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THE FUTURE OF IRAN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Perspectives on Democratic Reforms

By Saeed Paivandi



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This working paper was produced for the Legatum Institute's workshop on Educational Reform on 12 November 2012. The workshop was part of 'The Future of Iran' project, which is designed to encourage Iranians to begin thinking about the challenges they will face if, or when, they suddenly find themselves in a position to carry out major political, social and economic reforms.

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INTRODUCTION

The Islamisation (islami kardan) of education in Iran has been an important turning point for the country. After the 1979 Revolution, the newly installed Islamic power quickly pursued its main objective of creating an Islamist state by reforming major institutions, including the educational system. This was a radical change from the modern educational system, which was established in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. A century after the development of a secular and modern educational system, Islam was forced back into schools.

The process of the de-secularisation or Islamisation was imposed through diverse reforms during the revolutionary years (1979–89). The discourse that dominated the first stage of the Revolution included three goals: promoting Islamic culture, controlling the 'influence' of Western culture, and creating a new Muslim individual through religious socialisation (Paivandi, 2006).

Three decades after these deep reforms, the Iranian educational system became atypical when compared to other educational models. We cannot describe this system within the usual framework of modern or traditional; it is an unusual educational system that has passed through a process of de-modernisation.

Changes in the educational system during the Iranian post-revolutionary period (1979–2012) can be grouped into seven topics:

1. The legislative framework of education: Laws passed in Parliament, including the orientation law, and various legal rules concerning the goals and operation of the educational system have largely contributed to the transformation of education in Iran.
2. The curriculum: This includes the programmes, content of textbooks and school activities. The Ministry of Education has attempted to Islamise the content and curricula; textbooks have been rewritten several times to incorporate Islam.
3. The organisation and structure of the educational system: Several reforms have been aimed at the structure of the educational system to make it more efficient. The last reform launched this year increased the duration of elementary school and reorganised high school.
4. Teacher training: Teachers have been a key component of the educational policy of the Islamic Republic since 1979. Moreover, the state tries to exert total control over their training and recruitment.

We cannot describe this system within the usual framework of modern or traditional; it is an unusual educational system that has passed through a process of de-modernisation.

5. The social environment: Educational institutions have become a place of political and ideological propaganda. The government has established several organisations (e.g. the paramilitary Basij) to dominate the social environment of schools and reinforce religious and political socialisation.
6. Enrolment: The educational system of Iran has accomplished a significant increase in enrolment from primary school to university. There is indeed a growth in access to education, especially for girls, but regional disparities and social inequalities persist.
7. Governance and organisation: Iran has historically been a centralised country. This trend has been reinforced since 1979, and the Ministry of National Education monopolises authority over the educational system.

As I cannot explore all of these topics in my presentation of the educational system in the post-revolutionary phase, I chose three important themes that characterise the most significant changes since 1979.

A VERY IDEOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS LEGISLATION OF EDUCATION

The first step toward Islamisation was political. Attempts were made to dispose of teachers that opposed the Islamic Revolution, to impose certain restrictions on girls (wearing the veil became mandatory), to introduce a series of religious practices in schools (such as prayers), and organising events to spread political and religious

propaganda. Another major reform in 1979 was the creation of the new body, Educational Affairs (Omour Tarbiyati), responsible for instilling Islamic culture in students and shaping their minds. By designating a political 'officer' in every institution, Islamic authorities were able to control teachers and students.

The Cultural Revolution (1980–82)¹ deserves mentioning as it played a significant role in the acceleration of ideological and religious reforms. The government nominated a committee, the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution (Setad-e enqelab-e farhangi), to reform the curricula in accordance with 'Islamic values' (Mehran, 1990; Mehran, 1998; Mohsenpour, 1988; Shorish, 1988). Even though the Cultural Revolution was initially aimed at higher education, it revived the debate about the meaning of the Islamisation of the entire educational system.

In 1987, Parliament adopted a law that was considered the most important document for instituting major reforms in Iran's educational system. The law emphasised an ideological framework for schools based mainly on Shi'ite values—representing the religion of the state as well as the sacred order on earth. According to the 1987 law, the most 'sacred' mission of schools was to educate the 'new' Muslim, to become "a virtuous believer, conscientious, and engaged in the service of the Islamic society" (Paivandi, 2006).

Women and men are not equal. Not only is this inequality clearly expressed, but the curriculum also seeks to justify this within an Islamic framework.

