. Specifically, in the MENA region, the number of female entrepreneurs lags behind that of men. Women in this region are often motivated by economic necessity rather than business opportunities, unlike their male counterparts. (Shah et al., 2021).

The state of female entrepreneurship globally reflects pronounced gender inequalities in the external environment, leading to unequal access to resources and opportunities. Gender inequality is defined as the unequal treatment of men and women, resulting in gender-based discrimination in their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Countries with high gender inequality often fail to recognize the diverse interests, needs, and priorities of men and women. This inequality has negatively impacted various human development indicators, prompting the inclusion of "gender equality" as a central goal in the UN 2030 sustainability agenda. [\(Bastian et al. 2019\)](#)

### 3.6 Gender Inequality in the MENA Region

MENA is a large region with about 360 million inhabitants. The MENA region consists of 22 countries, 10 of which are located along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Economically, this region includes countries that are rich in natural resources.

MENA countries exhibit some of the highest gender inequalities globally. Despite closing 60% of the gender gap, a 40% gap remains. Significant social and economic changes such as urbanization, industrialization, increased female education, and lower fertility rates have occurred, yet disparities persist in men's and women's participation and access to economic and political opportunities. All MENA countries signed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and are committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including promoting gender equality and empowering women. This commitment has led to female literacy rates reaching the global average of 80%, substantial investment in girls' and women's education, and increased female enrollment in secondary and higher education, surpassing male enrollment. Despite these advancements, women in the MENA region continue to face significant challenges in the labor market. ([Bastian et al. 2019](#))

Country	Women (Value %)			Female/Male TEA Ratio	Female/Male Opportunity Driven TEA Ratio
	Labour Force Participation	Employment to Population Ratio	Unemployment Rate		
Egypt	22.5 (2015)	17 (2015)	24.2 (2015)	0.36 (2016)	1.04 (2016)
Turkey	32.3 (2016)	28 (2016)	13.6 (2016)	0.46 (2016)	0.96 (2016)
Pakistan	21.9 (2016)	22.7 (2016)	6.1 (2015)	0.06 (2012)	-
Iran	19.1 (2016)	11.8 (2016)	20.7 (2016)	0.47 (2016)	0.95 (2016)
Algeria	13.5 (2016)	13.5 (2016)	20.7 (2016)	0.51 (2013)	1.08 (2013)
Tunisia	26.7 (2016)	19.7 (2013)	23 (2013)	0.43 (2012)	0.93 (2015)
Saudi Arabia	21.4 (2015)	16.8 (2015)	21.4 (2015)	0.75 (2016)	1.03 (2016)
UAE	42.1 (2009)	37.5 (2009)	10.8 (2009)	0.56 (2016)	0.95 (2016)
Qatar	13.6 (2009)	60.5 (2009)	0.7 (2009)	0.84 (2016)	1.17 (2016)

Table2: Available facts about women and work in the Mena region

In the MENA region, female participation in entrepreneurship is among the lowest globally, with only 4% of entrepreneurial activity involving women. In most MENA countries, men are

significantly more likely to start businesses, outnumbering women-led businesses by two-thirds. Women-led businesses are also 60% more likely to operate as single-person enterprises without additional employees. Additionally, women have demonstrated less ambition in advancing and growing their companies compared to men. ([Bastian et al. 2019](#))

### 3.7 Gender Inequality and Entrepreneurial Intention

"Entrepreneurial intention" is a key factor in an individual's willingness and perceived ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities. It represents a cognitive plan for future actions aimed at establishing new ventures or creating new value within existing companies. This intention is influenced by both the desirability and feasibility of entrepreneurial action. Desirability relates to norms and personal attitudes towards entrepreneurial activities, while feasibility refers to an individual's belief in their capability to carry out these activities. Norms, which heavily influence behavior, play a significant role in shaping positive motivation for entrepreneurship by considering the beliefs of others (Shah et al., 2021).

Research highlights several individual-level factors that precede entrepreneurial intention. These include "individual risk-taking" and "entrepreneurial role models," which affect the desirability of entrepreneurship. Factors related to the feasibility of entrepreneurship include "perceived capabilities," "opportunity recognition," and "experience with business discontinuity." The interactions between these factors and gender inequality also impact entrepreneurial intention (Dong et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence from the MENA region indicates that women's life choices, including entrepreneurship, are strongly influenced by their perception of what is socially acceptable for different genders. Research highlights that societies in this region are highly gendered due to the interplay of culture, patriarchy, and religion (primarily Islam), which fosters predominantly conservative orientations. These orientations significantly limit female agency and opportunities. In many MENA countries, institutionalized norms enforce gender inequality, relegating women to restricted roles and generating negative attitudes toward their employment and professional advancement ([Nigam and Shatila 2023](#)).

Traditional gendered assumptions often dictate that men should be decisive while women should focus on personal relationships and intuition. These societal expectations confine women to homemaking and childcare roles, creating a clash with entrepreneurial activities. A literature review

on female entrepreneurship in the MENA region points to additional barriers rooted in these social norms. Many women, regardless of their social status, frequently need to negotiate their professional roles with their husbands and extended families, ensuring that family obligations are met alongside their jobs (Mashapure et al., 2022). Balancing family expectations and business engagements is a significant concern for women in the region, often perceived as a greater obstacle than access to capital or societal attitudes towards entrepreneurship. Furthermore, certain religious traditions grant men considerable authority over women regarding financial responsibilities, inheritance, marriage, and divorce ([Nigam and Shatila 2023](#)).

### 3.8 The Characteristics of Women Who Enter Entrepreneurship

The primary theme identified in the literature pertains to the traits of women entrepreneurs. The studies reviewed indicate that entrepreneurship has generally not been a common career path for local citizens (Erogul 2014), and even less so for women, as it is seen as a relatively new phenomenon in this context (Tlaiss 2015). Traditionally, both men and women have pursued careers in the public sector, which is known for high pay and low productivity (Ennis 2019a). Research shows that there have been ongoing reforms in laws and regulations to support women entering the public sphere, with the goal of encouraging their active participation in the national economy. These reforms include increasing women's literacy rates, modifying restrictive laws, reducing women's dependence on male guardians, introducing initiatives to attract young people and women to entrepreneurship as an alternative career path, and providing funding along with establishing incubation centers to foster innovation. Despite these regulatory and economic advancements, patriarchal and societal norms, attitudes, and values regarding gender roles have largely remained unchanged (Barragan, Erogul, and Essers 2018). Nevertheless, women's academic achievements continue to surpass those of men in this context (Faisal, Jabeen, and Katsioloudes 2017).

Some studies indicate that despite the negative perceptions of women in nontraditional roles like entrepreneurship, women remain undeterred. They demonstrate significant resilience by showing confidence (Kemppainen 2019), expressing satisfaction with their accomplishments (Itani, Sidani, and Baalbaki 2011), and exhibiting enthusiasm (Ahmad 2011b). Women also rate themselves highly in interpersonal relations, idea generation, product development, general management, and organizational skills (Welsh et al. 2014). Furthermore, they display a stronger inclination towards



entrepreneurship (Danish and Smith 2012) and a higher risk-taking tendency than men, challenging typical findings on women in entrepreneurship (Majumdar and Varadarajan 2013). These women navigate social challenges with persistence and determination without directly opposing the prevailing norms and culture ([Hashim 2023](#)).

### 3.9 The Motivations of Women Who Enter Entrepreneurship

The second key theme focuses on women's motivations for pursuing entrepreneurial activities. Research indicates that women entrepreneurs are primarily drawn to entrepreneurship by self-fulfillment motives rather than economic reasons (Alexandre and Kharabsheh 2019). Economic motivations are secondary, except for divorced women, who prioritize economic necessity (McElwee and Al-Riyami 2003). Additionally, women pursue entrepreneurship to gain control over their personal and professional lives (Erogul and McCrohan 2008) and to balance work and family life (Jabeen, Das, and Katsiolouides 2015). A comparative study of Emirati women entrepreneurs and other Arab women in the UAE found that Emirati women are attracted to entrepreneurship, whereas other Arab women are driven by necessity (Naguib and Jamali 2015). Interestingly, some studies show no significant difference between men's and women's entrepreneurial intentions (Ahmed, Amponsah, and Johnson 2019), and research on university students reveals a strong entrepreneurial drive among both genders, with women showing a higher need for achievement (Majumdar and Varadarajan 2013). In Saudi Arabia, both male and female university students are motivated by economic reasons, although male students have a wider range of entrepreneurial motivations (Almobaireek and Manolova 2013).

### 3.10 The Ventures of Women Who Enter Entrepreneurship

The third key theme involves the types of ventures established by women entrepreneurs. Studies show a noticeable rise in women entrepreneurs in the UAE over the past decade, largely due to government initiatives promoting entrepreneurship. Most of these businesses are sole proprietorships (Ghouse, McElwee, and Durrah 2019), although many also involve family members as shareholders. The sectors these businesses operate in include services (Alexandre and Kharabsheh 2019), retail, manufacturing, oil and gas, information technology, and logistics (Jabeen, Das, and Katsiolouides 2015).



In conclusion, the literature on women entrepreneurs in the UAE highlights their resilience and confidence despite societal challenges, primarily driven by self-fulfillment and personal control, with economic necessity secondary. There is a notable rise in women-led ventures across diverse sectors, supported by government initiatives. These themes underscore the dynamic and evolving landscape of female entrepreneurship in the UAE. [\(Hashim 2023\)](#)

### 3.10.1 Challenges

Many of the reviewed studies address the multifaceted challenges that women face in this context at various levels. On the macro and societal level, these challenges include security and political concerns, such as instability and conflicts, which can create an environment of uncertainty that hinders entrepreneurial activities (Barragan, Erogul, and Essers 2018). Bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of coordination among government institutions further complicate the entrepreneurial landscape by creating red tape and slowing down business processes (Almobaireek and Manolova 2013).

The absence of comprehensive market studies means that women entrepreneurs often lack critical information about market demands, competition, and potential opportunities, making it harder for them to strategize effectively (Sadi and Al-Ghazali 2010). Patriarchal religious interpretations and male guardianship requirements impose additional constraints by limiting women's autonomy and decision-making power. These legal and cultural barriers can restrict women's ability to travel, access funding, and enter into contracts independently.

Sociocultural constraints and prevailing attitudes towards gender roles also play a significant role in shaping the entrepreneurial landscape. Traditional views on gender can lead to a lack of support from family and society, making it challenging for women to balance their entrepreneurial ambitions with societal expectations (Barragan, Erogul, and Essers 2018). These attitudes can manifest in various forms of discrimination and bias, both overt and subtle, which can undermine women's confidence and deter them from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. [\(Hashim 2023\)](#)

Overall, these macro-level challenges create a complex web of obstacles that women entrepreneurs must navigate, highlighting the need for targeted policies and support systems to address these issues and promote gender equality in entrepreneurship. [\(Hashim 2023\)](#)

### 3.11 Factors Influencing the Entrepreneurial Dynamism of Women

In the MENA region, the political, economic, and socio-cultural context often impedes women entrepreneurs from achieving their goals, raising questions about their motivations and how this context can better support entrepreneurship. The literature identifies various factors influencing female entrepreneurship, including political, economic, socio-cultural, and individual aspects. Analyzing these factors suggests the need to generate and later validate hypotheses.

