Human Development Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1999
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Foreword by the Head of the Plan and Budget Organization

Two decades of sustained effort involving cultural, social, political and economic transformation have wrought remarkable achievements in human development in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in education and health. Realized despite the economically and developmentally draining Imposed War with Iraq in the Islamic Republic's early years, these achievements can be attributed in no small measure to the First and Second Development Plans which laid the groundwork for growth in GNP and improvement in human development indicators.

The Third Development Plan represents the pursuit and expansion of this reform-cultural, social and political-and should foster higher economic growth and a stronger social security system, all of which augurs well for further gains in human development.

This first Human Development Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran was compiled under the supervision of the Plan and Budget Organization using reports prepared by the directors and experts of various agencies and organizations. The United Nations Development Programme and the other UN agencies in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as their international consultants who reviewed the final draft, made an important contribution to this report.

It is my duty here to express my thanks to all those who had a share in the preparation of the report. I would particularly like to acknowledge Mr. Abdolhamid Mosfian (National Project Director), Mr. Masoud Mohammadi Alamuti (Principal Coordinator and member of the Editorial Committee), Dr. Mohammad Reza Sharifrazadeh and Dr. Mehdi Assali (members of the Editorial Committee), Dr. Farhad Noorbakhsh and Mr. Omar Noman (international consultants). I would also like to thank Dr. Mir Mahdi Seyyed Isfahani, head of the Management and Development Centre of Iran, for his valuable cooperation with the Plan and Budget Organization on this project.

It is my hope that this report will be a stepping stone in the regular publication of national human development reports of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the coming years.

Mohammad Ali Najafi
Vice President
Head of the Plan and Budget Organization
Foreword by the
United Nations Resident Coordinator

The first Human Development Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran reflects the debate that is taking place within the government and, increasingly, within society at large. Not only does it give a picture of the current situation in the country, but it also champions the national agenda for social and economic reform.

The report's general perspective is enlightening and constructive. There are strong messages on good governance, economic development, gender equity, population issues and environmental protection—messages that are attuned to the concerns and priorities of the United Nations. Along with the forthcoming Third Development Plan, the report will become a key reference to those in Iran and elsewhere who wish to gain a better understanding of this country and the concerns of its government.

The United Nations family in the Islamic Republic of Iran is pleased to have contributed its ideas and resources to this landmark effort—an effort that is already bearing fruit. Spurred on by the findings published here, the UN family is designing a joint project with the government in Sistan and Baluchestan, the province with the lowest human development index in the country. Though still in its early planning stages, this integrated effort to eradicate poverty in its many forms already speaks of a vision that is shared by the United Nations, the government and civil society.

On behalf of the United Nations family, I congratulate the Plan and Budget Organization and the other institutions that have devoted so much time and energy to the first National Human Development Report. This is a milestone occasion on which the United Nations reiterates its firm commitment to the development goals of the host country and all its people.

Francesco M. Bastagli
UN Resident Coordinator

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Preface by the Editorial Committee

The Human Development Report by the United Nation Development Programme is the brainchild of the late professor Mahbub ul Haq, whose deep insight and intellectual acumen gave rise to a new conceptual framework in the literature of development. Today, ten years from the publication of the first Human Development Report in 1990, this conceptual framework has gained a special place at the global level, exerting enormous influence on decision-makers, researchers, academics and even ordinary citizens.

The idea of human development emerged from the assumption that income does not constitute the entirety of a person’s life in society and, therefore, per capita income alone is not enough to measure human progress on earth.

Professor Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate in economics in 1998, also made an immense contribution to the development of this framework. Putting forward the idea of human capacities and functions, he underlined the all-important fact that achieving a better life has more to do with nurturing and expanding human potentialities and capabilities than constantly promoting consumption of ever more goods and services. Accordingly, the enhancement of the individual’s mental capabilities through education, along with the strengthening of his or her ability to earn a living, is one of the basic elements of human development.

Although the Human Development Index is still being seriously debated in academic circles all over the world, what is beyond a shadow of a doubt is that it has greater explanatory force-in any society-than the measure of gross domestic product. But the concept of human development continues to evolve, with increasing attention being paid to the idea that analysis of a country’s human development index needs to be considered from a longer perspective—one that takes into account the functioning of its cultural, political and economic institutions.

Today, perhaps, dialogue is needed more on the social changes affecting the promotion or decline of human development than on the human development index as such. This is a debate that can be conducted more effectively in national human development reports than in the Human Development Report proper.

Today, the publication of more than a hundred national human development reports by various countries is a confirmation of the growing influence of these reports at the national level. Concentrating on issues relating to human development in individual countries, these reports provide a better opportunity than their parent publication to identify national human development challenges and achievements and make recommendations for the improvement of citizens’ quality of life. Although the reports are compiled in cooperation with governments, they are designed to belong to all individuals and social groups, and consequently reflect the independent opinions of researchers and experts in the field of development. Because they address the public and non-governmental institutions in the social, cultural and political spheres as well as government decision-makers, the reports prepare the
ground for fruitful critical dialogue. The critical and independent nature of these national reports could lend them national and international reliability, making them valuable to a wide range of users—but only if their objective analysis of human development trends is informed and enriched by an analytical review of the role of social change.

This is the context in which the first Human Development Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran was prepared. The focus of the Iranian project has been to discern the role of an empowering social environment in the enlargement of human choices and to present a realistic profile of the country’s human development achievements. The challenges facing the country have also been discussed in light of a comprehensive analysis of I. R. Iran’s human development indicators and the various demographic, economic, educational, health and environmental dimensions involved. Throughout the report, particular emphasis has been placed on the status of women.

This exercise has resulted in the presentation of a new agenda for human development in I. R. Iran, informed by a profound analysis of the social changes affecting it. The remarkable progress in I. R. Iran’s educational and health indicators and the relatively steady growth of per capita income are the most important findings to emerge from the analysis of the country’s human development profile. Therefore, the new agenda for higher human development requires a package of structural reforms, two fundamental components of which are political development and transition to a competitive economy.

The Editorial Committee takes this opportunity to thank all the working groups that have provided it with detailed reports for the compilation of the first Human Development Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We also acknowledge the important contributions of Massoumeh Raghebi, Ladan Nowroozi, Bita Samimi, Morteza Sabet Ghadam, Abolfazl Abolfath Ghomi, Shahryar Alaei, Majid Dehghan Sho’ar, Davood Rahbar, Hossein Sharifi and Dariush Farkhak. Our special thanks are due to the international consultants involved in this exercise, particularly Dr. Farhad Noorbakhsh, Director of the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Glasgow. It is our hope that in the years to come National Human Development Reports will enjoy more such cooperation with universities and research centres.

Editorial Committee

The first Human Development Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran
Summary: Findings and Recommendations

Chapter 1
The Concept of Human Development

• The concept of human development has evolved, and now is underpinned by the goal of achieving a better life and the idea that an enabling social environment has an important role in expanding human choices. This concept lays the foundation for an analysis in national human development reports of the impact of social change on human development.
• The expansion of people’s choices through higher incomes and better education and health for all is a goal that is clearly expressed in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The interaction between the two founding principles of I. R. Iran—Islam and republicanism—paves the way for the creation of an enabling social environment for human development.
• The necessity of enlarging human choices is an idea shared by the human development approach and the doctrine of spiritual evolution in Islamic thought.