The first important point made in the 1987 legislation is the priority given to ethical and religious development in education and school activities. According to Article 4, in Islamic education, "purification takes precedence over training". In the chapter covering the objectives of education, the first article of the orientation law emphasises "the promotion and reinforcement of religious and spiritual foundations through teaching the principles and laws of Shi'ite Islam" (Safi, 2000). The second article delineates 14 main objectives for Islamic education, of which nine directly address religious, ideological, ethical, and political issues: to promote moral virtues and respect for religious traditions, to promote the purification of the spirit, to learn and understand the Koran, to learn Islamic culture, to encourage understanding of moral and religious values, to reinforce the belief of God, to develop religious obedience, and to understand the obligation of religious practices. The same article specifies the role assumed by the educational system in shaping students politically and ensuring their adherence to the Islamic Revolution.

The Law of 1987 is the main legal basis guiding the legislative framework of education in Iran. All laws passed by Parliament since 1987, or the policies developed by the Ministry of National Education and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, were created in the scope and spirit of this law.

The Law of 1987 has inspired recent attempts at Islamisation in higher education, particularly in humanities.

THE CURRICULUM

The Islamisation of the curriculum was the most significant educational reform in the last 30 years.

The most significant change in the school's curriculum is no doubt the renewed importance of Islamic education and the religious perspective given to academic knowledge. For example, the Arabic language (as the language of the Koran), which disappeared from the curriculum in the 1970s, is now reintegrated. Teaching the Koran and increasing time spent on religious courses became another important change.

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL TIME (FORMAL AND REAL) SPENT ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

	BEFORE REVOLUTION (1975)	AFTER REVOLUTION FORMAL (2005)	AFTER REVOLUTION REAL (2005)
PRIMARY SCHOOL	7%	17%	24%
SECONDARY SCHOOL	5.5%	11%	26%
AVERAGE (ALL LEVELS)	6.4%	12.7%	25%

In a comparative study, N. Moussapour (1999, p. 107) asserts that time spent on religious education increased after 1979: on average, 12.7% of school time is spent on religious teachings, compared to 6.4% in 1975. The most significant increase is in primary school: 17% in 1994, compared to 7% in 1975. Before the Revolution, high schools spent 5.5% of their time on religious education, but in 1990, that figure rose to 11% (Gooya, 1999). However, these numbers do not take into account the religious topics present in other subjects (Persian language studies, history, social sciences, Arabic, etc.). Once this fact is taken into account, it can be estimated that 24% of primary and 26% of secondary school time is devoted to religious education (Paivandi, 2006).

Another important reform post 1979 was the Islamisation of textbooks—adapting academic knowledge to the 'rules' and 'values' of Shi'ite beliefs, and to the political vision of the Islamic state (Paivandi, 2006). Thus, geography, history, literature, civic education, social sciences, religion, and language textbooks no longer resembled those used before 1979. Instead they followed the strict course of reinforcing the religious and political character in education.

TEXTBOOKS

A qualitative and quantitative research on textbooks in Iran in 2008 revealed the undeniable influence of ideological conception of religion in the curriculum². According to this research, looking at and presenting the world from a religious perspective, and perceiving and encountering social phenomena and individual issues from the Shi'ite-Islamic viewpoint are the main themes of Iranian textbooks. Islam appears as a fully-

fledged, universal, social, and spiritual discourse that is not time or place specific, and has eternal credibility. The educational system seems to seek a form of divine and sacred legitimacy about the essence of its discourse. The direct consequence of this orientation is the dominant presence of religious themes in textbooks (Paivandi, 2008). Topics related to Islam are not restricted to religious textbooks. Social studies, history, Persian language and, to a lesser extent, science textbooks also discuss religious, Islamic, and political issues either directly, by insinuation, or through metaphors.

A statistical analysis of 412 lessons in elementary and junior high Persian language textbooks, made in a survey by Paivandi (2008), shows that religious topics are widely present. Religion (God, the prophets and religious and historical personalities) and Islamic topics appear in 38% of the lessons. Fifty of the lessons on poetry, literary subjects, and classic Persian literature are about God. An additional 65 lessons discuss the Prophet of Islam, Shi'ite imams, and other historical and contemporary Islamic personalities, while nine lessons mention prophets of other religions. The statistical analysis of the textbooks' images shows the consistent presence of religious and ideological themes. Of the 3,115 images analysed, 645 depict well-known individuals (religious, cultural, political, social, and scientific personalities). Most of these images depict personalities from post-1900 Iranian political history and religious personalities. In keeping with Islamic tradition, images of the Prophet and the imams are avoided. However, despite this fact, 147 religious personalities and 102 saints are depicted (approximately one out of three).

Themes of war, conflict, and martyrs are also prevalent. The concept of sacrifice, especially in its higher form, that is martyrdom for one's homeland or one's religious beliefs holds an important role in textbooks. Praise is bestowed on martyrs dating from the beginning of Islam until the present day and their sacrifice is commemorated as a sacred and religious act.