#### 3.11.1 Political Factors

Laws, policies, and programs play a crucial role in shaping trends and individual potential, especially in choosing types of entrepreneurial activities and accessing the necessary resources and services to start a business. This is supported by Shapero's analysis model (Colot et al., 2007) and Gartner's model, which highlight the importance of state aid, support services, and other government influences. Paturel and Arasti (2006) also validated this model. However, Lee-Gosselin, Housieaux, and Villeneuve (2010) found that women entrepreneurs often perceive government programs as overly bureaucratic, which discourages their participation. Additionally, Ardagna and Lusardi (Renders, 2010) pointed out that the poor quality of these institutions negatively affects entrepreneurship by weakening the positive impact of social networks and increasing the negative impact of risk-taking.

#### 3.11.2 Economic Factors

Numerous studies have highlighted significant disparities in access to finance between women entrepreneurs and their male counterparts. Amine and Staub (2011) have explored and explained these differences in loan accessibility between women and men. Women and men contribute different types of expertise to their businesses, shaped by their respective education and years of experience. Despite this, women are more likely to avoid registering and legalizing their businesses. Consequently, women-owned businesses tend to be smaller and often operate in less promising sectors. Additionally, women entrepreneurs are less likely than men to seek equity financing, further contributing to the financial disparities they face.

### 3.11.3 Sociocultural Factors

Bayad and Bourguiba (2006), cited by Colot (2007), evaluated the impact of culture on entrepreneurship using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, which suggest that entrepreneurship thrives in cultures with low power distance, high individualism, strong masculinity, and low uncertainty avoidance. In the MENA region, cultural influence is evident through the transmission of values and beliefs during socialization. In many Middle Eastern and North African societies, girls are taught from a young age that their social status is tied more to their marital status and fertility than their professional achievements. This results in a lower societal status for women, limiting their decision-making power and access to education and resources. Due to this socialization, recent research highlights the crucial role of relational networks in entrepreneurship. Women from families with an entrepreneurial background are more likely to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

### 3.11.4 Individual Factors

Shane, Locke, and Collins (2003) developed a framework linking entrepreneurial motivations to the business startup process. Their indicators of motivation include the need for achievement, risk-taking propensity, and tolerance for ambiguity, self-control, individual efficiency, personal independence, and goal pursuit. Other researchers found these indicators to be interrelated, particularly in the quest for personal independence, achievement, and calculated risk-taking. These factors distinguish women entrepreneurs and influence their inclination to start a business. Shane, Locke, and Collins (2003) refer to this motivation as encompassing ambition, energy, and tenacity, which are critical to the entrepreneurial process. Brouillard (2005) also suggests a link between passion, drive, and motivation, though it has been less explored in prior research. Furthermore, Morisson (2001) connect personal characteristics, such as gender, age, marital status, family background, education, experience, and motivations, to business creation. Gender differences are observed in education, management experience, financial and networking skills, and business motivations ( Hind and AZDIMOUS2,2021).

## 3.12 Conclusion

The study on the entrepreneurial motivation of women in the MENA region highlights the complexity of their motivations, encompassing multiple dimensions. These dimensions can be categorized into economic and non-economic, as well as positive and negative motivational factors.

Women entrepreneurs in the MENA region have overcome inequalities and asserted their professional roles, becoming a crucial part of society that drives both economic and social development (Alexandre and Kharabsheh 2019). Despite their significant impact, their numbers remain low compared to those in developed countries, though the trend is encouraging. Factors such as a lack of professional networks, insufficient support, funding challenges, and other issues contribute to the lower rate of female entrepreneurship in the region ( Hind and Azdimousa,2021).

## Chapter 4

### Iranian Women entrepreneurs in Iran and abroad

#### 4.1 Iranian Women Entrepreneurs in Iran

Women make up half of the population in Iran, yet their participation in the Iranian labor market stands at only 12.4%, moreover the total female unemployment rate is 19.8% (SISC, 2015). As a consequence – as can be seen in figure 1-, Iran ranks low in terms of gender equality in the economy, ranking 141st in women's economic participation, 143rd in market participation, 106th in leadership positions, and 108th in professional careers out of 145 countries surveyed by the World Economic Forum in 2015. This is noteworthy considering the high level of education among Iranian women. Iran, particularly Iranian women, faces a challenge in reconciling economic and cultural changes with deeply rooted cultural and social contexts (Javaheri and Ghazati, 2004). Islamic teachings in Iran sometimes conflict with pressures from the secular world, creating barriers to career advancement for Iranian women, despite opportunities presented by globalization and information technology (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007).

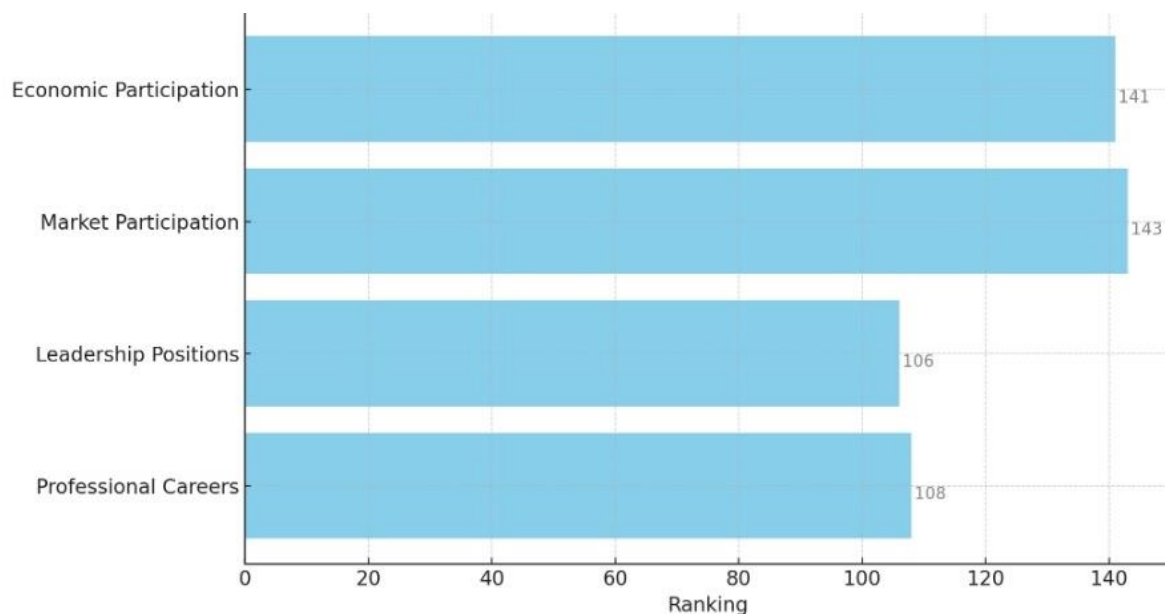


Figure 6: Gender equality ranking (world economic forum 2015)

As a result, Iranian women see self-employment as a means to overcome barriers to entering the public sector (Javadian and Addae, 2013) and occupational segregation (Arasti, 2006; Javadian and Addae, 2013). Although women's entrepreneurship faces challenges in Iran, and despite increased entrepreneurial activities among women, the ratio of businesses run by women to those run by men is 2 to 10 according to a report by GEM-which can be seen in figure 2-. Globally, entrepreneurship is predominantly male-dominated, although countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Thailand show a more balanced gender ratio. Notably, in a total of 60 countries surveyed by the latest GEM report, Iran ranks 18th and 30th in terms of nascent entrepreneurship for men and women, respectively (Kelley et al., 2016).

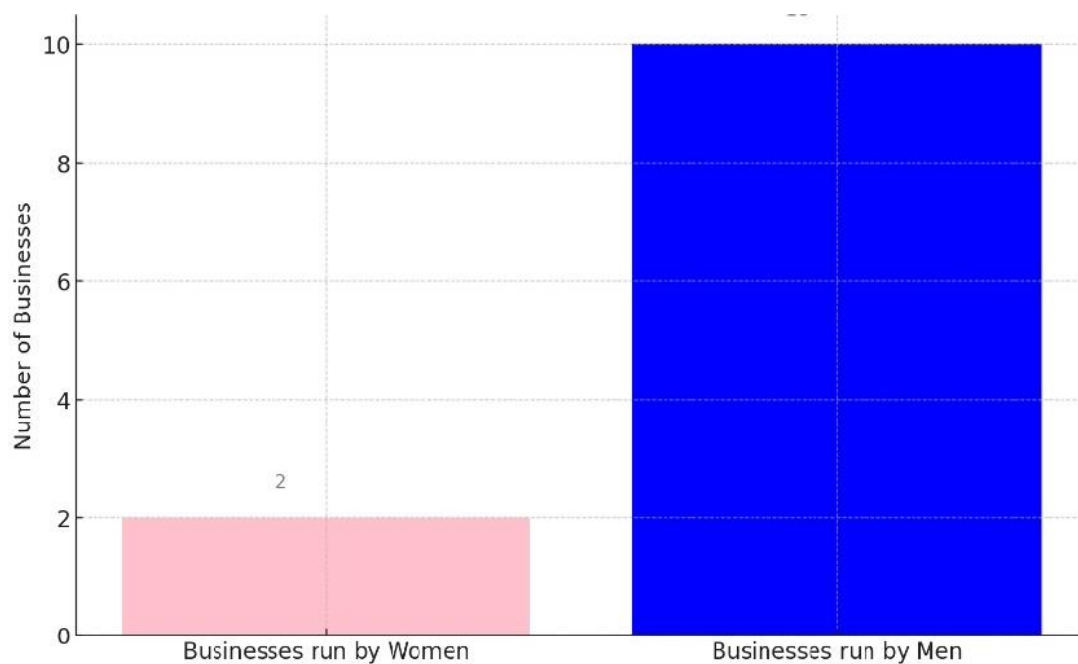


Figure 7: Entrepreneurship ratio by gender

One of the primary reasons for this disparity can be attributed to the socio-cultural norms prevalent in Iran, which are not conducive to women's entrepreneurial endeavors. Within the Iranian context, there exist numerous negative beliefs and values regarding women's employment and entrepreneurship, particularly in smaller towns. Arasti (2006, p. 109) has outlined several of these negative beliefs within Iranian society: a woman's employment is deemed unacceptable if her

family does not require her salary; a woman's financial independence is viewed as diminishing her husband's authority over her; household duties and childcare are seen as a woman's foremost responsibilities; certain occupations are deemed inappropriate for women by society; women working in all-male environments is frowned upon; societal approval of women in managerial positions is lacking; there is a lack of trust in women's managerial capabilities within society; and there is skepticism regarding women's social security. ([Modarresi et al. 2016](#))

Javaheri and Ghozati (2004) contend that these attitudes are reinforced within families, where girls are excessively encouraged to rely on their mothers, perceived to have different paths to autonomy compared to boys, and given more freedom to be away from home. These attitudes are exacerbated within the educational context by perpetuating gender inequalities such as gender segregation and the depiction of male superiority in educational materials. This contributes to the development of a poor gender identity among women, which in turn influences their psychological and personal structures, as well as their attitudes toward entrepreneurship.

## 4.2 Motivations

It is evident that in recent years, more Iranian women have pursued university education, a factor that has mitigated negative attitudes toward female entrepreneurs in society (Arasti and AkbariJokar, 2008). Arasti (2006) argues that despite the challenges faced by Iranian female entrepreneurs, they possess the necessary qualities and skills to excel in entrepreneurship, similar to their counterparts in other parts of the world. Indeed, university education provides female entrepreneurs with the confidence needed to overcome these barriers (Arasti, 2006). Moreover, it is anticipated that over time, more women in Iran will find themselves in entrepreneurial positions (Javadian and Singh, 2012). As reported by Forbes, the increasing level of university education among Iranian women has led to their growing presence in the business sector and their significant contributions to startup development (Guttman, 2015). Additionally, the number of female employers has been on the rise in recent years (SISC, 2015), with women actively engaged in both export and import activities, as evidenced by the issuance of 2,500 women's commercial cards by Tehran's Commerce Chamber (TCCIM, 2016).