Chapter 2
A Profile of Human Development in I. R. Iran

• From 1960 to 1995, Iran’s human development index values increased 0.452, moving I. R. Iran from the group of countries considered to have low human development to join the ranks of those with medium human development.
• In the past 10 years, I. R. Iran’s human development index rose from 0.642 to 0.758.
• Increased life expectancy, higher rates of adult literacy, and better combined enrolment ratios were the primary factors in I. R. Iran’s human development gains.
• Analysis of the trend of human development in I. R. Iran indicates that if the country had managed to achieve higher economic growth, it would have attained an even higher level of human development. A rise in per capita income coupled with sustained allocations to the social sector—particularly education and health—are key to achieving high human development in the coming years.
• The human development index adjusted by income distribution has improved in the last decade, due to relatively higher gains in the income share of the poorest 20% than of the richest 20%.
• The fall in human poverty from 31% to 18% was the country’s most important human development achievement in the past 10 years.
• In the past decade, the human development index adjusted by gender rose from low to medium. This was largely attributable to the improvement in women’s literacy and education, which was more significant than their gains in health and income.
• There has been no remarkable change in the gender empowerment index over recent years. Expansion of women’s share in political, scientific and technical positions could help improve this index.
• There are considerable HDI disparities among the provinces. In 1996, Tehran topped the list with an HDI of 0.842 while the province of Sistan-Baluchestan, with an HDI of 0.545, was at the bottom. Differences in gross expenditure per capita were the most important cause of human development gaps among the provinces.
• Disparities in human poverty among the provinces are also significant, ranging from 11.3% in Tehran province to 39.5% in Sistan-Baluchestan in 1996. Differences in the adult illiteracy rate, income distribution, and the percentage of the population without access to safe water and sanitary toilets were the primary reasons for these gaps.
• There are noteworthy disparities in the provinces’ HDIs with respect to women, primarily explained by differences in female literacy rates and the number of women representing the provinces in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament).
• A comparison of the provinces’ rankings on the gross expenditure per capita index and the human development index reveals that higher economic growth could lead to improved provincial HDIs, but that the most effective way of improving the human poverty index and the gender-adjusted HDI in the provinces would be to redistribute education and health services among them.

Chapter 3

Population Changes and Trends

• The most important factor in weakening population growth (from 3.2% in 1976–1986 to 1.3% in 1991–1996) was the considerable drop in fertility.
• Population changes have caused the active population to grow from 25.4 million in 1986 to 33.7 million in 1996. The population aged 15–64 years is expected to reach 47.6 million in 2006, which means that demand for jobs will increase substantially in the coming years.
• Rapid urbanization and high population growth have had an adverse effect on educational and health services as well as the environment, bringing the country face-to-face with important human development challenges.
• Unemployment did not increase inordinately under the First and Second Development Plans, but if the unemployment rate is to be kept at 9.1% under the Third Development Plan, 750,000 jobs will have to be created every year.
• The pattern of employment in the various economic sectors has changed over the last 20 years. The agriculture sector’s share of employment has shrunk as the services sector’s share has expanded. The decline in the industrial sector’s employment share was due largely to falling employment in construction.
• I. R. Iran is host to some 2 million immigrants and refugees, reflecting a humanitarianism and Islamic compassion unrivaled in the world.
• Continued implementation of population and family planning policies would certainly help prevent a rise in unemployment in the coming years, but the only way to address the unemployment problem effectively is to adopt serious job-creation policies.
• The expansion of employment calls for labour market flexibility, higher productivity in the whole range of production factors, and the mobilization of capital. Revising the country’s labour laws and regulations would help achieve this. Development of small and medium-sized enterprises is also an effective employment-expansion strategy.

Chapter 4

Income Trends and Economic Policies

• The first decade after the Islamic Revolution was marked by the Imposed War and the economic embargo, which made it impossible for I. R. Iran to formulate and implement comprehensive development plans. Consequently, the country suffered GDP losses and a downward trend in per capita income.
• In the next ten years, though, because of a strategic change of direction under the First Development Plan towards economic liberalization and privatization, GDP grew at an average annual rate of 7.3%. Since the economic reforms envisaged under the plan were not fully realized, and there was a concurrent steep fall in the price of oil on international markets, average annual GDP growth in during the first four years of the plan was no more than 3.8%.
• The absence of a logical relationship between the Second Development Plan’s general policies and its operational programs was a key impediment to the full implementation of economic reforms and high economic growth.
• The economic context in which the Second and Third Development Plan were prepared were very similar. The principle structural problems facing economic reform were (and are) the government’s extensive role in the economy, its intervention in price mechanisms, multiple exchange rates and insufficient distinction between fiscal and monetary policies.
• The Third Development Plan’s priorities in the economic sector are reforming administrative and management structures, streamlining and increasing the efficiency of state enterprises, downsizing government, reducing monopolies, regulating the tax and budgetary systems, separating fiscal and monetary policies, and regulating the financial markets.
Chapter 5

Education

- An increase in adult literacy rate from 57.1% in 1988 to 74.5% in 1997 and a rise in combined enrolment from 65.6% to 75% in the same period were two key factors in human development gains in the last decade.
- Primary education's share in the combined enrolment has gone down, but gross enrolment rates at the secondary and tertiary levels have registered a remarkable increase.
- Comparison between education index in I. R. Iran (75% in 1997) and countries with high human development (85%-99%) makes it clear that I. R. Iran has considerable room for improvement, even though, on average, it is doing better than most countries with medium human development.
- Quantitative expansion of education, particularly at the tertiary level, has been accomplished at the expense of quality, to some degree at least. It is very important to improve the quality of education because of its impact on the country's overall development, especially at a time when the country needs higher economic growth to achieve higher human development.
- It is vitally important to ensure that education programmes—vocational and technical in particular—are compatible with the various economic sectors' needs and human development goals.
- Important policies for educational system development include boosting private sector involvement at different levels; giving universities and institutions of higher education administrative and academic independence; recruiting qualified faculty and encouraging them to do research; ensuring that tertiary-level curricula are aligned with the needs of the economy and the country's scientific development goals; and expanding independent research and development institutions.

Chapter 6

Health, nutrition and food security

- Human development gains from 1988 to 1997 were due in large measure to the increase in life expectancy from 61.6 to 69.5 years. The drop in mortality among under-fives—from 85.3 per 1,000 live births in 1988 to 37.3 per 1,000 live births in 1997—had the greatest impact on this indicator.
- Compared with life expectancy in countries with high human development (75-80 years), I. R. Iran's 69.5 years leaves considerable room for improvement. Nonetheless, I. R. Iran is higher on this indicator than most countries with medium human development.
- The establishment and expansion of the Public Health Care network was the government's most important policy, giving 100% of the urban population and around 85% of the rural population access to primary health care.
- Policies needed to develop the national health system include continuing government involvement in health care while expanding private sector provision of specialized medical services; introducing realistic fees for health care services; giving local councils more discretion over financial allocations to health care services; and eliminating shortcomings in the Public Health Care network and the health system in general.
- From 1988 to 1997, the average share of different macronutrients (proteins, carbohydrates and fats) in Iranians' total energy supply was similar to that in developing countries.
- To achieve sustainable food security, I. R. Iran needs to increase domestic production of food items, take measures to ensure adequate levels of micronutrients in Iranians' diet, prevent food wastage, improve general nutrition awareness, reduce income poverty, and assure a more equitable distribution of income.

Chapter 7

Women

- Almost all of I. R. Iran's institutions and public organizations have established special units for advancing the status of women. The most important of these are the Cultural and Social Council of Women, the Special Committee for Women and Youth attached to the Expediency Discernment Council, the Centre for Women's Participation affiliated with the Office of the President, the provincial commissions on women's affairs within the Ministry of the Interior, a special parliamentary commission on women and youth and the family, and bureaus of women's affairs in the judicial branch.

Summary
• Women have made significant achievements in the legal arena. These include the ratification and implementation of laws and regulations aimed at defending women’s rights, the expansion of women’s participation in the decision-making process, actions and measures taken to prevent violence against women, and access to international treaties and conventions.

• The difficulties women face in I. R. Iran can be explained by the fact that modernization in the country’s economic, social and political systems has not been matched by a similar level of development in its legal system, resulting in certain inconsistencies in social life. Developing Islamic jurisprudence in such a way as to take account of the changing status of women might be an important step towards eliminating women’s legal problems.

• It will be important to expand women’s non-governmental organizations; make government agencies dealing with women’s affairs more coherent by eliminating duplication; and accede to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], with reservations on those sections considered to be in contravention of incontrovertible Islamic principles.