Social sciences textbooks are also actively involved in ideological acculturation covering a number of social (e.g. family, social groups, and socialisation) and political topics (e.g. different political systems) with an Islamic viewpoint. Social studies textbooks in grades four and five discuss the prophets, the advent of Islam, the Prophet Mohammad's life, the battles fought by the Prophet, the mosque, ommat³, the prerequisites for becoming an Islamic leader, revelation, different rituals and rules of Islam, and responsibility in the Islamic society.

History textbooks often analyse the transformation of society through the lens of religion and religious movements. As a result, opinions on historic events are formed based on their connection with religion and the constant struggle between sacred truth and the enemies of the divine order. Prophets, imams and clergy have a more omnipotent presence in the historical events covered and, as representatives of absolute and eternal truth, spearhead the fight against falsehood.

An important result of this approach is the large-scale mixing of religious beliefs with scientific and secular knowledge. The sacred is mixed with the profane throughout the curriculum. The coexistence of these two phenomena signifies a belief in the connection

and unity of different fields of knowledge. This goes against one of the fundamental characteristics of modern education: the independence of the experimental sciences and non-religious fields from religious subjects. This separation is particularly important because the methodology and epistemology of these two fields, as well as their development, are very different.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

The discourse in textbooks that is focused on Islam and Shia tradition has an important impact on the representation and status of gender and minority groups in Iran.

Three principles present in the discourse enable us to better understand the position of both sexes in the curriculum (Paivandi, 2008):

1. Women and men are not equal. Not only is this inequality clearly expressed, but the curriculum also seeks to justify this within an Islamic framework. The legal and social equality of men and women is not mentioned.
2. Women and men have assigned gender roles in their social and private lives and are presented as two different social individuals who complement one another. Men are defined as the "superior sex" and women are the "second sex".
3. In comparison with modern women—who have rights equal to men in all contexts—Iranians are faced with a de-modernised image, limited to the house and the boundaries of family life.

In a study of 3,115 textbook pictures (2007–08), women are present in only 37% of images, mostly appearing in group photos. Women in lower-age groups are more commonly depicted than higher age groups, especially those over 18 years of age. The absence of women in male-dominated environments is noticeable, such as images showing work and social environments. Women are also neglected in individual portraits, and those of portraits of historical, cultural, political, and scientific personalities. Conversely, women have a stronger presence in home and 'neighbourhood' images. Portraits of women and girls, alone, are only taken inside the home. The lack of pictures showing both men and women together is relevant to understanding the extent of gender separation. Men and women are concurrently present in only 18% of the images. About 63% of the images depict male only subjects (adults and children) and a mere 19% depict female only subjects (adults and children).

The concurrent presence of the two genders occurs mostly in images of family, social and religious settings. As observed earlier, the images in the textbooks demonstrate a trend towards gender difference. Of the 1,147 images in which women are present, only 79 cases (or 7%) are related to work and professions (as opposed to 360 images depicting men at work). The supporting text even explains the gender separation in roles in the labour market from social and religious standpoints: "Usually, the father works outside the home. He has the duty to provide food, clothing, and other necessities for his wife and children. In some families the mother works outside the home, as well." (Grade four, social studies textbook, 2006, pp. 112–113.)

In the 412 Persian language lessons covering all year levels, 386 cultural, scientific, political, social, and religious figures are mentioned, and only 7% of those are women. There is little mention of women in the biographies of well-known personalities: it is as though history, literature, and society itself, are male domains (with few exceptions), and everything takes shape from a male-dominated order.

Data from Paivandi's survey (2008) shows that the depiction of women as autonomous individuals is absent in textbooks. Female autonomy is not recognised and accepted. A woman's individuality is limited to that of the mother, sister, daughter or wife of a man. The curriculum has a coherent discourse that is based on differences between men and women in social and family spaces. Male and female environments are meticulously segregated and specific social definitions are provided for each one. The relationship between men and women is based on the 'natural' and 'legitimate' superiority of men and women's presumed 'inferiority.'

MINORITIES

Another problematic issue in textbooks is the case of minorities. Iran is a nation with multiple ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious minorities. An analysis of textbook content reveals the existence of different identities: Islamic, national and local. These three identities coexist but are not considered with the same importance. Islamism, like other ideologies, does not limit itself to the geographic boundaries of one country and believes it has universal credibility. The concept of Islamic Community (ommat) is highlighted in textbooks. This notion goes beyond the borders of Iran and includes all Muslims in the world. The vision of establishing a supranational and global Islamic government is also covered in this discourse as part of the Islamist agenda. There are many references to the universal government of Shia based on the belief in the manifestation of the twelfth Imam, who—as believed by the Twelver Shi'ites—has been absent since 874 AD.