Modarresi et al. conducted in-depth interviews with 40 women-owned home based businesses aged more than 3.5 years in the province of Tehran who had experienced a decisive increase in sales

growth and identified eight key motivations which are “need for achievement”, “need for independence”, “proving competency”, “socio-cultural concerns”, “financial issues”, “fame”, “positive feedback from others” and the “problems of working at home”. These motivations were categorized into two groups based on their nature: intrinsic and extrinsic. The first four motivations are intrinsic, as they are driven by internal satisfaction without consideration of external rewards or pressures. The remaining four motivations are extrinsic, as they depend on obtaining rewards or avoiding punishment and external controls. ([Modarresi et al. 2016](#))

#### 4.2.1 Intrinsic Motivations

According to Modarresi et al. there were four intrinsic motivations.

##### 1-Need for achievement:

Six women in this study cited the need for achievement as a primary motivation for running a business and its growth. They stressed on the importance and timeliness in producing works with quality and said that their hard work intended the growth of their business only. In essence, these women associated business advancement with accomplishment and efficiency indicating that the business growth impacted their productivity. It was this drive that motivated them and achieved what they did, it instilled hard work and the desire for perfection. The four articles’ emphasis on the company’s drive for quality output and ongoing improvements demonstrate the authors’ commitment to not only launching and sustaining their businesses but expanding them. The second innate motivation serves their need for individual and career development and compels them toward achieving greater things despite the barriers they have to face.

##### 2-Need for independence:

Of all women entrepreneurs investigated in this study, 12 indicated that independence was a major factor influencing their expansion of businesses. This desire for independence extended not only to financial and economic spheres meaning that these women wanted to be independent in terms of controlling their economic fate and decision-making of their enterprises/establishments. Economics turned out to be an important motivator of the young participants, while the desire for independence had been embedded in some of them from an early age; their families helped to develop the entrepreneurial spirit in them. These women were primarily raised consciously or unconsciously to embrace being on their own as a core tenet in their private and public lives.



On the other hand, it was not just the participants' families who influenced this aspect of the self, for other participants the need for independence was a learned trait after early socialization. These women might have been in some situations that forced them to become independent when it comes to their financial and career directives. In Modarresi et al's study, economic forces, scarcity of opportunities or changes in personal circumstances forced life into starting up business through entrepreneurship.

### 3- Proving competence:

Precisely, 13 women in this study, were determined to take all the available resources and opportunities in their own community to prove themselves that they are capable entrepreneurs. These women operated into a society that was characterized by systematic prejudice and discrimination with the objective of achieving their goals in the face of systemic discrimination on the basis of their gender as well as cultural regression. This desire to expand their businesses was not only a pursuit of success for these women but also a desire to fight against the system and show that women can be business people, capable of doing well for themselves, even in a hostile world. In their business expansion they wanted to demonstrate that women were equal to men; they wanted to prove that they are capable of doing business and fight for their rights they should gain it, and in this way to encourage other women and change the situation in their society, at least in their places. Socio-cultural concerns: Four interviewees in Modarresi et al's study identified socio-cultural concerns as their primary motivation for business growth. While the majority of women did not prioritize these concerns, those who were passionate about them experienced significant business expansion. Notably, these four women successfully grew their businesses to employ more than ten individuals. During the interviews, they highlighted issues such as job creation, poverty alleviation, and increasing income for vulnerable segments of the population as key motivators driving their entrepreneurial efforts.

#### 4.2.2 Extrinsic Motivations

According to the interview findings in Modarresi et al's study, four categories of extrinsic motivations were identified, all contingent upon external factors. These encompass "financial concerns," "recognition," "validation from external sources," and "challenges associated with home-based work."

### 1-Financial issues:

All participants in the study highlighted financial concerns as a significant motivation for running a business. It's important to note that for the majority of interviewees, increasing income and ensuring financial security were key factors driving their continued engagement in entrepreneurial activities. Financial challenges within the family, such as bankruptcy or the disability of the primary breadwinner (husband or father), divorce, insufficient income from the husband to meet daily expenses, and the need to support living costs, were cited as reasons for their involvement. Additionally, saving the business from closure and expanding it through increased revenue were mentioned as further incentives by the participants.

### 2-Fame:

Some participants are motivated to launch and grow their businesses because of the desire for recognition. Among them(5 interviewees), two interviewees aspire to fame as notable artists, while the remaining three seek recognition and elevated social standing as accomplished female entrepreneurs. Although fame may not be as prominent as other motivations for all participants, they affirm that it has bolstered their determination and resilience, significantly impacting their business expansion. Intriguingly, all participants driven by this motivation are widely recognized within their respective business spheres.

### 3-Positive feedback from others:

Receiving affirming comments from others was a significant motivation for running and expanding the business for the majority of women in the study, totaling 14 individuals. Encouragement and support from spouses, family members, and friends, as well as recognition for their artistic endeavors, and constructive feedback, served as motivators for these women to expand their businesses.

## 4.3 Barriers and Obstacles

Entrepreneurs are recognized as key drivers of industrial, product, and service advancements within their communities. The growth of entrepreneurship consistently influences economic progress. This, in turn, impacts not just the mental and emotional well-being of individuals, but also their

spiritual fulfillment and overall prosperity. Thus, it is crucial to remove obstacles to entrepreneurial development in every country. Additionally, fostering creativity and innovation through education at various levels of industry, services, and universities is vital for societal progress. ([Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam 2011](#))

Experts predict that future entrepreneurship rates could serve as a benchmark for distinguishing between the economies of different countries. Nations that prioritize entrepreneurship are likely to experience sustainable economic growth, while those that do not may face economic downturns and social issues.

In Iran, a Middle Eastern country with a predominantly young population, recent statistics indicate that approximately 12 percent of the active young population is unemployed (Arasty.2006). Even university graduates are struggling with unemployment, with 14 percent lacking jobs (Arasty.2006). The situation is even more severe for women and girls, with their unemployment rate projected to increase in the future. To address this issue and promote economic development, policymakers and planners must carefully and effectively implement solutions.

The barriers faced by female entrepreneurs differ from those encountered by their male counterparts. Due to gender inequality and the multiple roles women often juggle, they may encounter specific challenges. Clearly, addressing the issues faced by female entrepreneurs will enhance both their personal and social effectiveness in the future. ([Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam 2011](#))

In many developing countries, including Iran, women face a lack of economic resources and supportive social and cultural perspectives that would enable them to leverage their talents and capabilities to become successful entrepreneurs and create their own jobs. This disadvantage is largely due to the patriarchal nature of these societies, which often view women as the inferior sex.

#### 4.3.1 Education, Discrimination, and Media Influence

Although many employed women possess higher education, only a small number have attained top administrative and managerial roles (Smith, R. A. 2002). Additionally, gender discrimination is evident in the training they receive, including how women are portrayed in course materials and textbooks. The media perpetuates traditional views, suggesting that women should remain at home and that their involvement in social activities or earning an income is unnecessary. Restrictions on education in certain male-dominated fields, limited opportunities for overseas education for

women, and inadequate facilities, such as appropriate training environments for girls, all pose significant barriers to entrepreneurship among Iranian women..([Halimi et al. 2011](#))

#### 4.3.2 Societal Perceptions and Self-Confidence

There is a correlation between personality traits like self-confidence and women's employment, with self-confidence significantly influencing their employment status and job positions. However, studies indicate that women are generally less interested in starting a business and have lower confidence in their abilities. This lack of self-confidence is exacerbated by societal views in Iran that consider women as inferior to men. The perception of women primarily as mothers and wives rather than as successful entrepreneurs poses another barrier to female entrepreneurship (Seymour, N. 2001). Additionally, marital status affects women's employment, with single women enjoying more freedom to engage in economic and social activities compared to married women. The increasing fertility rate among Iranian women further contributes to a decline in their employment, as their roles as mothers take precedence. Consequently, the expectation for women to be exemplary mothers and wives rather than entrepreneurs limits their opportunities to participate in social and economic activities and to strengthen their entrepreneurial presence in society..([Halimi et al. 2011](#))

#### 4.3.3 Educational Inequality and Limited Opportunities

Another barrier is the unequal accessibility of information between men and women, as basic education remains inaccessible to women in some countries. This issue is particularly prevalent in developing economies where societal structures and economic challenges force women to forgo even basic education. Consequently, women in these economies experience a greater lack of education compared to men. Additionally, women often lack knowledge about their individual, family, professional, and social rights, and they have limited participation in professional, industrial, organizational, social, cultural, and political activities (Karim, N. A. 2000; Mayoux, L. 2001). These examples illustrate the unequal opportunities for women in many developing countries, including Iran. Gender discrimination in society results in fewer equal social and educational opportunities for women based on individual competencies.

In many Islamic societies, the family is considered the fundamental unit, with the husband serving as its leader. Additionally, certain family laws pose challenges to women's employment, such as regulations on women's alimony, the necessity of the husband's consent for a wife's employment,

and the requirement for the husband's written permission for a woman to travel abroad.([Halimi et al. 2011](#))

#### 4.3.4 Financial Barriers

Another barrier is the lack of specific financial support for women. Gender stereotyping and discrimination may cause financial institutions to be less supportive of women entrepreneurs (Carter, S et al. 2001; Storey, D. J. 1994). Additionally, the lengthy loan application process, insufficient banking facilities and financial resources, and the negative attitudes of bank officials towards women repaying their loans are significant challenges for women entrepreneurs (Commonwealth business women.2002).

#### 4.3.5 Social Security and Network Limitations

The lack of social security in some developing countries, including Iran, limits women's ability to actively participate in society. This issue becomes particularly significant when their jobs require travel between cities. Social position delineates the connections individuals maintain across networks, with these networks serving to furnish data, information, opportunities, and support. Regrettably, women in Iran encounter limited opportunities in accessing diverse social positions, which hinders their ability to acquire comprehensive knowledge and a nuanced understanding of markets and entry strategies ( Larson, A., & Starr, J. A. 1993). Consequently, societal acceptance of women as competent managers remains a challenge. The significance of social networks in entrepreneurship underscores the pivotal role interpersonal communications play in facilitating information exchange.([Halimi et al. 2011](#))

#### 4.3.6 Economic Barriers

Insufficient access to technology, support services, and information, coupled with inadequate security for women's involvement in certain occupations, represent economic hurdles. Additionally, a lack of awareness regarding the availability of certain raw materials and emerging markets, alongside deficient negotiation and bargaining skills, pose further challenges. Women's skills and capabilities are often undervalued, leading to a preference for hiring men over women, thereby stifling the realization of women's potential. Moreover, women often endure low and unequal salaries compared to men in equivalent positions, perpetuating their status as inexpensive labor. Women's tendency towards low-risk behavior is a significant factor influencing their decision to embark on new business ventures (Ekelund, J. et al. 2005; Wagner, J. 2003). This inclination is particularly pronounced in developing nations like Iran, where women encounter

various restrictions that contribute to their overall cautious approach towards engaging in new entrepreneurial endeavors, as compared to men.