• It has been impossible to assess women’s share in the national economy and total employment properly because of the lack of techniques to measure the work done by women in small traditional units. Indeed, official statistics put the female economic activity rate in 1997 at 14.3%. Initiatives aimed at expanding women’s employment are needed to improve their human development.

• Some of the most important achievements in women’s health are the implementation of reproductive health and family planning programmes; greater popular participation in health care service provision; the formulation of laws and health schemes guaranteeing the reduction and elimination of occupational health hazards for women; and the development of mechanisms to give women full and equal access to health care services.

• Policy priorities to improve women’s health are: strengthen the participation of non-governmental organizations in health service provision for women; expand sports facilities for women; and develop social security networks for the protection of women.

• Although the rate of female literacy, particularly in rural areas, has grown remarkably in the past decade, female illiteracy in both cities and villages is still high. A reduction in this rate will greatly help improve women’s human development.

• The considerable increase in the rate of admission of girls to universities and institutions of higher education is undoubtedly a significant achievement. The creation of sufficient job opportunities for women with college degrees is now an important challenge.

• The human development of women in Islamic terms requires comprehensive development in all its cultural, political and economic dimensions and based on an approach inspired by Islamic spirituality so that the problems and challenges stemming from unbalanced development in women’s affairs can be addressed.

Chapter 8
The environment

• Rapid urbanization during the recent decades, coupled with a lack of attention to the environmental impact of industrial activities, is one of the chief factors threatening the human environment in I. R. Iran.

• The policy requiring the construction of industrial parks in city outskirts is one of the most effective for reducing industrial environmental pollution. To achieve this, it will be necessary for industrialists and factory owners to observe environmental standards more strictly. Another important pollution-reduction measure will be to implement environmental impact assessment of development projects.

• Domestic sewage, industrial effluent, pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers, solid waste, and microbial and chemical pollutants in ground water are the leading sources of water pollution in I. R. Iran.

• Scant rainfall, reduced organic content, increasing salinity and alkalinity, changes in land use, and industrial pollutants are all threatening the soil. Key problems are the absence of a comprehensive plan for protection of the soil, as well as excessive use of agricultural chemicals and improper mining practices.

• Motor vehicles, which are the source of 65% of total air pollutants, are by far the most important factor in air pollution. The use of a variety of fossil fuels for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes, and industrial activities like cement production, steel and non-ferrous metal foundries and chemical industries are the other leading sources of pollution.

• In order to tackle threats to the human environment, it will be necessary to adopt policies aimed at inculcating an ecosystemic approach to urban development, (particularly urban systems such as transportation, housing, communications, sewerage networks and commercial centres); raising the price of energy; enhancing public awareness of environmental hazards; assessing the environmental impact of development projects; requiring vehicles to conform to environmental standards; and expanding public transportation in order to limit the use of private cars.

• Desertification is one of the most serious threats to the country’s natural environment. Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the Organization of Forests and Range Lands has implemented a number of projects aimed at rehabilitating the country’s pasture
lands and improving their management, as well as numerous other projects. These projects have been important steps towards the protection of the country's forests and pasture lands and the prevention of desertification.

- It will be important to strengthen the Department of the Environment so that it can implement the national biodiversity plan; prepare a comprehensive inventory of plant and animal species; expand the country's protected areas to 10% of its total surface area to protect biodiversity; carefully monitor the exploitation of endangered species; impose a ban on changing the use of forests and pasture lands without conducting a environmental impact assessment; and prepare a national plan for tackling marine pollution.

- Two other steps are required to deal with the environmental challenges facing I. R. Iran: strengthen the system of policy making, management and implementation of environmental protection programmes, notably through the Department of the Environment; and enhance popular participation in environmental protection, particularly by non-governmental organizations and the industrial and manufacturing sectors.

- Expanding regional cooperation within the framework of the Regional Organization for the Protection of Marine Environment (ROPME) will contribute significantly to preventing and reducing marine pollution.

Chapter 9

Drugs

- I. R. Iran captured 70% of all the illicit opium and 90% of the illicit morphine seized throughout the world in 1990–1996. In 1998, I. R. Iran was the international leader in illicit opium seizures, with 86.9% of the world total. These figures illustrate the country's important achievements in controlling the supply and transit of narcotic drugs.

- Vast poppy cultivation and massive narcotic drugs production in Afghanistan, the booming drug markets in European countries, extensive common borders with the Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the high cost of establishing and maintaining physical barriers along its borders to prevent drug trafficking are the major challenges facing I. R. Iran in controlling the supply and transit of narcotic drugs.

- Previous legislation against drug abuse in Iran lacked provisions for reducing demand, concentrating instead on drug-use bans or penalties for offenders. Treatment programmes were few and far between.

- The formulation of a programme for the prevention of drug abuse and treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts by the State Welfare Organization was the first step towards a comprehensive planning approach to reducing demand for narcotic substances. The organization is currently taking effective demand-reduction measures by establishing outpatient treatment centres, implementing addiction prevention programmes in a number of the provinces, developing self-help services, and publishing educational books and films. It will be necessary, however, for the Ministry of Health and Medical Education's five-year plan to take an approach to its prevention strategy that is inclusive of the whole range of physical, psychological and social aspects of addiction.

- To tackle the drug problem effectively, regional and international cooperation on reducing the supply of and demand for narcotic drugs needs to be expanded, particularly through exchange of information, legal collaboration, confiscation of assets acquired from narcotic drugs, and controlled delivery. Meanwhile, exchange of information on preventing drug use and reducing demand and the provision of training programmes by international organizations would help combat the destructive impact of drug addiction on human development.

Chapter 10:

Political Development and Economic Reform:
A New Agenda for Human Development

- Political development and economic reform are the keys to the creation of an enabling environment for the achievement of higher economic growth and, by extension, a higher level of human development.

- Identifying the conditions and requirements of an integrated matrix of political development and economic reform, and providing the grounds for the realization of these reforms are the primary challenges facing the creation of an enabling environment.

- The formulation and ratification of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran laid the foundation of rule of law. Efforts aimed at the constitution's full implementation are imperative for the development of rule of law in I. R. Iran.

Summary
• A comparison between the number of participants in the various elections held in I. R. Iran and the number of eligible voters indicates that political participation is growing. Although this trend has had its ups and downs because of the nature of the different elections, the general conclusion to be drawn is that whenever there was greater pluralism, participation increased.

• Insufficient attention to the socio-political prerequisites for economic reform, policy changes in the course of implementation, and failure to implement fully some of the policies adopted under the plans were among the main reasons why the First and Second Development Plans were not completely successful in achieving their economic goals, particularly for the transition to a competitive economy.

• By forging a relationship between domestic politics, economic reform, cultural policies, and foreign policy, the Third Development Plan strives to present operational strategies for the realization of its general policies. Because it relies on the reform of regulations and institutions and pays more attention to the social, cultural and legal dimensions of development, this plan stands a higher chance of success. Nonetheless, the implementation of the Third Development Plan faces a number of challenges, notably the creation of a suitable socio-political environment for the realization of economic reforms as well as the building of the executive, technical and informational capacity required for its implementation.

• An integrated process of political development and economic reform requires rule of law and popular participation to be strengthened. This can be achieved by carefully monitoring the constitution’s implementation, enhancing the people’s participation in elections, institutionalizing freedom of association and a free press and assuring government transparency and accountability. It also requires a connection between economic reform and political development—one that can be made by ensuring consistency in the various aspects of privatization policies within the framework of the existing laws and regulations, and by reducing legal obstacles. The government’s commitment to executive reform and the provision of judicial, political and social security is also of great importance in this regard.

• Civil society organizations’ role in the achievement of an integrated process of political development and economic reform is evinced by their continual monitoring of the government’s economic and social policies to ensure that they are compatible with the legal, political and social prerequisites of such a process. It is also reflected by their activities to raise public awareness and strengthen the government’s transparency and accountability. It is clear, therefore, that properly functioning civil society organizations have a fundamental role to play in the integration of political development and economic reform.
Women

Introduction
Women’s role in development has been widely recognized since the early 1970s. Empowering women to participate in various aspects of development and promoting their social, political and cultural status is now a global priority.