In regard to non-Shi'ite religions, three categories of religious minorities in Iran are identified. The first group is the Sunni minority, which, in terms of numbers, is ahead of the next group by a large margin. The Sunnis' historical and religious characteristics separate them from the rest. As an officially recognised minority, Sunnis receive religious instruction especially designed for them in schools. However, what makes them unique in comparison with other minorities is the historical connection between Shi'ites and Sunnis. The Shi'ite sect came about through tension and competition with Sunnis, who comprise the majority of the Muslim population in the world. Important historical Shi'ite figures and their lives are detailed on numerous occasions, but textbooks avoid providing similar case studies for Sunnis. The biggest issue for the Sunnis is that several textbooks are radically opposed to their tradition. The extensive presence of religious topics with a Shi'ite bend in non-religious textbooks (e.g. Persian language, history, and social studies) adds to the complexity of the relationship between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis and makes the relationships with other religious minorities difficult as well.

The second group is comprised of officially recognised minorities, including Zoroastrians, Christians (Armenians and Assyrians), and Jews. The members of these minorities receive a special religious education designed by the authors from their own community. Similarly, these 'recognised' minorities are forced to learn topics in non-religious textbooks that do not correspond to their beliefs.

The third category of minorities is comprised of groups not formally recognised by the Shi'ite government and with whom even hostile encounters have taken place, namely the followers of the Bahá'í religion. In a lesson entitled "Sect-Building by Colonialism", the grade eight history textbook (2006, p. 37) claims that the Bahá'í religion is a "manufactured sect" and the Bahá'ís are accused of being tools in the hands of foreign superpowers. Besides the Bahá'ís, other officially unrecognised religious minorities exist whose religions are for the most part related to specific branches of Islam (Shi'ite or Sunni), such as Sufism. These groups are completely ignored.

One key point in transition to a new education system will be the re-training of current teachers—there are currently about 900,000 teachers employed in more than 120,000 schools

Finally, people who do not have a specific religion or sect, or who only have a superficial and marginal connection with religious rituals must be mentioned. Not believing in a specific religion is considered either impossible or an 'abnormality'. Connection with one of the officially recognised religions is the norm. Those who do not fit into these official religious classifications are thought to be suffering from a form of 'deviance'. The term kafar (heathen), which applies to a person who is the enemy of religion or "a person who denies the existence of God or creates rivals or partners for God or does not accept the mission of the prophets", is often used (grade seven religious studies textbook, 2006, p. 83). In this passage a heathen is called nadjes (impure) and—along with human excrement or faeces, corpses of animals, dogs, pigs, and alcoholic beverages, etc.—is considered one of the ten examples of nedjasat (things considered intrinsically impure).

In this way, a discourse intended to be moral, spiritual, and at the service of all humanity is turned, paradoxically, into a discriminatory rhetoric that separates and divides humans from one another. The problem in the Iranian educational system is the same as that of all religious schools that view the world egocentrically: the system imposes a belief system on students that they do not have the freedom or right to criticise.

The 'original sin' of these textbooks—in production and reproduction of a discriminatory viewpoint and the explicit negation of equality of human beings—is related to the ideological-political discourse. This viewpoint becomes prisoner in this closed, frozen, and unilateral outlook of the world. Thus, the philosophical structure of the syllabus is in clear contradiction to critical thinking, which is the most important achievement of modernity. This identity-based attitude towards the subject of religion leads to classification and discrimination, and reduces the possibility of peaceful and humane coexistence.

The main feature of the Iranian curriculum is the co-presence of multiple forms of discrimination that are both religiously and politically 'justified', leading to a discriminatory culture. The curriculum seems to embody an institutional form of discrimination, symbolic in violence against students and families. This culture has its own signs, codes, language, and values and discourse has become a rhetoric based on violence. Explicit violence occurs when speaking of martyrdom with reverence or when destroying and eliminating opponents in domestic jihad. The hatred towards Israel, the US, and the West further breeds intolerance and discrimination. Symbolic violence takes place when certain individuals are denigrated or ignored and are victimised by exclusion from the syllabus.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF IRANIAN EDUCATION

During the last three decades, the Iranian educational system has continued the rapid growth begun in the 1960s and the rate of schooling continues to increase: nearly 87% of the population between the ages of six and 19 attended school in 2010, compared to 36% in 1966 and 59% in 1976. Primary school attendance (six to 11 year olds) reached 97% in 2010.