#### 4.4 Factors Affecting Iranian Women Entrepreneurs' Growth

Natural resources, human resources, capital, management, and technology are key drivers of development, with human resources being vital for sustainable growth. Women play a significant role in this process. Recent decades have seen a notable decline in gender discrimination, allowing women to contribute to goods production, entrepreneurship, and national development. The rising involvement of women in society and business as entrepreneurs and business owners has altered the demographic landscape of entrepreneurship. Women-owned businesses are increasingly active in both society and the economy. ([Arasti et al. 2012](#))

In recent years, women-owned businesses have grown at three times the rate of all firms. However, women are still underrepresented among high-growth companies. Research indicates that women-owned businesses typically have lower annual sales, slower employment growth, and lower return on assets (Buttner, 1993; Cliff, 1998; Brush, 2008). Despite the notable increase in the number of businesses led by women, most remain small and have not grown as quickly as those owned by men. Women-owned businesses tend to be smaller, with less capital, lower revenues, fewer employees, and are often in lower-profit industries (Buttner, 1993; Reshmi, 2002; Roomi, 2009). According to estimates from the Statistical Center of Iran, women made up 49.5% of the 73.5 million population in 2009, indicating their potential to significantly contribute to economic growth. Today, Iranian women are skilled and highly educated, with over 65% of university students being female, surpassing their male counterparts. However, there are no specific public organizations supporting women entrepreneurs, only limited self-employment support available equally to both men and women (Arasti & Akbarijokar, 2009).

Given the economic role of women, examining the factors influencing women's businesses from an individual perspective can provide deeper insights into the growth of women-owned enterprises. This understanding may accelerate the development process in developing countries.

The study done by Arasti et al. aimed to identify the individual factors influencing the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs. To address the research goal and identify individual factors influencing women's growth orientation in entrepreneurship, a quantitative study was conducted

involving a sample of women entrepreneurs, academic experts, and decision-makers in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Academic experts specializing in entrepreneurship, particularly women's entrepreneurship
- Practicing women entrepreneurs involved in high-growth ventures
- Active decision-makers in the field of women's businesses

In total 11 semi-structured interviews with 2 decision makers, 1 academic and 8 women entrepreneurs were conducted between spring and summer 2011. All Interviews were recorded and then transcribed for content analysis and conclusions. After conducting content analysis on 11 interviews, the individual factors influencing the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs were categorized into four groups: motives, goals, female identity, and personal characteristics.

The results of this qualitative study indicate that growth orientation is a complex phenomenon. The findings suggest that growth orientation is influenced by goals (both economic and non-economic), motives (push and pull factors), female identity (internal and external stakeholders), and personal characteristics (including personality and demographic traits, personal attitudes, and skills).

#### 4.4.1 Motivation and Goals

Other studies (Roomi et al., 2009; Gundy & Welsch, 2001) have identified goals and motives as influencing factors for the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs. The research done by Arasti et al elaborates on these factors by categorizing them into push and pull motives, as well as economic and non-economic goals. Non-economic goals were more frequently mentioned by interviewees than economic goals. Most women entrepreneurs emphasized quality, credit, employee satisfaction, and creating social-environmental values over other goals. Additionally, pull factors were more motivating for women entrepreneurs than push factors. Self-expression, independence, wealth accumulation, flexibility, life progress, job creation for relatives, and gaining internal stability were highlighted as more significant motives for women entrepreneurs.

#### 4.4.2 Female Identity

Morris et al. (2006) mentioned female identity as a factor influencing the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs. Arasti et al's study confirms this and further categorizes female identity into two sub-factors: internal and external stakeholders.

#### 4.4.3 Personal Characteristics

The results indicate that the most crucial individual factors influencing the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs are their personal characteristics. This factor was mentioned in all interviews more frequently than other individual factors, suggesting that personal characteristics have a greater impact on growth orientation than goals, motives, or female identity. Among these personal characteristics, management and technical skills were highlighted by the interviewees more often than other traits.

Age, education, previous entrepreneurial experience, and related work experience have been identified by other researchers (Valencia & Lamolla, 2005; Morris et al., 2006) as factors influencing growth orientation. These demographic factors were confirmed by Arasti et al. Additionally, Morrison et al. (2003) was the only prior study to mention management skills as a factor affecting growth orientation. In Arasti et al.'s study, both management skills and technical skills have been identified as personal skills influencing the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs.

In Conclusion Arasti et al sought to identify the individual factors that influence the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs.

The qualitative findings revealed that growth orientation is shaped by goals, motives, female identity, and personal characteristics. It became evident that modest and high-growth entrepreneurs differ in their self-perception, family views, and business perspectives. Additionally, they employed strategies to balance work-family conflicts. These entrepreneurs are highly dedicated to their businesses, viewing their firms as the most important aspect of their lives. Compared to other women entrepreneurs, they are more ambitious, higher in risk-taking, and possess greater energy levels. They view obstacles not as limitations but as opportunities for growth whenever possible.

#### 4.5 Obstacles of Iranian Women Entrepreneurs' Growth

While women's businesses are expanding at a rate three times faster than men's, many of these enterprises have remained small and have not undergone significant development. Growth, a crucial stage in business advancement, is often not experienced by many women-owned businesses (Morris et al., 2006). According to a GEM report from 2012, women across all economies tend to have narrower growth perspectives compared to men, largely due to gender disparities in environmental conditions (Kelley et al., 2016). There are diverse perspectives on the growth rates of women's businesses. Some feminist theories attribute gender differences in business growth to



discriminatory practices, while other researchers point to the service-oriented nature of women's businesses. In this context, variations in growth aspirations emerge as a crucial factor influencing the growth and development of women's businesses (Breen and Karanasios, 2010), an aspect that has received relatively little attention compared to other factors influencing business growth (Morris et al., 2006). ([Modarresi et al. 2016](#))

Despite the rise in women's business ownership and the growing number of female entrepreneurs, the majority of women-owned businesses remain small in scale, with limited sales growth and a small workforce (Morris et al., 2006). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report indicates that women frequently run businesses as sole founders, without employees, and generally have lower ambitions for business expansion (Kelley et al., 2016).

Studies suggest that one reason for this phenomenon may lie in the fact that entrepreneurship is influenced by gendered norms and beliefs within society (Jennings and Brush, 2013). Women's goals and preferences are shaped by their social values, which can limit their outlook on growth (Welter et al., 2014).

For instance, some women may intentionally keep their businesses small to prioritize family matters, as noted by Brush et al. (2004). Similarly, numerous studies have highlighted the significant challenge female entrepreneurs face in balancing family responsibilities with work commitments (Ramadani et al., 2015). Moreover, societal values often impose gender constraints, limiting women's opportunities and hindering their growth potential (Welter et al., 2014). Discriminatory practices in the workplace, such as limited access to managerial roles, further exacerbate these challenges (Greer and Greene, 2003), perpetuating unequal opportunities for men and women in entrepreneurship. In regions with conservative social norms, such as Islamic societies, these constraints are particularly pronounced, impacting female entrepreneurs significantly (Roomi, 2013). Despite the increasing number of women-owned businesses, women's entrepreneurship has struggled to bring about substantial changes in social values and gender biases (Anggadwita et al., 2015).

## 4.6 Work/Life Balance Issues

Even though women make up 49.6% of Iran's population (Abbasi-Shavazi, 2013) and have a literacy ratio nearly equal to men, with women outnumbering men in college education, female participation in the economy remains significantly lower than that of their male counterparts (Sarfaraz & Faghih, 2011). The General Entrepreneurship Monitor's (GEM) 2008 report indicates that male entrepreneurial activity in Iran is twice as that of females (Sarfaraz & Faghih, 2011). In addition to economic challenges caused by US sanctions and government interference, which discourage business ventures (Sarfaraz, 2016), women face financial, socio-cultural, and familial obstacles when trying to start a business (Mirghafouri, Sayadi, Taheri, 2010). The prevailing patriarchal ideology, which emphasizes women's domestic roles, has fostered a negative stereotype towards working women (Ghorayshi, 1996). This stereotype contributes to society underestimating women and their entrepreneurial efforts (Alaedini & Razavi, 2005).

Additionally, certain regulations further restrict women's entrepreneurial activities. For example, women require their husband's consent for employment or even to obtain a passport (Alaedini & Razavi, 2005). Recent studies indicate that Iranian women face work-life balance challenges due to traditional gender roles that define them primarily through their roles as spouses and mothers ([Mohamadi.2019](#)). Research has shown that support from spouses or family is crucial not only in encouraging women entrepreneurs but also in helping them manage work-life balance challenges (Kulik & Rayyan, 2003).

Although the number of women entrepreneurs has been rising in Iran in recent years, much of their potential remains untapped due to numerous socio-cultural constraints. Work-life balance is one of the most significant challenges these women must overcome to achieve success. Research indicates that the degree of patriarchy in a society directly affects work-life balance (WLB). When Iranian women entrepreneurs were asked about difficulties in balancing work and life responsibilities, the majority (4 out of 5) reported experiencing challenges, highlighting the daily role overload they encounter.

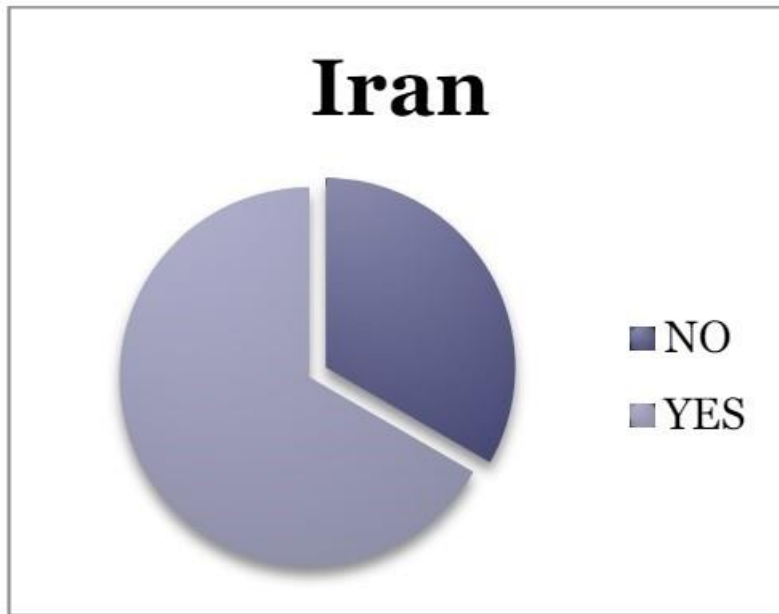


Figure 6: Work Life Balance in Iran

Traditionally, women are expected to take on more domestic responsibilities than men. This means that, in addition to managing their business duties, they are also largely responsible for household chores and childcare (Jamali, 2008).

Women must also care for their physical and emotional health in addition to managing their family and work responsibilities. However, due to the overwhelming demands they face, this aspect of their lives is often neglected (Mathew & Panchanatham, 2011). Mohammadi's study supports this finding, with most participants acknowledging that they prioritize fulfilling their work and family roles over their own needs. This role overload makes it difficult for women to maintain a healthy balance between work and life duties, leading to neglect of their personal well-being, which can negatively impact their marital, job, and overall life satisfaction (Lee Siew Kim & Seow Ling, 2001).