Available statistical data and considerable research point to the duality of the role and status of women in I. R. Iran today. Findings relating to health, education and social participation—and women’s influential presence in the political arena—show Iranian women to be in a far better position than their counterparts in most developing, Islamic and neighbouring countries. In reality, however, Iranian women still have a long way to go to gain their rightful place in society. The cause of this ambiguity in women’s affairs in I. R. Iran is that insufficient attention has been paid to gender issues, particularly in the First Development Plan but also in the Second Development Plan. This deficiency has been addressed to a considerable degree in the Third Development Plan.

This chapter, drawing on human development indicators, attempts to identify as far as possible the impact of each of the factors affecting Iranian women in terms of the role they play in society, their achievements, and the privileges and restrictions they face in terms of material welfare and spiritual blessings.

Institutional mechanisms for women’s advancement in I. R. Iran
Today, almost all organizations and executive agencies in I. R. Iran have established special units for promoting the status of women. Some of these were set up after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, but most have been established in recent years. Different government bodies have also developed special mechanisms for planning, supporting and monitoring the advancement of women (figure 7.1).

Development of institutional mechanisms
There are two distinct sets of institutional mechanisms: special institutions, and organizations linked to the three branches of government (the judiciary, the legislature and the executive).

The special institutions are the Special Committee for Women and Youth (affiliated to the Expediency Discernment Council), the Cultural and Social Council of Women, the Women’s Section of the Islamic Propagation Organization, the Advisory Section on Women’s Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization (IRIB), and the Section for the Mobilization of Women in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The Special Committee for Women and Youth, which was created in 1997, formulates national policies on women and youth, in consultation with experts, and submits them to the Expediency Discernment Council for consideration. The Cultural and Social Council of Women was established in 1987 as a specialized council affiliated to
Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women in all three branches of government have expanded considerably in recent years. The High Council of the Cultural Revolution to coordinate the activities of the various bodies involved in women’s cultural affairs. The Women’s Section of the Islamic Propagation Organization deals with questions concerning women in Islamic jurisprudence and offers new Islamic ideas in this regard.

Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women in all three branches of government have expanded considerably in recent years, notably those connected with the executive; these include the Centre for Women’s Participation (affiliated with the Office of the President), commissions on women’s affairs in the Ministry of the Interior, and special women’s affairs units in ministries and government organizations.

The Centre for Women’s Participation replaced the Bureau of Women’s Affairs by presidential decree in 1997. It focuses on increasing women’s participation in various areas through conducting expert studies and making recommendations to government, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (majlis or parliament) and the Cultural and Social Council of Women on drafting and enacting appropriate laws and regulations.

Provincial commissions for women’s affairs within the Ministry of the Interior began operating in 1990 under the Social Council of the Provinces. These commissions aim to create an environment conducive to women’s advancement, identify problems specific to women, and promote women’s social and political participation. In 1998, 14 posts on these commissions were allocated to women at Ministry of the Interior headquarters in Tehran and three were given to women in each of the provinces.

Special women’s units have also been set up in other ministries and government

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Figure 7.1: Structure of women’s affairs organizations in the three branches of government

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Source: Centre for Women’s Participation, Office of the President.
organizations, the most important of which are listed in box 7.1.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly has also formed a special parliamentary commission for family, women and youth affairs, and a bureau for women's affairs has been established in its research centre. These two bodies play an important role in I.R. Iran's decision-making process through their deliberations on women's issues and their presentation of policy recommendations for women's advancement.

The women's affairs units instituted under the head of the judiciary were upgraded to general directorates in 1997. Their main role is to examine legal issues relating to women, identify women's legal problems and suggest appropriate means of resolving them.

The establishment of all these units is an important step towards expanding the institutional mechanisms for dealing with women's issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 7.1</th>
<th>Leading women's units in ministries and government organizations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit</td>
<td>Ministry or organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Employment Services Bureau</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headquarters for Women's Affairs</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension Directorate for Rural Women's Activities</td>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Rural Women's Affairs</td>
<td>Ministry of Construction Jihad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Unit on Women's Affairs</td>
<td>Ministry of Health and Medical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of International Social and Women's Affairs</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Head for Women's Sports and the Department of Women's Sports</td>
<td>Physical Education Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Unit on Women's Affairs</td>
<td>State Organization for Administrative and Employment Affairs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women
Women’s legal achievements
Some of the most significant legal achievements for women have been the adoption of laws and regulations which defend women’s rights and pave the way for their participation in decision-making processes, and laws aimed at preventing violence against them. Increased public awareness of women’s burgeoning role in society, promotion of women’s legal knowledge, and Iran’s accession to international conventions relating to women are other noteworthy achievements.

The Iranian constitution provides the basis for defending women’s rights and eliminating discrimination against them by setting out the role of women in an Islamic society. This fundamental law states that the family is the basic social unit and the primary focus for human growth and spiritual progress. The cornerstone of spouses’ growth and development as they found their new family is shared opinions and aspirations, which it is one of the duties of the Islamic system of government to nurture.

From this point of view, the family is regarded as a unit equipped and willing to assume the heavy responsibility of bringing up individuals who are imbued with and inspired by the great teachings of Islam, rather than machines at the service of consumerism.

Article 3(4) of the constitution requires the government to do all in its power to ensure the rights of all individuals—men and women alike—to provide legal protection for all and guarantee their equality before the law. In addition, under Article 21, the government is obliged to take the following actions to protect women’s rights.

- Establish special courts to preserve the dignity of the family and to ensure its survival.
- Set up specific insurance schemes for widows, elderly women and women without means of support.
- To protect the children’s best interests, give qualified mothers custody of their children when no other legal guardian, as defined in Shari’a law, exists.

As these provisions illustrate, the constitution stresses the equality of men and women while requiring the observance of Islamic tenets and principles. Steps have already been taken towards achieving the qualitative objectives set out in the constitution regarding the revision, on the basis of Islamic criteria, of existing laws to guarantee the truly human position of women.

Certain laws and regulations enacted before the revolution that were in keeping with Islamic principles were retained and enforced as before. These are: the Civil Law (enacted in 1928) and its later addenda; the Law of Torts (1960); the Non-litigious Jurisdiction Act (1940); the Social Security Act (1975); the Marriage Abnegation Act (1932); and the State Civil Service Act and its bylaw on leave of absence (1967).

A series of laws and regulations pertaining to women were enacted after 1979, the most important of which are listed in box 7.2. These laws are aimed at protecting the social, cultural and economic rights of women and preventing violence against them by stipulating Islamic punishment.

Women’s participation in decision-making
Women’s participation in the decision-making process has expanded considerably since the revolution. Women from all walks of life participated in massive numbers in the revolution itself, and since then have been active in all types of elections and professional groups and associations. On another level, women are represented in
Principal laws and regulations enacted after 1979 to protect women’s rights