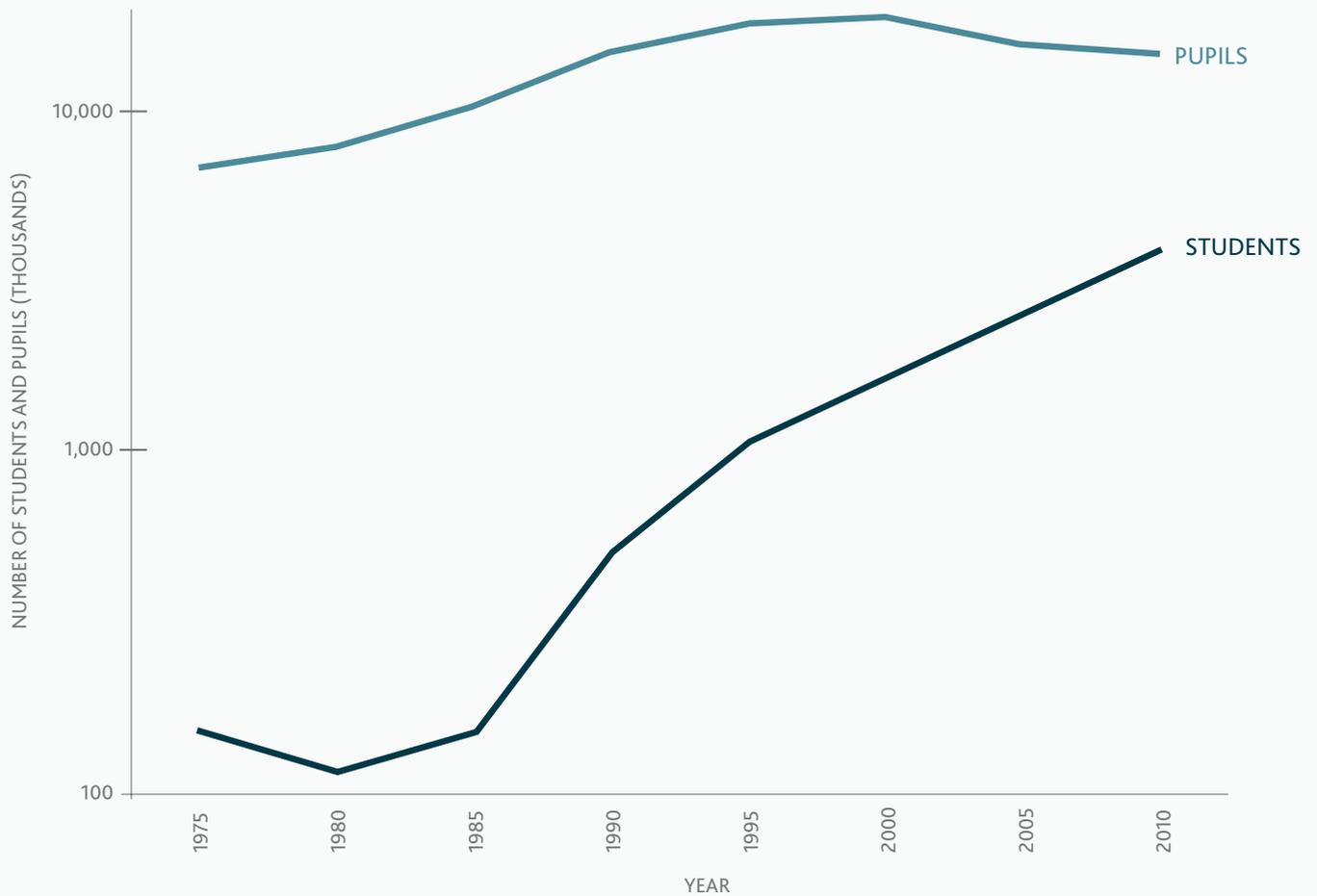
While enrolment percentages have increased, the last 10 years has seen a decrease in student numbers due to demographic decline. From 2001 to 2010, student numbers decreased on average of 3.3% each year and the number of pupils has dropped from 19 million to nearly 13.5 million. This significant decrease allows the educational system to improve quality and provide better conditions for students.

The most remarkable growth was achieved in higher education. The number of students in 2010 was eight times greater than in 1990. With more than four million students in a population of 75 million, Iran has a rate of access to higher education similar to that of developed countries.

Different regions across the country have not benefited in the same way from this transformation of the system. In fact, in some regions educational development has declined. Therefore, educational disparities between regions remain an important issue: there is a serious education gap between poor areas (provinces of east, south and west) and most developed areas (the central axis).

The most important point of this quantitative growth is the rise in female access to schools and higher education. The number of girls in school continues to grow: 48% in 2010 compared to 38% in 1978. Likewise, since 1997, more girls obtained high school degrees and many of them passed the public university's entry exam. Feminisation of higher education rose between 1998 and 2004, when 57% of seats, on average, offered by public universities were filled by women. As a result, the presence of girls has increased in the student body: 54% in 2010 compared to 30% in 1978.