#### 4.5 Iranian Immigrant Women Entrepreneurs Abroad

In the past several decades, entrepreneurship is perceived as one of the significant drivers of economic growth, change, innovation, and employment. Out of all the different kinds of entrepreneurs that have been seen in today's society, one of the fastest-growing niches in today's society is female entrepreneurs entering business. Stretch is most evident in the post-1979 Iranian

women who for various social, economic, political reasons decided to set their own businesses outside the country. This social and economic migration for business-related reasons is thus not only authored by a web of push and pull factors influencing their business initiatives but also opens promising avenues to interpret the intersections of gender migration as well as entrepreneurship. Through an endeavor to assimilate into their host nations, Iranian women immigrants gain access to employment and business opportunities to combat several socio-economic issues. Since, they have to face difficulties such as discrimination, non-recognition of their educational degrees, language problems in the labor market, many of them believe that only for a financially secure and independent life they are left to start up their own business ventures. [\(Tabari and Chen 2022\)](#) These women can easily reach out to their fellow women from their culturally related and ethnic backgrounds, and the population; this makes it possible for them to offer specialized services and products to the cultural and ethnic groups as well as other people.

New entrepreneurial ventures of Iranian women in foreign countries might be seen in the larger global framework of how global actors use the international context to obtain economic mobility and social and career achievements. The entrepreneurial experiences of these women tend to include various micro-and-macro level biases that remain influenced by cultural heritage, legal status, and the overall institutional environment of the host nations. Consequently, the research on Iranian women entrepreneurs living overseas crosses over into various fields of research like women/gender studies, migration/immigration studies, and business/ economics that provides a more comprehensive perspective on how they engage/s and are subjected to the international economy and dynamics.

In upcoming sections we aim to explore various aspects of Iranian women's entrepreneurship in foreign contexts, focusing on their motivations, challenges, and impacts considering gender inequality. Through an analysis of their reasons we can gain understanding of the individual and environmental press that propels these women overseas. Inferring their concerns shows that the obstacles in their work were structural and cultural in nature and affected business creation. Therefore evaluating their effects provides one with the necessary framework to evaluate the role of such entrepreneurs in the development of both the host country, and the country they hail from. (Kauffman Foundation 2016).

#### 4.5.1 Motivation

##### 1-Economic Necessity and Employment Barriers:

Many Iranian immigrant women are at a disadvantage when seeking employment and have to deal with issues like discrimination, employers' failure to recognize their academic achievements, and language barriers. These barriers can act in a way that make it difficult for these individuals to find normal jobs in line with their education and experience. Thus, starting a business becomes not only a possibility to ensure a stable financial future but also achieving the desired financial variety. This path enables them to avoid the structural influences that may hinder their chances of finding employment or being economically productive in a new country and instead seek employment for themselves, which is crucial for their economic sustenance. ([AILA](#)) ([Emerald Insight](#) 2022)

##### 2-Utilization of Ethnic Resources:

One more way of creating livelihood opportunities is the appeal to the cultural and ethnic community among Iranian immigrant women. Women, for instance, will usually begin businesses that are associated with their ethnic groups offering products and services such as traditional Iranian foods and beverages, ethnic clothing and textiles, handcrafted goods and artisanal items, cultural events and entertainment services, beauty and personal care products specific to Iranian culture ,that conform to their origins. By tapping into their cultural heritage, they can create niche markets for products and services that resonate with their community, offering familiarity and authenticity. This approach not only supports their business growth but also strengthens community ties and preserves cultural traditions in a foreign land ([Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#) 2016)

##### 3- Desire for Flexibility and Work-Life Balance:

Through entrepreneurship, Iranian immigrant women are able to compromise their professional and family requirements since there is more flexibility in owning a business. Being self-employed offers these women the flexibility to balance work with family responsibilities, which is particularly important in cultures where women are expected to manage household duties alongside professional roles. This flexibility is especially desirable in cultures where women are often expected to combine family chores with career responsibilities. Running a business for them enables them to determine their working schedule and conditions, therefore having flexible time to attend to their family responsibilities. ([Tabari and Chen 2022](#))

#### 4-Economic Empowerment and Autonomy:

Many Iranian immigrant women seek to achieve economic empowerment and autonomy through entrepreneurship. It is argued that the process of starting their own business provides the opportunity to avoid gender and cultural prejudices that can hinder the work in specific spheres of the economy. As sole proprietors of their own businesses, they can practice autonomy in decision making, work towards the achievement of their goals, and take charge of their financial lives. It marks a new level of freedom in the lives of these disadvantaged women breaking the cycle of dependence and thereby giving them an opportunity to contribute significantly to their families and societies.([AILA](#)) ([Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#) 2016)

#### 5-Cultural and Social Capital:

The migrants from Iran have certain assets, cultural and social in nature, for instance, being excellent cooks or possessing ethnic food specialties and handmade or ethnic know-how products. These distinctive skills and knowledge assets can be converted into value-added industries to cater to both the taste of the Iranian expatriate community and global market ([Tabari and Chen 2022](#)). This is because they are able to provide their customers with unique products and services thus providing defense in a manner that enables them ‘capture’ niche markets thus improving their business prospects.([Emerald Insight](#)) ([Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#) 2016).

#### 4.5.2 Barriers

##### 1- Discrimination and Stereotyping:

Women from Iran experience substantial career discriminations owing to racism, ethnic prejudice, and sexism in their careers. It is evident that these biases manifest in a variety of ways, with the repercussions of these biases hampering the respondent’s potential as art professionals and entrepreneurs. Lack of resources, such as membership in professional organizations and exclusion from the industry’s critical events also hinders their business growth and access to mentors (Moghadam, 2002). In addition, Iranian women immigrants continue to suffer emerging financial

injustice in form of loan and grant deprivation, and hence, a restriction of the key fundamentals of capital for business expansion. As for the last criterion, they may lack the necessary resources, which creates difficulties in competition with other people who do not experience such prejudice. Discriminatory obligations also allow the market to engage in discrimination by offering different prices and partnership deals, thus hampering their credibility and capability to bargain for better terms (Ghanimi et al, 2022).

Systemic discrimination on the other hand prevents Iranian immigrant women in Canada from acquiring important business opportunities, decision making managerial position and promotion, just because they are ethnically irrigation immigrant women. This has to make them struggle more than their male counterparts in order to get the same chance at success (Moghadam, 2002). Lastly, societal prejudices erode their credibility and repute, and when potential clients and business partners enter into contact with them, their professionalism and competency is called into question. This skepticism leads to the company's failure to secure new business and clients and challenges of retaining customers.

## 2- Lack of Recognition of Qualifications:

Many immigrant Iranian women have substantial educational and professional qualifications that are unrecognized in the host country. As such, this barrier greatly impacts on their capacity for working at leverage for already attained skills and experience; most of the time, this leads to loss of professional identity and economic potential. This barrier significantly impacts their ability to leverage their existing skills and experience, often resulting in a loss of professional identity and economic potential.

## 3- Limited Access to Capital:

Women Iranian immigrants are quite hesitant to access capital for their businesses. It is for this reason that many of these women access the institutions without credit records which is an important factor in accessing loans from financial institutions. In I; specifically due to the absence of credit record, assets like properties or significant fixed assets, it is incredibly challenging to obtain funds (Ghanimi et al, 2022).

In the same manner, these women often lack the social and business network that attracts investors. At the same time, these women do not have the social and business networks which attract investors. These are usually formal business networks, which can take some time to build, in order to help business owners meet the right funders, and receive mentorship from like-minded people. Without those networks, it is challenging to obtain investment and the trust of investors within Iran for Iranian immigrant women (Ghanimi et al, 2022). This is compounded by the fact that they are discriminated against on matters of gender and ethnicity when seeking financing from financial institutions. Discrimination existing in these institutions leads to unfair advantages where credit at a higher interest rate, smaller loans, or no credit at all are given to the sufferers. The writers (Ghanimi et al, 2022) also suggest that prejudices borne by loan officers contribute to discouraging factors because they perhaps have a preconceived idea about the ability of women immigrants to repay their microloans. It is Crystal clear that the funds available to the Iranian immigrant Women for business formation are very limited, and even those women who do manage to launch their enterprises are greatly restricted by the same funding constraints when it comes to the expansion of the business. Lack of adequate capital bars the funding of key sector such as inventory, branding and steering the right human talent which hampers its quack and competitiveness within the market. Thus, their businesses may fail to offer sustainable and turn into profitable in the long run.

#### 4- Language Barriers

A mere weak understanding of the language used in the host country poses an immense limitation when it comes to communication with the various stakeholders exemplified by the customers, suppliers, and other business partners. This is not just a basic problem of communication: it becomes translated into every business message sent and received, hindering the ability to relay essential information clearly, as well as identifying customers' and partners' requirements. Whenever the owners and their teams fail to have a proper grasp of the local language, they are likely to experience a considerable challenge in the creation and sustaining of healthy working relations with clients and other business partners which are central to long-term survival. Furthermore, the language issue creates a significant barrier when it comes to issues regarding laws and regulations of conducting business in the country or state. Keeping up to date with regulations in the host country as well as completing obligatory paperwork and interacting with the officials thereof necessitate the skills in language of the country in question. Failing to achieve this level of proficiency means companies, corporations or firms might end up paying hefty fines or facing legal



issues that would otherwise could have been prevented due to better communication. (Ghanimi et al., 2022).

It is not only in the formal signing of documents that language is a problem; even in the routine conduct of business there is an issue. Lack of language and cultural understanding may provoke simple misunderstandings, and potentially more significant issues affecting orders, contracts, and negotiations. These mistakes can have devastating impacts in terms of loss of customers, non-fulfillment of expected profits, missed opportunities and tarnished image among other adverse effects between business partners and customers. Furthermore, activity might be conducted insufficiently and fail to notice significant business prospects due to the lack of understanding of trends, customers' opinions, or local business practices (Panahi& Abedini, 2020).

Overall, lack of fluency in different languages can come with severe consequences in the process of conducting business. They set off domino effects of constraints that cause disruption to operations; conflict; and restrict organizational development. In turn, organizations might require launching language courses for their workers, employing managers with a good command of respondent languages, or using translators' and interpreters' services. Language issues must be dealt with, as they are seen as root causes of misunderstandings that hamper business translations and overall success in the realm of the global economy.

#### 5- Navigating Cultural Differences:

Pushing to further improve the knowledge of new business circumstances Iranian immigrant women entrepreneurs appears to face considerable barriers. They are surrounded by cultures with which they are unfamiliar and need to adapt again to the norms by changing their business models. These also involve clash of communication, negotiation, and business manners that, compared to the strict relationship-oriented interactions in Iran (Panahi & Abedini, 2020), are flexible. It is also established that the development of relational capital, growth of credibility, and accommodation to the local business environment is indispensable. Business oriented phenomena as trust and reputation, which are the basis for any commercial success, cannot exist without recognizing local culture. It is not just the language that has to be learnt and understood but also the manners of interaction and behavior prescribed in the new location. This adaptation process generally requires elements of networking, marketing and more specifically, communication (Ghanimi and Kassim,

2022). This shift often poses difficulties for individuals because of the differences in business etiquette; for instance, while Iranian business interactions are framed in terms of trust concerning the other party, many western countries' business environments are more rigid and formal. These differences need to be mediated for Iranian immigrant women to receive acceptance and credibility within new business worlds (Ghanimi and Gholami, 2022).

Also, establishing ways of functioning that respond to the peculiarities of the new institutions such as local legal frameworks and regulatory frameworks challenges family owned businesses. This includes carrying out paper works and seeking for financial inputs; a problem solving activity requiring not only knowledge but also the precise cultural implementation of the same. The adaptation process is useful for the formation of trusted relationships and gaining credibility, which should be invested time and effort (Ghanimi et al, 2022). Finally, despite the difficulties encountered during the integration and acculturation phases, the subsequent advancement unlocks the potential for business ventures for Iranian immigrated women (Ghanimi et al., 2022).