- Law for the establishment of the special civil tribunal (1979)
- Law transferring custody of minors and incompetent children to mothers (1981)
- Women’s half-time service act (1983)
- Regulations enforcing note 2 of the law permitting the payment of pensions to the heirs of government employees (1959) and the establishment of lifelong pensions for female children and grandchildren (1985)
- Decree concerning the duties of the executive agencies regarding the enforcement of the government’s birth control policy (1985)
- Law permitting women to take early retirement with 20 years of service and a minimum age of 45 (1988/89 and 1990/91)
- Law regarding security for women and children without any means of support (1992)
- Equality of the sexes for all types of punishment and restrictive measures, and the mitigation of penalties, the suspension of punishment and conditional freedom from prison in accordance with the Islamic punishment act (1991). This law, while observing the principle of equality between the sexes, provides for the mitigation of punishment in certain cases for pregnant and breast-feeding women.
- Regulations relating to medical and economic support for the families of prisoners of war and the establishment of pensions for them in the event of the prisoner’s death while in captivity (1989)
- Allocation of quotas for the admission of women medical residents (1993)
- Family Planning and Population Control Act (1993)
- Law for the promotion of breast-feeding and protection of breast-feeding mothers (1995)
- Rural Midwife Training Act (1995)
- Executive regulations for the implementation of the social security law for women and children without any means of support (1995)
- Amendment to the act relating to the conditions for selecting and appointing judges (1995), giving the head of the judiciary the authority to appoint women with the qualifications approved in 1982 as advisers to the Court of Administrative Justice and the Special Civil Law Tribunals. They can also be appointed as examining magistrates, as consultants to bureaus of legal studies and bureaus that draft laws on the administration of justice, and to judge-level positions in legal departments and departments responsible for minors and other units with judge-level posts.
- Decree on executive measures for providing support to women on their release from prison (1995)
- Law decreeing that a number of the tribunals set up under Article 21 of the constitution (relating to the creation of qualified courts) should be allocated to the protection of the dignity and survival of the family (1997)
- Law providing for the establishment of guidance and relief units attached to the Special Civil Tribunals (1991)
- Law granting family allowances to divorced or widowed women or women whose husbands are occupationally disabled (the Coordinated System of Payments to Government Employees Act, article 9, paragraph 2, 1991)
- Amendment to divorce regulations ratified by the Expediency Discernment Council as well as the criteria and restrictive regulations on divorce obliging the husband to pay his wife a sum determined by the court in compensation for her domestic and childcare work during their marriage. This single-article act also stipulates that couples considering divorce shall file a suit to have their cases heard and decided by the court (1992).
- Addendum to the law of half-time service for women (1997) that permanent female government employees may choose to work three quarters of the regular working hours instead half the normal hours, provided their requests are approved by the highest ranking officials in their respective agencies.
- Law on the payment of the marriage portion at the current rate (1997) and its executive bylaw (1998) which stipulate that payment of the marriage portion (mehr) to brides, if contracted in current money, shall be subject to recalculation on the basis of the price indices prevailing at the time of divorce.
- Amendments to employment laws and armed forces regulations require that women are given priority in campaigns against social vices for positions related to crimes committed by women and for positions in the administration of women’s sections in prisons (1998).

parliament and there are female executives and decision-makers in a wide range of administrative and judicial positions. The growing proportion of women selected in parliamentary elections (figure 7.2) reflects the increased participation of women in legislative and decision-making bodies.
Indeed, the number of women deputies in the Islamic Consultative Assembly rose about 150% from the first to the fifth election.

The appointment of women to top administrative and decision-making posts reflects increased participation by women. Examples of this trend include women in the roles of:

- Vice President (Head of the Department of the Environment and member of the Cabinet of Ministers);
- presidential advisor (Head of the Centre for Women’s Participation and member of the Cabinet of Ministers);
- political advisor to the President;
- press advisor to the President;
- Deputy Minister for legal and parliamentary affairs in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance;
- Director General of the Office of the Head of the Department of the Environment;
- Director General of the country’s administrative divisions in the Ministry of the Interior; and
- university chancellor.

In addition, all government ministries have women advisors. These examples illustrate how women are present at high levels of decision-making.

The presence of women on city and village councils is also of great importance. In the recent Islamic Council elections in urban and rural areas, 114 women won first or second place in 109 cities. Of 28 provincial capitals only three—Kohgilooye, Kurdistan and Ilam—elected no women councillors.

**Violence against women**

Women all over the world experience violence in the family, and I. R. Iran is no exception. Consequently, I. R. Iran has been determined to develop and implement a plan of action to combat violence against women and to introduce the measures needed to eliminate it altogether. The cornerstones of its approach are legal procedures, preventive cultural and educational campaigns and protective measures.

Citizens and the government both can avail themselves of a number of effective legal mechanisms for addressing violence against women. The incidence of rape, sexual abuse and prostitution is low in I. R. Iran because of the severe penalties for such crimes. There is, however, the need for new and effective laws to deal with other forms of violence against women. A package of legal measures to address this problem is under consideration, while amendments have already been made to some existing measures (box 7.3).
Legal measures to prevent violence against women

- Consider legislation relating to male aggression.
- Consider revising the age of puberty for girls.
- Consider certain requirements permitting a man to take a second wife, including equal treatment and financial means.
- Consider a total prohibition of marriage by minors (below the age of puberty).
- Consider revising the provisions relating to a wife’s inheritance from her husband.
- Consider the question of setting an age of majority.
- Consider reviewing the criteria for dissolution of marriage on grounds of the deficiency of the wife.
- Examine effective and practical ways of preventing compulsory and early marriages.
- Discuss certain aspects of the Islamic penal code and deterrent penalties.
- Eliminate physical punishment, including flogging.
- Attempt to reactivate juvenile courts, especially for young girls.
- Amend existing laws to allow women to be employed in campaigns against social vices.
- Approve the establishment of a qualified court to hear family cases.
- Ratify the mandatory payment of fair compensation to the wife in cases where the husband files for divorce.
- Approve the obligation to pay the marriage portion (mehrij) to the wife at the current rate in the event of divorce.
- Employ more women in courts dealing with women’s affairs.
- Attach support and guidance units to family courts.

The incidence of rape, sexual abuse and prostitution is low in I. R. Iran because of the severe penalties for such crimes. There is, however, the need for new and effective laws to deal with other forms of violence against women.

cultural and educational measures are currently being developed. The most important of these are:

- to raise sensitivity to and awareness of violence against women and the violation of their human rights through public education and other measures aimed at changing society’s general attitude to the issue; and
- to impose legal restrictions on and encourage the mass media to limit its use of violent material, and to promote peaceful solutions to interpersonal problems and disputes.

A number of protective measures are being planned as well, including:

- setting up and strengthening existing institutional mechanisms, including advice centres for girls and women where they can talk about the violence they have been subjected to and receive help in starting legal proceedings;
- establishing direct telephone hotlines for victims of violence where they could obtain the information they need to find appropriate solutions;
- establishing specialized libraries for women and compiling an encyclopedia for women (this last project was started in 1997 by the Centre for Women’s Participation);
- having the provincial commissions on women’s affairs set up legal advice centres in provincial capitals to address women’s legal problems;
- compiling a charter by the Cultural and Social Council of Women on the position of women in the Islamic system that would also define the pivotal role of the family in this system;
- providing financial and other support for victims of violence;
- establishing special police stations staffed by women;
- creating national committees for the elimination of violence against women;
- introducing a scheme for the prevention of wife abuse;
- introducing a scheme for marital reconciliation (this project, led by the State...
The approach to women's rights, freedoms and equality taken by the Islamic Revolution is fundamentally different from the one taken in the Western intellectual tradition.

Iran's accession to many international conventions on women's rights illustrates its commitment to the protection of these rights (box 7.4). I. R. Iran has yet to accede to the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, however. There seems to be no consensus amongst UN member states on this convention, and in I. R. Iran, the High Council of the Cultural Revolution's refusal to accede to it has sparked heated debate among various groups. Caught in the midst of a stream of opposing views, the relevant government and non-governmental organizations and experts are discussing the most appropriate approach to this convention. The aim of these discussions is to ensure that without denying women the opportunity to enjoy the privileges and rights set out in this convention, the principles of the Islamic legal system are respected.

**Legal issues and challenges facing institutional mechanisms**

The approach to women's rights, freedoms and equality taken by the Islamic Revolution is fundamentally different from the one taken in the Western intellectual tradition. This difference can be explained by the crucial requirement that in an Islamic society all reforms and amendments of laws and regulations relating to women, particularly those that concern their legal

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**Box 7.4**

**International treaties and conventions on issues relating to women to which Iran has acceded**

- The International Convention for the Suppression of Trafficking in Women of Full Age, 1933; amended 1947. The first article of this convention provides that anyone recruiting a woman or a girl of the age of majority for prostitution in another country, even with her consent, shall be subject to punishment.
- The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956.
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, aimed at protecting the rights of women and female children as society's future mothers. The Islamic Republic of Iran acceded to this convention with two general reservations regarding consistency with the principles of Islam and national statutes.
status, must be carried out in an Islamic context. In an Islamic framework, every principle—including the principle of equality between men and women—is governed by the principle of justice. Nevertheless, Islamic Shari'a does not ignore the centrality of the natural and inherent rights of human beings. From the Islamic viewpoint, men and women are equal and identical in the essence of their humanity, but they have different kinds of responsibilities, duties and rights which require a division of labour based on their physical, psychological, emotional and behavioural differences. Consequently, any punishment meted out to them has to be different as well. This difference, however, should never be used as an excuse to violate the inherent dignity of women or to justify the denial of their rights.