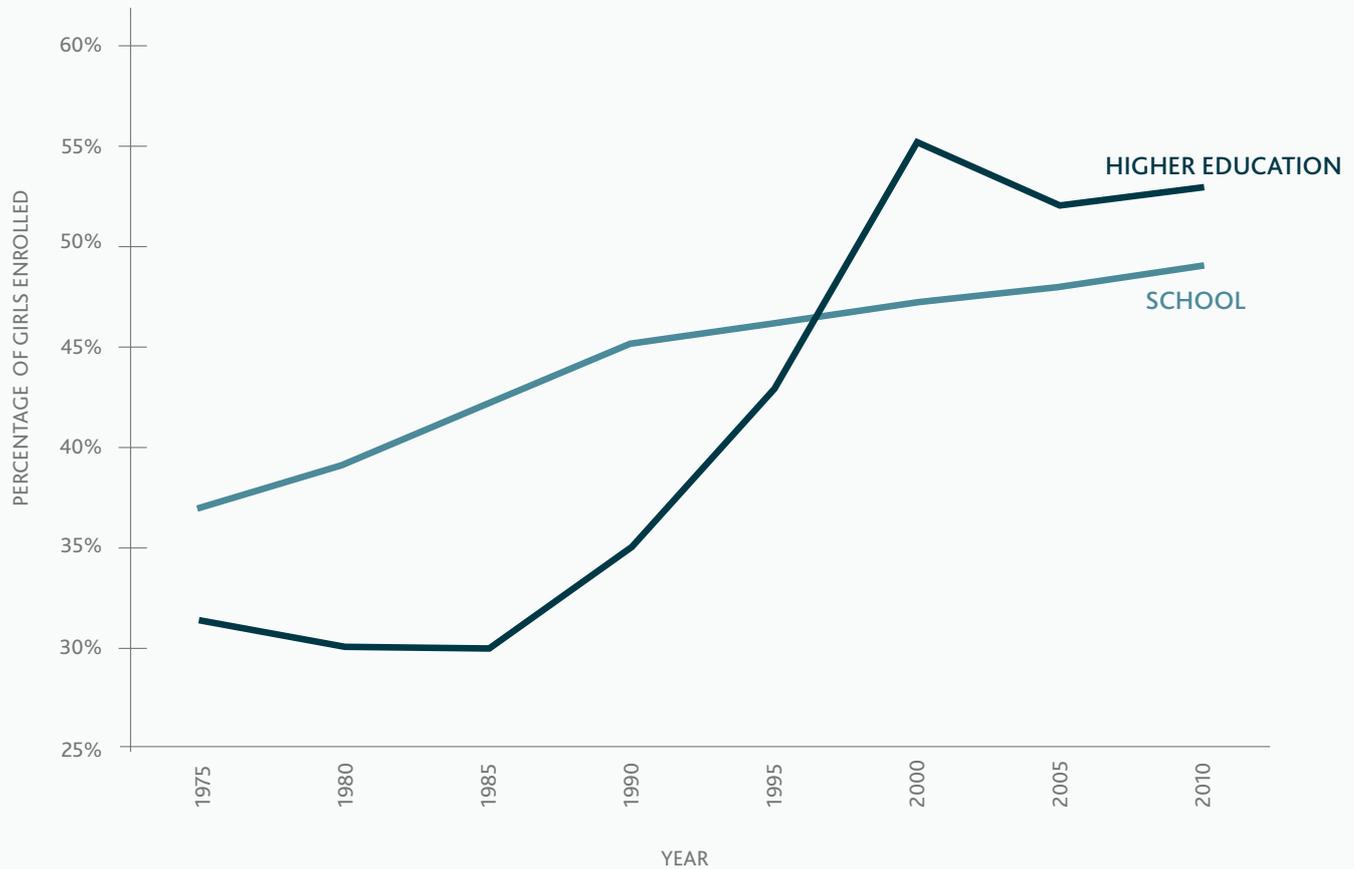
FIGURE 1: EVOLUTION IN NUMBER OF PUPILS AND STUDENTS FROM 1975



SOURCE: ISC IRAN

The considerable progress made by women in the context of an anti-women curriculum is a telling sociological phenomenon. Attending school or university has turned into a social challenge for women to accomplish their autonomy and self. Despite the frustrations, humiliations and pressures of the curriculum, the school has a function of emancipation for women.

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF THE GIRLS ENROLLED BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION



SOURCE: ISC IRAN

REINVENTING AN OPEN, DEMOCRATIC AND HUMANISED EDUCATION SYSTEM

The democratic reform of the Iranian education system will be complex compared to Eastern European countries. Some decisions, such as the abandonment of political and ideological propaganda, can be realised quickly. But education in Iran needs a deep reform for both its curriculum and its organisation and policies. The extent, scope and depth of the educational reforms that can be proposed are extraordinarily large, since the reforms concern all levels and all areas of education: curricula, educational legislation, management, and administration. A complete overhaul of the educational system is necessary to implement an open and democratic curriculum.