#### 6- Balancing Family and Business Responsibilities:

Due to the restrictions in the country for women, most of the Iranian women have a problem of handling small businesses while at the same time being homemakers or mothers hence facing some major challenges. This comes as a surprise because the wives and mothers are usually left with most of the caregiving responsibilities including domestic duties and managing family affairs. This entails activities like, washing of utensils and clothes, preparation of meals, looking after children and elderly parents and relatives. While performing all these domestic tasks, one has to also manage the responsibilities of operating a business venture, which also need Constant time and proper organization. (Moghadam, 2003).

These two responsibilities can prove to be quite unaccommodating in the Iranian culture and cut short the duration Iranian women can afford towards personal business. The lost time wearing the hat of a housekeeper means they are not using the time to devise business solutions, reach out to clients, or build their market position. Also, since the responsibilities that are expected of these women include family chores, performing these tasks drains their energy which may affect their physical and emotional health hence doing business becomes a challenge. All this switching between tasks may prove overwhelming and cause fatigue and reduced effectiveness which in turn

has ramifications for the growth of various organizations that the two are linked to. (Ghanimi et al., 2022).

There is added pressure for women to handle domestic responsibilities in addition to professionally required tasks, which worsens the problem. The cultural expectations of women in Iranian families entail being confined to the home and primarily taking care of the household, leaving the man with societal and family pressure to choose between career goals and childcare. This has a culture that makes women indecisive and unhappy about working for their businesses, since they are likely to be regarded by the society as being selfish, after abandoning their family responsibilities (Panahi& Abedini, 2020) .These conflicting drives can hold back their desire to become an entrepreneur and work against them by not being able to dedicate 100% of themselves to their business.

Furthermore, other factors, such as child care services or shared household responsibilities, as the support structures that could also add more challenges to Iranian women starting their businesses. Unfortunately, these women are expected to do the most household chores alone or devoid of the necessary support hence, making it incredibly impossible to afford their businesses the time and energy they need. (Moghadam, 2003).

In general, Iranian Women entrepreneurs experience several barriers as they try to combine working for their business enterprises and their conventional role of women in families. The combination of roles and responsibility inevitably results in the strain of time and resources which may cause their business not to thrive. This becomes a challenge because society has placed expectations onto women that they should maintain their cultural homemaking and career success making it even harder for women to withstand this pressure. Nevertheless, it is seen that due to Iranian women entrepreneurs' urbanity, they can successfully maneuver through these conditions and continue to maintain their entrepreneurial ventures. (Panahi& Abedini, 2020)

#### 7- Isolation and Limited Networks:

Challenges also exist because women who emigrate from Iran, lack networks social and business, in the new countries that they relocate too. They always have to start their businesses from scratch, and as such, do not enjoy the networks that local entrepreneurs enjoy, which helps in accessing mentorship, business advice, and partnership opportunities, which are essential when it comes to business growth and sustainability (Salehi et al., 2021).

It should be noted that there is no substitute for guidance for Upcoming business people because mentorship gives useful information, encouragement, and practical experiences. Lack of mentors deprives immigrant woman of what they need in order to make the right decision, to avoid mistakes and to look for the new opportunities in the new sphere. Their target is negatively affected because they lack the confidence and guidance that specialist advice provides regarding how to venture into business successfully (Ghanimi et al., 2022).

Another challenge is isolation; it is impossible to develop a business as their success depends on partnerships. Due to social and cultural barriers, immigrant women are normally slow in making new associations and being recognized in the new environments and therefore restricted in their likelihood of forming business relationships with other organizations (Moghadam, 2003).

Almost in every area the lack of language competencies and cultural differences continue to present challenges to the formation of supportive networks. The communication flow is essential to build trust between two businesses, and language barriers stand in the way of establishing meaningful social connections. Immigrant women also get socially isolated through extended lost connections with their families and friends and get additional mental loads of working and being isolated with the children during the day as well (Panahi & Abedini, 2020).

In summary, the social isolation of immigrant women hinders businesses prospects as it cuts off vital needs such as professional guidance, consultation and partnership in essential needs for growth and sustenance. Nonetheless, the article reveals that immigrant women are capable and have the potential to succeed within the business sector, although they face many obstacles, proper recognition of their strength and determination (Ghanimi et al., 2022).

#### 4.6 Iranian Women Entrepreneurs in Iran VS Iranian Immigrant Women Entrepreneurs Abroad

The part and contribution of women business people can tackle considerable account of consideration in many regions today. This is especially important when considering Iranian women, and how the different socio-economic and political surroundings challenges them in their entrepreneurial activities both within Iran and outside its borders. The context in which females are running businesses within Iran is still influenced by culture, legal restraints, and the unique regional environment in which they operate (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). On the other hand, Iranian female

entrepreneurs in diaspora contexts can be positioned in more liberal settings that are also endowed with resources that may not be available in Iran due to political restrictions /policies, the aforementioned female entrepreneurs may however also encounter social, cultural or systemic challenges owing to their gender or Iranian ethnicity /origin. (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994).

Consequently, this section seeks to take a comparative approach to scrutinize the life conditions of Iranian women in both countries who build their small businesses and became entrepreneurs. Through this comparison, it will be evident to discover how the various socio-political structures affect the chances, probabilities and achievements of such regimes. Knowledge of these dynamics is imperative in policy making and the creation of corresponding supportive programs aimed at realizing the entrepreneurship capabilities of women both within the Iranian context and on an international level (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004).

#### 4.6.1 Similarities

##### 1-Gender Discrimination:

Iranian female business owners, irrespective of their type of business, are involved in numerous gender-specific issues albeit with some differences in incidence and circumstances. Challenges that stunt women in Iran to become entrepreneurs include; In Iran, women business owners face deeply embedded norms and limitations regarding their profession. This may involve the societal structure that discriminates women from presenting their agenda in leadership and corporate benchmarks such as gender roles that compel women to concentrate on family chores rather than on business or employment policy issues that do not allow women to own property or apply for loans; cultural impediments to having women leaders. Restrictions placed on women and gender related prejudices can limit women's ability to obtain the trust and backing that is essential for success in the business world. (Panahi& Abedini, 2020)

Likewise, the Iranian female immigrants living in other countries can also endure gender prejudices, albeit in different cultures. Despite achieving success they may be faced with biases and prejudices in their host nations that challenge their business management skills. This discrimination may manifest itself in several areas, including, but not limited to, restricted access to funding, poor representation in business databases, and challenges to getting into partnerships and receive business deals. Furthermore, it implies that many of these women will also encounter

gender discrimination, as well as racism or ethnicism, which will not only make it challenging for them to start businesses but also to develop them. Nevertheless, both the groups of women demonstrate the spirit of coming through all the barriers and continue to follow their dreams despite the barriers put in place by the male-dominated society and institutions (Salehi et al., 2021).

## 2-Utilization of Social Networks:

Currently both, the foreign Iranian women as well as the local ones, use all their social connections to help them in their business because the role that connections play in the success of the business cannot be overemphasized. In Iran, women have to rely on family and friends support, and other informal structures in order to overcome various problems attendant to running a business. These networks can offer the essential forms of capital like financial capital in the form of capital from friends and relatives, human capital in the form of sponsorship from experienced businesswomen, and social capital in the form of introductions to sources of supply, customers, and supply partners. This element of community support helps women strengthen their bonds and this can also be a great source of strength and a way through which people, both within community, can share knowledge, and support each other given the tough business climate. (Panahi& Abedini, 2020)

To sum up, it is worth mentioning that social networks also occupy a significant position regarding Iranian immigrant women abroad, although there might be distinctions in the network configuration and activity. Often these women gain and develop the networks both within the Iranian expatriate circles and in the business environment of the host country. These ones can also provide camaraderie, guidance and various resources like finances, training sessions, and even mentorship. The multicultural networks of immigrant women might also have more varied sources of information and wider possibilities of thinking through the challenges and opportunities in business. These networks, if Iranian immigrant women interactively engage in them then, some of the barriers would be alleviated and the chances of success in entrepreneurial activities would be boosted. (Salehi et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is possible to establish that Iranian women practicing business activism and immigrant Iranian women similarly rely on their social circles for help in their business initiatives. Many these networks offer key factors of production including capital, support in form of advice, and networking opportunities, which are critical and fundamental to the processes of undertaking

entrepreneurship. Consequently, social networks can be viewed as a valuable asset for share or stock investors as well as a valuable approach, know-how, or tool to penetrate specific markets and generate income despite the various and diverse conditions the two groups experience.

#### 4.6.2 Differences

##### 1. Legal and Economic Environment:

- Iran: There are Major obstacles placed on women by the Iranian legal regime, most particularly with regard to owning a business or being employed in business. Women are forced to overcome enormous bureaucratic barriers, difficulties in obtaining financing, and legal obstacles to their business entrepreneurship (Salehi et al., 2021).

- Abroad: Iranian immigrant women benefit from the relatively more supportive legal and economic environments of their host countries. Though they face discrimination, they often have better access to entrepreneurial resources, including funding, legal protection, and business development programs (OSMAN, 2023).

##### 2. Access to Capital:

-Iran:

Largely, women in Iran have struggled to access finance needed to support their entrepreneurial activities. Discriminatory practices in lending are a major challenge; financial institutions generally have a poor record of lending to women on the grounds that they doubt their ability to run businesses appropriately. As such, this often denies women access to loans and other financial services. In addition, many women do not have the necessary collateral—like property or substantial assets—in their name, which lenders often require to secure loans. This lack of collateral further undermines their chances of obtaining the needed funding. Cultural norms also play a critical role in restricting women's economic activities (Salehi et al., 2021). Traditional gender roles and societal expectations prioritize domestic responsibilities above any other thing; hence, women are limited in engaging in and committing to entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, the legal framework in Iran can impose additional restrictions on women's financial independence and their ability to operate businesses effectively.

Abroad:

Although Iranian immigrant women in foreign countries also struggle with the challenge of access to capital, the overall financial landscape is friendlier than that in Iran. Most of the host countries offer better opportunities for raising the requisite support from a wide range of channels. Microfinance institutions often provide small loans to entrepreneurs who otherwise are at risk of being rejected by traditional banks, hence acting as a lifeline for the immigrant women in establishing or growing their businesses. Government grants and funding programs to support minority and women entrepreneurs are also more accessible, thereby offering invaluable financial resources that may not be obtained in Iran. Equally important, community-based lending circles and peer-to-peer lending platforms provide alternative financing through which the collective strength and trust within immigrant communities can be harnessed. All these support systems, in addition to the general friendliness of the regulatory environment, cushion the financial challenges faced by Iranian immigrant women and enable them to be more confident and resourceful in pursuing their entrepreneurial ambitions (OSMAN, 2023).

### 3. Market Opportunities:

-Iran:

Among the other constraints that exist within the Iranian market are sanctions, economic instability, and a relatively small consumer base. Sanctions on the country have limited trading and investment in the international market, therefore reducing access to resources and technologies that could have otherwise fueled business growth. Furthermore, economic instability and the instability of currency values make operations difficult for entrepreneurs, hampering planning and forecasting. In addition, the consumer base in Iran is relatively small and homogeneously structured, meaning that market sizes and the nature of demand are limited and diversified, respectively, placing further pressure on women entrepreneurs to develop high rates of innovation and adaptability. Notwithstanding, many Iranian women entrepreneurs are defiantly strong and imaginative, harnessing their inventiveness to launch unique products and services that satisfy the domestic market (Salehi et al., 2021).