Many leading authorities and intellectuals in I. R. Iran's theological seminaries and universities favour revision of decrees, laws or regulations that may be in some way unjust and discriminatory towards women, on the grounds that modern realities have rendered some notions irrelevant. An important legal discussion at the moment is the feasibility, in the framework of Islamic jurisprudence, of amending the rules and regulations concerning women that are not religiously incontrovertible. If this necessary work is not carried out, limitations will be placed on the rights and protection of women. Unless women are given the opportunity to participate in these serious legal and doctrinal discussions, however, many of the present problems are unlikely to be resolved.

The legal problems of Iranian women also stem from the fact that I. R. Iran's economic, social and political systems are undergoing transformation as the country makes its transition from a traditional to a modern society. A similar transformation is not being wrought in the legal system, however, especially where women's rights are concerned, leading to a certain inconsistency in social relations.

Two key shortcomings in I. R. Iran's institutional mechanisms are duplication in many national institutions' activities, and inattention to the problems of young girls and concentration on those of young boys.

The discussion on violence against women still lacks a definition of violence, an understanding of which groups are vulnerable to violence, the different ways in which violence is inflicted, a reliable means of measuring it and the most effective ways to counter it. What makes the fight against violence particularly difficult in I. R. Iran is the sad reality that it is mostly a hidden social phenomenon. It is not openly discussed in the family and is all but denied by the relevant authorities. It is hardly surprising that the issue of violence, particularly domestic abuse, is rarely reported or discussed in the media and, except in extreme cases, is not officially discussed or condemned.

An age-old culture of male domination, coercion and violence against women—generally regarded as chastisement—is mostly taken for granted by society. The existence of discriminatory laws and the ambiguity of other laws compound this attitude and make women vulnerable to violence, particularly domestic violence. It should therefore come as no surprise that apart from a few measures applied in extreme cases and some reasonably effective programmes designed to identify the cultural, social and legal roots of violence against women, no notable action has been taken to change prevailing attitudes or reform the pertinent laws and regulations.

Recommendations for improving women's rights and relevant institutional mechanisms
The following initiatives would improve the institutional mechanisms influencing the status of women.

- Encourage women to establish non-governmental organizations.
- Give governmental institutions dealing with women's issues more coherence.
and a sharper focus and eliminate institutional duplication.

- Encourage research centres and theological seminaries to participate more closely with women’s non-governmental organizations.
- Create opportunities within organizations for women and girls to use their skills in civil defence and disaster relief.
- Accelerate legislative reform and enact new laws to provide institutional protection for women and girls.
- Raise awareness among women, particularly of women’s rights in law.
- Increase the number of experienced and highly qualified women judges and legal advisors in family courts.
- Establish independent reform schools and rehabilitation centres for girls, and reactivate juvenile courts, particularly for young girls.
- Sensitize and train all types of law enforcement personnel as well as judges and lawyers to investigate and deal effectively with crimes and violence against women.
- Attribute greater importance to research on women’s issues, particularly on women’s rights and problems.
- Establish a centre with legal jurisdiction composed of experts in law, psychology, socio-pathology and sociology to compile recommendations and opinions on legislative reform.

Other recommendations on the prevention of violence against women might include:

- Accede to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, with reservations about any provisions considered to be in contravention of incontrovertible Islamic principles.
- Draft new laws on the investigation and elimination of violence against women which include more severe penalties.
- Educate women on their legal and human rights using the mass media, and encourage open discussion of violence, particularly domestic violence.
- Conduct more discussions on women’s rights in Friday prayers and gatherings in mosques.
- Set up telephone hotlines in all town and city law enforcement centres.
- Train and deploy a female police force, particularly to deal with violence against women and to run telephone hotlines.
- Establish shelters for victims of violence and child abuse.
- Expand counseling centres using social workers, lawyers, psychologists and educational counselors.
- Provide vocational training facilities for women vulnerable to violence.

Economic participation by women: opportunities and obstacles

As half the population, women are not only the subject and object of development but they are also important players in the process of economic and social development itself. However, precise statistical data on women’s economic participation are not easily available. Identifying women’s employment status is complicated and ambiguous for the reasons discussed below.

Among the most important of these factors are traditional and ethnic prejudices, the cultural and social diversity of Iranian society and the absence of any mechanism for accurately assessing female employment in traditional small businesses. Traditional and ethnic prejudices usually make both women and their husbands reluctant to divulge information about their employment to surveys or census enumerators. The diversity of social structures means that women’s employment in activities such as agricultural production (in the northern provinces) and handicrafts (in the central provinces) usually fall within the informal sector and are generally unreported in I. R. Iran’s official statistics as a result. This is in a context where, in reality, few rural and tribal households do not have a loom. Similarly, there are not many rural households where wives do not have an
important role in the family’s livestock and agricultural activities. Many women also work as seasonal workers in small, unregistered production or service enterprises. Despite this, official statistics showed that female economic activity rate amounted to 14.3% in 1997.

Figure 4.7 shows that women’s share in total employment has not changed in the last 20 years, even though the number of women of working age increased considerably over this period—a trend that indicates an overall decline in women’s economic participation.

- there is little diversity in women’s employment in the service sector.

This situation prevails despite the fact that the constitution provides women with the necessary employment protection. Article 43(4) of the constitution stipulates that all Iranian citizens shall, with a view to achieving full employment, be given the facilities and opportunity to secure employment, and those who are able to work but lack the means to do so will be provided with training and other employment support. Despite such legal provisions, the proportion of women in employment remains low. I. R. Iran’s economic and social development planners must not lose sight of this explicit constitutional provision when they set employment goals.

In addition to this constitutional obligation to provide full employment—which obviously includes women—other legislative and regulatory provisions guarantee equality between men and women. I. R. Iran signed the International Convention Concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women for Work of Equal Value in 1972 and I. R. Iran’s 1990 Labour Law also stresses equality in wages and prohibits wage discrimination on the basis of age, gender, race, ethnicity and religion. The Social Security Law also contains provisions that protect women’s equality with men in employment. Amongst these provisions are:

- payment of a marriage allowance and family support allowance to insured male or female employees;
- early retirement for women aged 45 with a minimum service period of 20 years;
- payment of pensions to survivors of deceased female government employees and the establishment of pensions for their children and grandchildren;
- reduction in the working hours of women in government employment; and
- introduction of a family support allowance for widows and divorced women or women with disabled spouses.

Economic recession during the Imposed War and certain cultural traditions were among the major factors in this downward trend in women’s employment. It is useful to review the most important features of women’s employment in I. R. Iran in order to understand the trends of the last 20 years. Research indicates that

- women’s share of unemployment in total unemployment is twice as large as their share of employment in total employment;
- women who work in the agricultural sector are not counted as employed;
- women lack the necessary skills to be employed in the manufacturing sector;
- the value added of women’s handicraft production is not properly calculated;

**Figure 7.4: Women's employment, 1976-1996 (millions)**

Official statistics showed that female economic activity rate amounted to 14.3% in 1997.
Issues affecting employment opportunities for women in the agricultural sector are of great importance to the Iranian economy. I. R. Iran’s female rural population is around 11.4 million, divided among some 60,000 villages. According to available statistics, about 42% of this population is under 15, 21.3% are in the 15-24 age group, 13.1% are in the middle age group and 4.9% are 65 or over.

Studies show that more than half the labour force engaged in farming and livestock raising is female, particularly in the northern and southern regions. Informal employment of women in rural areas provides an opportunity for initiatives aimed at expanding organized economic participation of women. The Ministries of Construction Jihad and Agriculture have already taken some steps in this direction, including organizing rural training and extension activities; organizing carpet weavers; setting up rural women’s production networks; launching women’s self-employment programmes; and expanding women’s cooperatives and non-governmental organizations.