The experience of reforms in Eastern Europe is very relevant. Significant reforms in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe were developed, adopted and implemented

in a few months, during the first two years of the transition period (Cerych, 1997). Two factors played an important role in the quick adaptation of reform in these countries: the mobilisation of researchers and academics to develop a project of rapid change, and international aid proposed by Europe or the institutions like the World Bank.

Education plays a fundamental role in social change. A democratic and modern education contributes to the development of a culture of democracy, tolerance and human rights. The first mission of education is cultural. We should examine education as a culture before considering it as a framework to develop skills and acquire qualifications.

THE FIVE MAJOR REFORMS

To attain this cultural change in education, the following five reforms are key:

1. New Legislation

Education needs new laws that specify aims and legal frameworks. The law must propose a new approach to education focused on the features of a secular education, a plural, open and democratic society, and a new definition of the relationship between education, government and religion. A reformed system will promote overall societal welfare. It could be guided by principles contained in the Iranian educational tradition, the instructions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The educational system should respect the Islamic System of values, as well as all religious and non-religious minorities. Education and upbringing serve to develop young people's sense of responsibility, admiration of the motherland and respect for the Iranian cultural heritage, while at the same time being open to world values and cultures.

Two objectives are a priority in this institutional reform:

- Secularisation of the goals and objectives of the school and university.
- Elimination of all forms of inequality and discrimination present under the current law. The law should also specify how schools should define and deal with ethnic and linguistic minorities.

2. Curriculum reform for a revision of school textbooks

Educational reform is an opportunity to modernise the curriculum. The role of the state in defining the curriculum and the design of a single national programme is increasingly criticised around the world. The new curriculum should be in favour of replacing the unique programmes with a national base, while also increasing the autonomy of regions, schools and teachers, which will diminish the role of the state and improve educational democracy. This important reform should be gradual and teachers and decision-makers must be trained to understand the meaning of this radical change—at the level of core curricula as well as changes in the organisation and methods of teaching. Revising the curriculum would also include revising the role of religious education and introducing the opportunity to learn languages alongside the official language for ethnic and linguistic minorities in primary school. Rewriting textbooks will be a large undertaking given the current government propaganda.

Considering the ethnic and religious variety in Iran, eliminating all forms of intolerance, discrimination (religious, gender and ethnic) and exclusion is an important yet challenging task. Similarly, relationships with other countries in the region must transform from the 'curriculum of war' to a 'curriculum of peace'. The conflict between civilisations must become the dialogue to restore the balance between the transmission of information and the development of skills, and personal critical thinking.

3. Training of teachers

We need a different approach to training teachers to explore new methods that encourage student autonomy. Teacher training should take place at university without ideological, religious or political control. It needs a new academic culture that promotes methods, and a pedagogical approach with the sociology and psychology of education to better understand and work with children and youth. Teachers must have a higher education degree. Currently, primary school teachers often have only two years of training. This reform should also involve the recruitment of teachers. One key point in transition to a new education system will be the re-training of current teachers—there are currently about 900,000 teachers employed in more than 120,000 schools.

4. Changing the school environment

Each school must allow democratic socialisation. Democracy encourages a free and humane school environment. The first step for democracy in the educational system will be the dissolution of all organisations established by the state and its institutions. Democratic schools and universities will encourage the freedom of students, parents and teachers to create their own unions and professional organisations.

The most important dimension of democracy in higher education is university autonomy. Academic freedom is an essential component of scientific research and teaching. The university is the only institution of modern society where critical thinking and freedom are institutionalised. A university without autonomy, without freedom to criticise, is a clamped and disabled university.