Abroad:

Thus, the market is notably wide and different for Iranian immigrant women, who have access to diversified and larger markets in their host countries. This is different from the restricted consumer base in Iran; the immigrant woman can draw on a number of consumer segments, whether within the ethnic community or wider demographics within the host country. This opens up opportunities for them to expand their businesses in different ways to cater to more diversified consumer preferences and needs (OSMAN, 2023). They can now create products that resonate with both Iranian and local markets and are appealing to a much wider market while still maintaining links with their ethnic community. This way, the dual market approach increases their chances of business success and allows them to thrive in new entrepreneurial efforts abroad.

#### 4. Motivations:

Iran:

In Iran, entrepreneurship among women has to a great extent been driven by necessity. Unemployment rates are high, and job opportunities are scarce. The traditional employment environment in Iran is not very friendly for women, as societal norms are often discriminative towards limited roles and opportunities for them in the workforce. In light of this, entrepreneurship provides many women with a means of achieving independence and economic sustainability. On this account, the perception that women could create employment for themselves and possibly for others, instead of the restrictions of traditional employment, leads them to see entrepreneurship as a possible way to achieve economic independence and stability. In addition, entrepreneurship allows women to pursue their passions and interests while simultaneously contributing to the economic development of their communities. Despite the uncertainties and challenges that running a business in Iran poses, there remains the impetus for creating one's own financial future and, of course, the associated success (Salehi et al., 2021).

Abroad:

The motivations for entrepreneurship are multiple: for Iranian immigrant women, they are both necessity and opportunity. Like other females in Iran, they are driven by the desire for economic independence and stability and see entrepreneurship as a vehicle toward these goals. However, the immigrant women are often motivated by the opportunity for personal fulfillment and autonomy. The opportunity for many to do what they are passionate about and what provides them with outlets for their creativity and allows them to materialize ideas and values by constructing a business motivates many immigrants. Furthermore, the opportunity to balance work with family life has led many immigrant women to perceive entrepreneurship as a field where they can balance their personal and family obligations as well as their drive toward professional development. These findings suggest that, for Iranian immigrant women, reasons for engaging in entrepreneurship are complex and multilayered, combining aspects of both necessity and opportunity. This necessity/opportunity combination motivates Iranian immigrant women to seriously start entrepreneurship with great vigor and determination to create meaningful and fulfilling lives for themselves and their families in new destination countries (OSMAN, 2023).

## 5. Cultural and Social Capital:

Iran:

Women entrepreneurs in Iran tread a business arena that is largely embedded with cultural and social values, extremely reinforcing traditional gender roles. The cultural and social capital that women enjoy in more homogeneous societies paves the way for their ability to start and expand their businesses. At the same time, these very traditional gender roles may act as barriers to business expansion or innovation. Cultural expectations, especially of the type of industry or business that women should be a part of, restrict the scope of entrepreneurship opportunities for women. Societal expectations regarding the roles that women should play in the public sphere can also have an impact on the visibility and credibility of women-owned businesses in a way that can limit access to customers and potential investors. Yet, many Iran women entrepreneurs demonstrate their resilience and resourcefulness, having the ability to mobilize their cultural and social capital to

overcome such barriers and succeed within the bounds of their society's expectations (Panahi& Abedini, 2020).

Abroad:

Iranian immigrant women abroad, on the other hand, take advantage of this cultural heritage and turn it into a unique source of entrepreneurship within multicultural contexts. They bring a rich tapestry of traditions, customs, and culinary delights that resonate with many cultural groups. Immigrant women often find niche markets that value and appreciate their cultural products and services, giving them a critical edge in entrepreneurship. They are therefore in a position to provide authentic and unique experiences that can appeal to an expanding market of people interested in new cultural experiences by drawing from their heritage. Be it in food, art, fashion, or indigenous crafts, Iranian immigrant women can carve a space for themselves in multicultural markets, maintaining and representing their cultural identity, and at the same time, building successful businesses. This, again, makes Iranian immigrant women unique in terms of entrepreneurial (OSMAN, 2023).

#### 4.7 Future of Women Entrepreneurs in Iran

Understanding the future of women entrepreneurs in Iran involves recognizing that their prospects are shaped by a complex mix of advantageous and contentious factors influenced by socio-economic, political, and cultural dynamics. These elements collectively impact the trajectories and opportunities available to these entrepreneurs. Challenges such as legal restrictions, for instance, mandatory male signatures for loans, limited property rights to women restrict their business initiatives, stereotype gender roles and unpredictable economic environments still pose a major challenge to them. Although accessibility and distribution play a major role, increased levels of education coupled with advances in technology present areas of proposed and potential development. Thus, the main environmental resources, which do not only give a powerful helping hand and mentorship but also create a proper atmosphere where women can achieve as many successes and reach for the stars, both locally and internationally, remain government- and non-governmental-support initiatives along with the presence of successful role models and membership in international networks. [.\(Mohamadi.2019 \)](#)

There will be an exploration of the legal and cultural structures, as well as financial restrictions that impede women's entrepreneurial start up in Iran. Measures like the provision of loans only when male guarantors are available and prohibition of women from owning property are names of some fetter that hinder financial and business opportunity greatly. In the same culture and traditional gender roles also impact women's entrepreneurship in that women are confined to the house hold and thus can only engage in entrepreneurial ventures in a very limited way because they have to balance between business and home. Economic fluctuations, especially under the influence of the sanctions received from the international community add to the list of problems, which are challenging for women engaging in business activity and seeking resources, funds, and support to contribute to the growth of their companies. Nevertheless, there are avenues through which one can grow amid these realities. [\(Halimi et al. 2011\)](#)

These increases in education for women in Iran present promising messages for a hopeful future as they obtain the relevant skills for business, engineering and technology to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Besides, the advancement in technology and development of the internet and social media platforms provides opportunities that outweigh physical constraints for women by providing them with online platforms to engage in, such as e-commerce platforms, social media marketing, and digital services. Many government and non-governmental organizations that have come up with programs that help women answer the challenges that they encounter in their business come up with training programs, sources of funds, and mentors.

The emergence of successful Iranian women entrepreneurs, in addition to successful businessmen, as role models inspired and empowered aspiring women entrepreneurs, while the international connections and diaspora networks provided an additional source of opportunities, resources, markets, and mentorship beyond local constraints. It is really through this resilience, innovation, and access to opportunity that Iranian women entrepreneurs are able to defy the odds and carve out paths to success in both local and global markets.

#### 4.8 Future Prospects

It is for this reason that women entrants are perceived to be capable of instigating changes in social relations within the Iranian context by improving on the gender relevancy thus fostering economic

development. In parallel to this development, further pressure for change in policies that would improve women's employment experience and labor market engagement would positively contribute to improving the business landscape for women, freeing more opportunities for them. Furthermore, the yard younger population in Iran that is increasingly connected digitally and is more familiar with technology than the older generation is a huge market waiting to embrace new innovations and high-growth opportunities. Therefore, there is no doubt that it is possible to foster new ideas and release interesting and effective initiatives into Iran's economy's, and therefore into the Iranian society at large – through developing creativity and enterprise among the country's young population ([Halimi et al. 2011](#)).

In conclusion, it is possible to outline a number of hopeful aspects concerning the future of women entrepreneurs in Iran though the latter remains quite problematic. Sustaining the progress will require people's stamina, policies that are friendly to continue learning, educational innovation and turning to innovative technologies.

#### 4.9 Future of Iranian Immigrant Women Entrepreneurs Abroad

For Iranian immigrant women entrepreneurs in the future the picture seems quite positive thanks to an array of support factors and opportunities. The host countries offer legal and economic advantages 'better financing, fewer legal barriers, and pro-adult entrepreneurial and immigration policies' for small business and immigrant Iranians. Also, general health care services management and overall health of the women who emigrated from Iran can be regarded as high, which also creates favorable conditions for running own businesses and developing one's activity abroad. In addition, growing access to, as well as use of technology and the social media platforms expand the markets to reach, run businesses and create new products, and e-commerce making marketing and selling easier to execute, hence no barriers to entry. Furthermore, as Iranian immigrant women operate in multicultural and diverse societies, the ethnic specializations, combined with the larger generic markets, avail the Iranian immigrant women entrepreneurs to a greater chance at penetrating business markets and enjoy business growth. First of all, the ties within the Iranian diaspora or other immigrants play a vital role in supporting the main outlines and can positively contribute to the development of a business organization, providing a source of mentorship, networking, and access to sources of funds.

Nevertheless, the Iranian migrant women doing business internationally encounter some challenges, such as competing within the unfamiliar cultural and economic standards, shouldering the responsibility of changing their strategies to conform to the new settings, and experiencing racism, xenophobia as well as sexism which may affect their chances of getting capital, customers, or partners. Combining entrepreneurial processes with family commitments is a challenge that has not been fully solved since time immemorial; however, the issue addresses the flexibility of entrepreneurship, which can help one balance the two obligations. Hence, work towards enhancing visibility and gaining more influence can also help secure such favorable conditions in the form of policies and programs designed for immigrant and women entrepreneurs such as funding, training programs and access to legal aid can go a long way in improving the existing state of Iranian women entrepreneurs travelling to other countries to stay and start businesses. [\(Halimi et al. 2011\)](#)

#### 4.10 A Better Future for Women Entrepreneurs in Iran

For taking a meaningful step towards enhancing women entrepreneurship in Iran and envisioning the improved future for them, it is imperative to look at the issues and potential changes from the preliminary policy and cultural perspectives alongside the educational enablement, institutionalization and technological revolution angles. First, it requires changes in policies and laws to remove such restrictions stemmed from gender; for instance, these include the ability of women to own property, avail credit facilities, and register their companies on their own. Micro finance institutions and financial products should be developed with a view to provide facilities to the women, loans and grants supported by the government can effectively facilitate the women to get capital that can create a business. Other legal requirements include, tax relief and subsidies designed to foster women participation in entrepreneurship, release them from certain costs and enhance their profitability. [\(Modarresi et al. 2016\)](#)

Training methods are indispensable activities that can help women gain knowledge and competencies to successfully start their businesses. To address this issue more targeted practical actions are necessary, for instance the integration of education in entrepreneurship and launching specialized training programs for business management and digital competencies. The programs regarding mentorship to the young women who intending to start businesses ,business networking

serve as a give and take functions thereby providing guidance and appropriate forums to access. Appropriate policies towards gender equality, raising public awareness through prevention of stereotyping female characters in media and entertainment and demonstrating success stories of women entrepreneurs through forums including television are notable steps that need to be taken in order to get acceptance for women owned business from their families and community.

It is imperative to have institutional support and suggested measures include the establishment of a special business incubation program for female entrepreneurs that will include business accelerators. Implementation of policies that ease regulatory frameworks, decrease bureaucratic entanglement, and promote a clear business climate are the key factors that make it easier for women to investigate business opportunities and embark on starting their ventures. One particularly emphasized main aspect is technological enfranchisement, which makes it necessary for females to be supplied with interesting and convenient Digital marketing tools for business. Connecting to the online business environment that comprises of digital marketing, e-commerce, and online business management creates new opportunities, while online communities and resources for the same enhance cohesion of support systems and improved business information. By implementing these measures comprehensively, Iran can pave the way for a thriving ecosystem where women entrepreneurs can flourish and contribute significantly to economic growth and societal advancement ([Modarresi et al. 2016](#)).