Training and extension activities were officially launched in 1993 to improve rural women’s economic and social situation. Women are given training on how to improve the quality of foodstuffs and the health and quality of livestock, environmental issues, home economics and productivity management. They are also trained in vocational and technical skills such as carpet and kilim weaving, sewing and other traditional Iranian industries.

Hand-woven carpets are one of I. R. Iran’s most important non-oil exports. There are currently 282 carpet weaving cooperatives and trade unions with a combined membership of over 6,000 weavers, 70% of whom are rural women. This illustrates how organizing female weavers can be an extremely effective means of expanding rural women’s economic participation. There are indications that the establishment of 1,000 workshops and rural women’s cooperatives has helped increase employment among women heads of household in handicrafts and home-based and small enterprises. The Ministry of Construction Jihad has so far succeeded in setting up 80 rural women’s cooperatives all over I. R. Iran. With the help of low-interest loans from Iranian banks, these cooperatives have been able to establish production units for women in various industries.

To date, 46 women’s production networks have been set up in clothing, handicrafts, dairy and animal products, forestry and herding, and 663 job skills centres have also been set up nationwide. Construction Jihad’s rural women’s groups have also been active in preserving and rehabilitating the natural resources and watersheds so crucial to women’s employment.

The Agriculture Bank launched a new initiative in 1994 to provide banking facilities to female heads of household; this group of women is among the most vulnerable in the country, especially in rural areas. The scheme provides easy credit facilities to rural women to support their productive activities.

The First and Second Development Plans also recognized the issue of women’s self-employment. Banking facilities aimed at strengthening self-employment among women were included for the first time in the 1993 budget. The Islamic Consultative Assembly also approved the establishment of a fund to support job opportunities for women. Three units are currently active within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to provide protection for women’s self-employment: the Women’s Self-employment Unit; the Women’s Job Placement and Self-employment Loans Unit; and the Vocational and Technical Training Organization. In addition, the Ministries of Agriculture, Construction Jihad, Cooperatives and Commerce are also supporting women’s self-employment schemes.
The establishment of women's cooperatives and non-governmental organizations within the Ministries of Agriculture, Cooperatives and Construction Jihad has helped expand women's participation. The 92 non-governmental organizations mostly engaged in economic or charitable activities have also been effective in addressing some of women's most acute needs.

Despite all these measures and the opportunities created for women's economic participation, certain historical, cultural, legal and economic obstacles have caused women to have a much lower share of total income than men. This calls for the adoption of new initiatives.

**Recommendations for the enhancement of women's economic participation**

Because the impediments to women's economic participation in I. R. Iran are diverse and complex, policy initiatives to counter them need to be comprehensive. These are some important initiatives:

- Review the cultural and social traditions that hinder the expansion of women's employment on religious or ethnic grounds.
- Review and reform existing laws and regulations to increase the proportion of women in the workforce.
- Expand home-based employment for women and increase women's participation in small industries.
- Improve women's technical skills and education in the sciences so that they have greater access to employment in specialized and new-technology fields.
- Encourage non-governmental organizations to offer vocational and technical training, particularly training in home-based industries, in poor rural and tribal regions.
- Support development of the agriculture-related industries with a view to increasing rural women's employment.
- Promote a gender-oriented approach to formulating national development plans.
- Support female-headed households and women without other means of support, particularly in rural areas.
- Increase women's involvement at higher levels of decision-making on employment issues.
- Establish a balance between supply and demand in the female labour force, emphasizing merit and qualifications as the basis for recruitment.

**The health status of women: achievements and challenges**

Some of the most important factors in the improvement of women's health in the last 20 years have been:

- the implementation of population control programmes, including reproductive health and family planning services;
- expanded popular participation in the provision of health services;
- the new laws, regulations and schemes brought in to reduce occupational health hazards for working women; and
- the development of mechanisms giving women full access to health care services.

There is no doubt that the population control programmes of recent years have greatly contributed to women's well-being. Because women are having fewer children,
Increasingly, though, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in health promotion—particularly the promotion of women’s health.

the maternal mortality rate has fallen, and married women’s health has improved. The government attaches special importance to premartial counseling, which, because it has a reproductive health component, improves women’s health remarkably. There are currently 478 premartial counseling centres in I. R. Iran, where brides-to-be attend classes on reproductive health and family planning after they have taken the necessary medical tests.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Education is responsible for drafting and implementing family planning policies and programmes. Increasingly, though, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in health promotion—particularly the promotion of women’s health—and are establishing and running health services centres, raising public awareness of health issues and making recommendations on how to improve Iranians’ health status. Organizations include the Iranian Society of Midwives, the Woman and Family Association, the Islamic Association of Iran’s Medical Community, and the Kahrizak Group of Charitable Women. Importantly, the government is very positive about the expanded role these organizations are playing in the development process.

Special programmes have also been designed to improve the nutritional status of pregnant women since malnutrition during pregnancy is considered a threat to the expectant mother’s health. Pregnant women are also provided with iron supplements because of the general iron deficiency in the Iranian diet.

The achievements of women in gaining full and equal access to health care services should be seen from a broader perspective. Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, primary health care has been the cornerstone of the new public health care system, a nationwide network that is the focus of all health care planning and management.

Under this public health care system (commonly called the PHC), Rural Health Centres offer a wide range of health services, while Urban Health Centres provide Iranian families with health information and training, particularly on women’s health issues. Since 1990, the Ministry of Health and Medical Education has employed the services of women Community Health Volunteers to strengthen its health programmes in the poor urban communities. This network is essentially a non-governmental organization offering health services, especially to women, in cooperation with the responsible government agencies.

Another achievement in the health status of Iranian women is the remarkable improvement in family health indicators. Of particular importance in this regard have been the provision of access to safe drinking water and sanitary toilets for the entire urban population and most rural households; an increase in the number of safe deliveries; a decline in maternal mortality; immunization against diphtheria and tetanus; and progress in the treatment of infertility.

The Health Houses in rural areas and Urban Health Centres keep files on all households under their care. The files all
contain a special form concerning the care of pregnant women (figure 7.6).

Figure 7.6: Pregnant women in rural and urban areas visited by a health care professional more than twice during their pregnancy, 1997 (percent)

![Figure 7.6](image)

*Source: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), Ministry of Health and Medical Education, 1997*

These statistics, which report health care provided to pregnant women aged 15 to 49 who have given birth during the last five years, indicate that about 80% of urban mothers and 73% of rural mothers have been attended to more than twice during their pregnancy. Trained professionals assist at 86% of births in I. R. Iran, although the number of deliveries attended by untrained people is six times higher in rural areas than it is in cities (figure 7.7).

The provision of health care—coupled with other factors such as higher female literacy, the supply of safe drinking water and improved communications—has reduced the maternal mortality rate from 140 per 100,000 live births in 1985 to 37.4 per 100,000 live births in 1997.

Pregnant women in I. R. Iran must be immunized against diphtheria and tetanus. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) in 1997 showed that around 77% of pregnant women had been vaccinated against tetanus. No reliable figure was available for immunization against diphtheria. As far as infertility treatment is concerned, I. R. Iran's first in-vitro fertilization (IVF) unit opened in 1989 in Yazd, where the first IVF baby was born in early 1990. More than 22 public-sector IVF units are now operating in I. R. Iran and the private sector is also highly active in this field.

Despite these achievements in women's health, I. R. Iran faces a number of challenges, including malnutrition and maternal health deficiencies (leading ones being low iron and calcium intake); the spread of certain infectious diseases; limited treatment facilities for infertility; inadequate health care for older women, particularly treatment for the effects of menopause; and insufficient reproductive health programmes for young women.