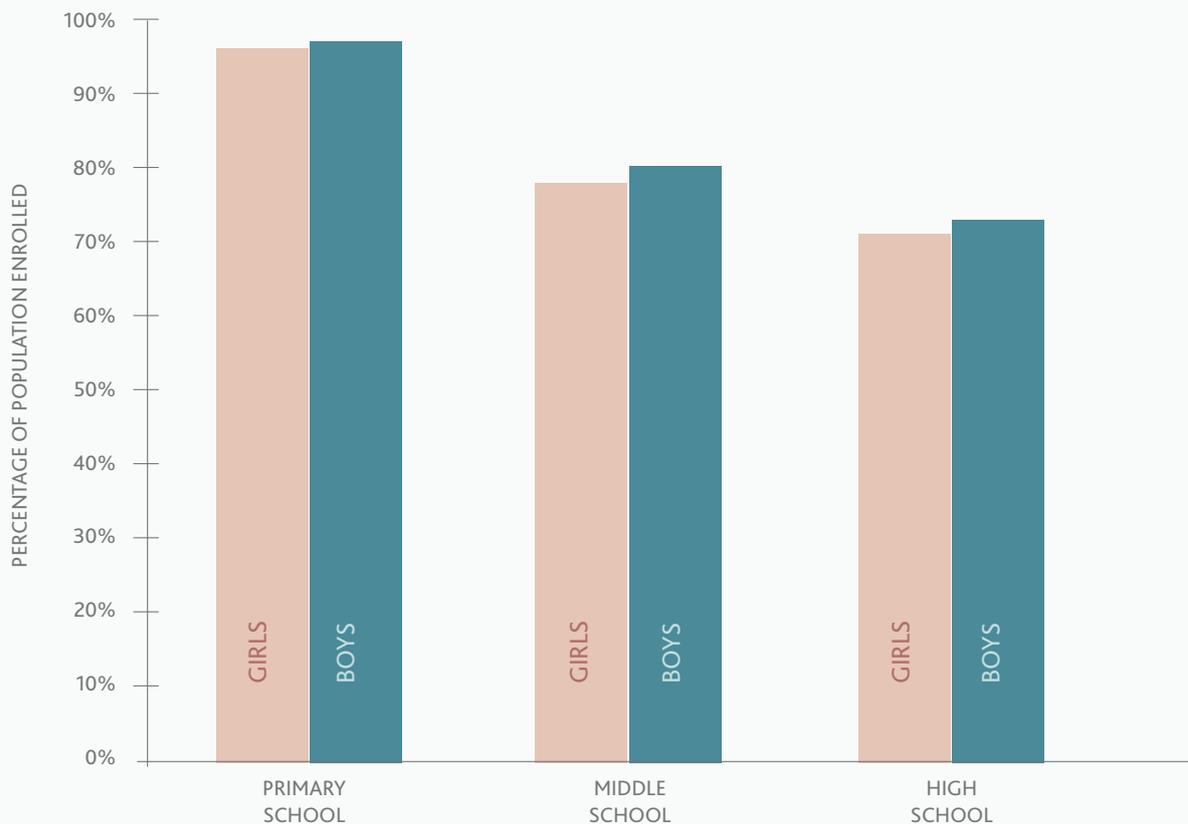
5. Greater democratisation

The Iranian educational system must complete the democratisation process of compulsory education. According to the results of the latest census published by the Statistical Centre of Iran (2012), nearly three million children cannot finish school and acquire qualification to join the labour market. Social phenomena such as child labour or the early marriages of girls are directly related to dropout rates. Iran needs a universal education for all. The justice in education is a component of education for peace, democracy and prosperity.

As Figure 3 shows, schooling becomes more critical after primary school as nearly 30% of young people cannot attend high school. Increasing the effectiveness of educational policies, the promotion of local initiatives and reducing the role of the state requires the gradual decentralisation of the system. A highly centralised authoritarian system severely limits the flexibility of actors at the local level of the school system. Iran's

current system sees most key policy and planning decisions made at the centre, and local authorities merely serve as implementation arms. The reform process must cater to altering the current centralised system. In a socioeconomic transition, a moderate approach may well be the least disruptive short-term solution; but ministries of education will clearly need to continue the decentralisation process in those areas they deem to be most appropriate.

FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION ENROLLED BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION (2010)



All of these reforms can be grouped into four categories: curriculum reform, legislation and educational policies reform, organisational and management reform, and the reform of teacher training. These reforms cannot be achieved with the same momentum if we take into account political and educational conditions. Educational reforms are often linked to social and political reforms. The process of decentralisation is seldom driven purely by educational goals but is part of broader processes of state reform motivated by a combination of political and other factors (Bird and Vaillancourt, 1998).

Educational reforms in Iran have always been imposed by the government through undemocratic processes. Future reform should be a participatory reform. This is where the school of democracy and democratic practice begins.

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- ² In 2008, Freedom House, a non-governmental organisation that conducts research on political freedom and human rights, released a study of 95 compulsory school textbooks, published between 2006-2007 under the supervision of the Iranian Ministry of Education at elementary, junior high, and high school levels. The book, *Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran's Textbooks*, embodies the research findings and viewpoints of the author. Methodology required three types of analyses: statistical analysis of 3,115 pictures from all the textbooks to demonstrate gender differences; quantitative analysis of 412 Persian language textbooks; and qualitative analysis of 95 textbooks (11,000 pages) to select relevant sections for the study of the image of the "other" (Paivandi, 2008).
- ³ The term *ommat* is a Koran concept, which is applied to the community of Muslims and has been in use since the time of the Prophet of Islam. Unlike the concept of nation, the term *ommat* is not concerned with geographic boundaries but is applied to the community of people whose religion is Islam.

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