#### 4.11 A Connection between Iranian Women Entrepreneurs Inside and Outside the Country

It would further open up opportunities for establishing a network for Iranian women entrepreneurs within and outside the country and would, in turn, accrue benefits to all parties involved. These links promise not only further individual development and success but also collective progression, innovation, and mutual support in the entrepreneurial environment. Iranian women entrepreneurs can join a dynamic network bridging geographical boundaries and benefiting from diversified experiences, expertise, and resources that are directed toward innovation, knowledge exchange, and application to multiply the effect of entrepreneurial activities. Through collaboration, mentorship, and joint initiatives, these connections can fuel transformative change, take business ventures to a higher level, and ultimately contribute to the socioeconomic development and empowerment of women entrepreneurs locally and internationally. Here is how this will be done

#### 4.11.1 Online Platforms and Networks

-Virtual Communities: Creating online communities and platforms where Iranian women entrepreneurs can connect, share experiences, and offer support is a practical solution. Social media groups, forums, and professional networks like LinkedIn can facilitate these interactions.

- Webinars and Virtual Conferences: Regular webinars and virtual conferences can be organized to bring together Iranian women entrepreneurs from different parts of the world. These events can focus on sharing knowledge, best practices, and success stories.

#### 4.11.2 Mentorship and Collaboration Programs

- Mentorship Networks: Establishing mentorship programs that connect experienced Iranian women entrepreneurs abroad with aspiring entrepreneurs in Iran can provide guidance, resources, and encouragement. Such programs can be facilitated by NGOs, educational institutions, or international business organizations.

- Collaborative Projects: Encouraging joint ventures and collaborative projects between Iranian women entrepreneurs inside and outside the country can lead to innovative business solutions and market expansion. These projects can be in various sectors such as technology, arts, and crafts, or food and beverage.

#### 4.11.3 Business Incubators and Accelerators

- International Business Incubators: Creating business incubators and accelerators that have a specific focus on Iranian women entrepreneurs can provide the necessary resources, training, and networking opportunities. These incubators can have branches both inside and outside Iran to facilitate cross-border collaboration.

- Exchange Programs: Implementing exchange programs where Iranian women entrepreneurs can spend time working in different environments abroad can help them gain new perspectives, skills, and networks.



#### 4.11.4 Economic and Trade Initiatives

- Export and Import Partnerships: Facilitating partnerships for export and import can help Iranian women entrepreneurs inside the country access international markets and vice versa. This can be done through trade fairs, exhibitions, and bilateral trade agreements.
- Investment Opportunities: Encouraging Iranian women entrepreneurs abroad to invest in startups and businesses run by women in Iran can provide much-needed capital and expertise.

#### 4.12.5 Cultural and Educational Exchanges

- Cultural Programs: Organizing cultural exchange programs that include business components can help build understanding and networks. These programs can showcase the work of Iranian women entrepreneurs and foster collaboration.
- Scholarships and Training: Providing scholarships and training opportunities for Iranian women to study and train abroad can enhance their skills and networks, which they can later utilize in their entrepreneurial ventures.

### 4.12 Potential Challenges and Solutions

#### 4.12.1 Political and Economic Barriers

It's a well-documented fact that women running businesses in Iran, as well as Iranian women entrepreneurs abroad, face barriers at political and economic levels that slow their progress. Sociopolitical risks, legal frameworks, business-cycle volatility are some of the biggest problems that entrepreneurs are bound to experience. Still, in the light of the mentioned challenges, using digital technology and implementing the concept of telework appears to be as relevant as solutions for the existing conditions. In essence, by embracing the effective use of technology and going virtual through options like having a meeting online or assignment management using online platforms, women entrepreneurs achieve increased efficiency and effectiveness of business in that the geographical barriers that were once limiting can be wholly erased. Furthermore, appealing to the international organizations focused on effort to improve the entrepreneurial environment is advisable as they can offer the expertise, support and lobbying and advising on political and economical environment. The partnership with such organizations can support networks, precise

funding, and appropriate mentorship enabling Iranian women facing political and, at the same time, economical barriers to attain success in their businesses. ([Modarresi et al. 2016](#))

#### 4.12.2 Cultural Differences and Communication

The different cultural practice and non-standard business communication norms are among the major challenges Iranian women entrepreneurs face when building business relations within and outside Iran. These differences can cause problems in communication and intensions, including prevent the forming of healthy romantic relationships. In response to such issues, the provision of cross cultural training rises as the strategic approach which can foster effective execution of culturally sensitive duties. It is through such body knowledge and exercise that women entrepreneurs can be educated on various cultural practices to respect and embrace the cultural and etiquette differences that are present in the society. Therefore, such aspect as communication characterized by an open and non-offensive approach is considered to be one of the fundamental measures to eliminate the concept of cultural barriers. The cultivation of socially sensitive contexts fosters equal opportunities and encourages women entrepreneurs to effectively manage cross-cultural experiences and demonstrate a high level of trust and understanding in their interactions. Because of exposure to cross cultural training and encouraging communication, Iranian women entrepreneurs can negotiate and effectively eliminate cross cultural barriers which exist and establish a good rapport. That drive growth, innovation and success in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

#### 4.13 Conclusion

Creating meaningful networking bridges between female Iranian entrepreneurs and those elsewhere also offers significant possibilities of creating bond that serves as a ground for support, encouragement, and cooperation. Thus, by applying information technology as a tool for communication and collaboration – from conducting meetings over video conferencing to maintaining social networks where women entrepreneurs can meet and interact with their counterparts from different countries – women can and should actively participate in the process of increasing their presence in the field of entrepreneurship. These linkages foster the sharing of experiences, practices and formats, supporting women who manage to transform problems into opportunities within a continually changing environment for entrepreneurs.

At the same time, the need for such activities raises the concept of mentorship as one of the critical keys to creating and developing women entrepreneurs. So, if male entrepreneurs are willing to support the cause, women should be given opportunities to create mentorship where experienced businesspeople are to work with new people since it will help them get experienced individuals who can guide and support them through the tough times in business. Leveraging of these ties is made even stronger through the collaboration on the various projects that women entrepreneurs embark on, to develop innovative products, markets and sustainable business models. (Abbasi-Shavazi, 2013)

Furthermore, international trade prospects enhance market exposure and entry points for Iranian women upscale entrepreneurs in international settings, create business linkages, and diversification. The opportunities from global markets and local support for scholarships and grants from international trade agreements that are currently being facilitated by trade fairs and exhibitions as well as supply chain networks are some of the ways through which women empowered entrepreneurs can explore new opportunities and catapult their business to greater heights.

In other words, those connections as a collective enables Iranian women entrepreneurs to achieve their goals, overcome hurdles, and hence bring improvements in a shared entrepreneurial environment in Iran. If Iranian women are given the opportunity to succeed by entering into partnerships with other professionals, receiving guidance from those who were once in similar positions, and via active international business involvement, they can help change the course for the better in their region and, in turn, the world.

## Concluding Remarks and Limitation of Study

### Conclusion

Gender inequality in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and also in Iran region remains a pervasive and multifaceted issue, deeply rooted in historical, cultural, social, and institutional frameworks. This thesis has examined the complexities of gender disparities, highlighting how entrenched patriarchal norms, religious interpretations, and socio-political contexts perpetuate these inequalities. Despite some progress in women's education and incremental policy reforms, significant barriers to gender equality persist, particularly in the realms of political representation, economic participation, and social rights.

The historical analysis reveals that traditional patriarchal structures have long limited women's roles and opportunities in Iran. While modernization and socio-political changes have sometimes opened new avenues for women's advancement, these shifts have often been accompanied by reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Legal frameworks, especially personal status laws, continue to disadvantage women, perpetuating disparities in areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and economic rights.

Economic analysis underscores the significant gaps in labor force participation, wages, and entrepreneurial opportunities between men and women. These disparities are exacerbated by cultural norms that prioritize men's economic roles and limit women's access to resources and opportunities. Socially, women face barriers in education, healthcare, and political participation, with harmful traditional practices and gender-based violence further entrenching their marginalization.

Addressing gender inequality in Iran requires comprehensive and sustained efforts. Legal reforms are essential to ensure equal rights and protections for women, particularly in personal status laws. Economic policies must focus on creating equitable opportunities for women in the labor market, promoting fair wages, and supporting female entrepreneurship. Socially, challenging harmful norms and practices through education and advocacy is crucial to shifting perceptions and fostering gender-equitable attitudes.

This thesis emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that integrates legal, economic, social, and cultural strategies to address gender inequality effectively. Collaboration among governments, civil society organizations, international bodies, and communities is vital to driving meaningful change. By promoting gender equality, Iran can unlock the full potential of all its citizens, fostering inclusive development, economic growth, and social progress.

In conclusion, while the road to gender equality in Iran is fraught with challenges, the insights and recommendations provided in this thesis offer a pathway towards transformative change. Advancing women's rights and achieving gender justice is not only a moral imperative but also a catalyst for broader socio-economic development and stability. Continued efforts and commitment are essential to realize a future where men and women can equally contribute to and benefit from the region's growth and progress.

### Limitations of the Study

While this thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of gender inequality in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the country of Iran, several limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations, inherent to the scope and methodology of the research, impact the generalizability and applicability of the findings.

Firstly, the study primarily relies on existing literature, secondary data, and reports from various organizations. While these sources provide valuable insights, they may not fully capture the most recent developments or nuanced local contexts. The reliance on secondary data limits the ability to obtain first-hand perspectives and detailed accounts of individual experiences with gender inequality in different MENA countries.

Secondly, the diversity within the MENA region poses a significant challenge. The region encompasses a wide range of cultural, social, economic, and political contexts, each with its unique set of gender dynamics. This diversity makes it difficult to draw generalized conclusions applicable to all countries in the region. While efforts were made to account for this diversity, the findings may not accurately reflect the specific circumstances of every country within the MENA region.

Thirdly, the legal and institutional frameworks discussed in this thesis are subject to change, and the pace of legal reforms can vary significantly across the region. Consequently, some of the legal analyses may become outdated as new laws and policies are enacted. This limitation underscores the need for ongoing research to monitor and analyze these changes and their impacts on gender equality.

Additionally, the thesis primarily focuses on broad trends and major themes related to gender inequality. As a result, it may overlook important micro-level factors and localized practices that contribute to gender disparities. The study's emphasis on macro-level analysis might not fully capture the everyday lived experiences of women and men in the MENA region, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.

Moreover, language barriers and the availability of translated materials may have limited the inclusion of certain sources and perspectives. Many valuable resources and studies in the region may be published in languages other than English, and accessing these materials could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues discussed.

Finally, the complexity of measuring gender inequality presents a challenge. Quantitative indicators, such as labor force participation rates and educational attainment, offer important insights but may not fully encapsulate the qualitative aspects of gender relations, such as social attitudes, cultural norms, and personal experiences. This limitation highlights the need for mixed-methods approaches that integrate both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more holistic understanding of gender inequality.

In conclusion, while this thesis contributes to the academic discourse on gender inequality in Iran and in the MENA region, it is important to recognize its limitations. Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection, exploring localized contexts in greater depth, and employing mixed-methods approaches to capture the full spectrum of gender dynamics. Despite these constraints, the findings of this study offer valuable insights and a foundation for further inquiry and action towards gender equality in the MENA region.

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