There is no reliable data on malnutrition in women of reproductive age. Surveys carried out by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF indicate that, based on their haemoglobin count, 33.5% of urban mothers and 33.3% of rural mothers are suffering from anaemia. Using standards recommended by WHO, 16.6% of all Iranian women—14% of urban women and 18% of rural women—suffer from anaemia and iron deficiency. Even though a startling proportion of I. R. Iran's women are suffering from anaemia and iron deficiency, the programme for providing iron supplements has been confined to pregnant women. Deficiencies in calcium and vitamins A and B₁₂ are similarly serious—some women are more than 50% deficient in these nutrients.

About 80% of urban mothers and 73% of rural mothers have been attended to more than twice during their pregnancy.
In addition, research related to the nutrition of expectant mothers has demonstrated that a large amount of folic acid ingested before conception reduces the incidence of neural tube defects and other congenital anomalies in newborns. However, no concrete action has yet been taken to supply expectant mothers with folic acid supplements or to inform them of its benefits. Similarly, the importance of adequate levels of retinol in preventing illness in pregnant women and newborns has yet to receive due attention.

**Basic measures for improving women's health**

Although I. R. Iran has made remarkable progress in promoting women's health over the last 20 years, some of the remaining challenges require urgent action.

- Create suitable opportunities for training women and employing them in various health programmes.
- Design a curriculum for a serious educational programme on reproductive health (sex education and sexually transmitted diseases in particular) which takes I. R. Iran's cultural context into consideration.
- Strengthen the involvement of women's non-governmental organizations in the provision of health services to women.
- Encourage and empower men to take more responsibility in married life.
- Provide more sports facilities for women.
- Extend social security networks in order to provide protection for women, especially housewives and vulnerable women.
- Expand programmes that deliver iron, calcium and vitamin supplements to women.

**Educational achievements and challenges**

The remarkable increase in the female literacy rate since the revolution is one of I. R. Iran's major achievements. Female literacy was only 35.6% in 1976, but ten years later it had risen to 51.0%, continuing its steep upward trend to 67.1% in 1991 and 72% in 1996. In the same period, the literacy rate for rural women rose from 17.4% to 62.4%, even more than for urban women among whom it grew from 55.7% to 81.7%. Literacy among women grew even faster than it did among men (figure 7.8).

The 21% increase in the female literacy rate can be attributed to the literacy policies and measures adopted under the First and Second Development Plans, and to the efforts of the Literacy Movement.

I. R. Iran therefore still faces a daunting challenge particularly in rural areas, where improved literacy rates would have a considerable impact on women's human development.

The female literacy rate in some provinces, particularly Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan, is much lower than it is nationally. If special measures were taken to enhance female literacy in these provinces, their gender-adjusted HDI could be improved considerably.

The educational progress of women over the last 20 years has by no means been confined to literacy. Women have also made remarkable progress in terms of secondary education. The ratio of female to male students increased from 66% in 1976 to 90% in 1996 at primary level, from 57% to
83.5% at guidance level, and from 59% to 99% at high school level.

The advances made by women in secondary education, particularly during the second decade of the revolution, can be ascribed to the educational goals and policies of the First and Second Development Plans. Noting the relative lack of girls in secondary education, the First Development Plan called for an increase in the ratio of female to male students from 45% to 48% at primary level, from 39.8% to 41.3% at guidance level, and from 43% to 45% at high school level. These targets were almost completely met at the primary and high school levels—and at the guidance level the plan’s target was exceeded by 1.7%, due largely to the expansion of educational facilities, especially in rural areas.

By the end of the First Development Plan, a number of challenges facing the provision of secondary education for girls were recognized. These included villagers’ reluctance to send their daughters to school; too few guidance and high schools, particularly in rural areas; a shortage of female teachers; and the wide gap between the number of male and female students in rural and poor areas, due to a lack of suitable facilities for girls.

In response, the Second Development Plan focused on balancing the gender distribution of students in the poorer regions and attracting girls of school age to school. The plan set a number of targets, including raising the ratio of female to male students in poorer regions from 48.1% in urban areas and 46.3% in rural areas in 1993 to around 48.5% by 1998; increasing the ratio at guidance level from 46.8% in urban areas and 37.4% in rural areas to 47.5%; and, in high schools, bringing the ratio up from 42% to 45.1%. All these targets had been met by the end of the Second Plan period.

**Women’s development in I. R. Iran is a process that involves development in the most comprehensive sense of the word, embracing the whole range of its cultural, political, economic and social dimensions, while especially emphasizing Islamic spirituality.**
Nonetheless, there are still problems in secondary education for girls, chief among them being the limited number of women at management and decision-making levels; a shortage of female teachers at guidance and high schools; the lower rate of female enrolment at these levels, particularly in the poorest regions; and insufficient attention paid to girls' vocational and technical education.

Although the higher education sector has grown considerably over the last 20 years, women have not made the gains expected of them at this level. The First Development Plan had no specific policy for the quantitative and qualitative advancement of young women in higher education. Indeed, the ratio of female to male tertiary level students had declined from 28.7% in 1989 to 28.1% by the end of the plan, due in part to restrictions on the admission of women to I. R. Iran's universities and other institutes of higher education. Providing talented students equal opportunity for access to higher education was one of the policies of the Second Development Plan.

By 1997 and 1998, after a number of the restrictions on university admission for women had been lifted—and families had become more interested in higher education for their daughters—women accounted for more than 52% of the new entrants to higher education. It was a significant increase over previous years. The healthy cultural environment in I. R. Iran's universities and institutions of higher education resulting from the observance of Islamic values in all their activities encouraged most Iranian families to support their daughters' quest for higher education. Special measures to support the enrolment of women in a number of fields such as midwifery and obstetrics and gynaecology have also played a part in increasing the number of young women seeking higher education.

The following measures are recommended to further the achievements of girls and women at various levels of education:

- Make efforts to reduce women's illiteracy rates, particularly in rural areas.
- Increase girls' access to education at all levels, emphasizing rural areas.
- Adopt a gender-sensitive approach to secondary education planning.
- Increase women's participation in planning and setting education policy and increase their presence at management levels.
- Improve the match between the subjects studied by women at the tertiary level and the job market.
- Formulate a long-term, gender-oriented human resource development policy that will expand the presence of women specialists in the Iranian job market.

Women's Islamic identity: cultural challenges

The Cultural and Social Council of Women was established to carry out the Islamic Republic's cultural policies. In 1996, it formulated a number of national policies on women, notably to improve the general cultural environment of I. R. Iran; enhance the level of women's culture and knowledge; revive the dignity of women; develop women's activities and education; and pave the way for women to attain the highest possible positions in the scientific and religious spheres.

The achievements of women following the victory of the Islamic Revolution are wide-ranging, and include their decisive role in the victory of the revolution itself and their support for the system's cultural policies, particularly those that relate to women's rights in Islam and emphasize the elimination of false and unjustifiable customs that violate women's rights. Imam Khomeini's progressive views, based on a new definition of the Muslim woman's role, have helped pull down the walls of ignorance and superstition found in some traditional Islamic societies. The numerous cultural studies on women's issues that
supported the women's reformist movement, the remarkable increase in the number of female researchers, and the growing number of women's publications all evince these achievements.

Women also face cultural challenges. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, practices such as the Islamic dress code were more rigorously applied to women than to men with the aim of moulding Iranian society to Islamic principles. As a result, certain misconceptions grew about the role of women in the Islamic Republic, causing other countries to underestimate the outstanding achievements of Iranian women in different aspects of their personal and public lives. Consequently, a great and sacred challenge facing Iranian women is to correct the erroneous images that prevail about them by introducing the true face of Islamic women to the world—not only to the West, but also to Eastern and even other Islamic societies. The role of I. R. Iran's cultural institutions is made more onerous by their need to present the important role of women in I. R. Iran.

In the face of these challenges, there needs to be interaction between an understanding of the true identity of the Muslim woman and recognition of the exigencies of the modern world. It is an interaction that should make it possible for women to preserve the essence of Islam while assuming a role—particularly in the economic and social spheres—that is compatible with the global environment today. A reaffirmation of this compatibility will contribute not only to broadening women's choices but also to creating favourable conditions for a comprehensive process of development in I. R. Iran.

Working within this framework, some important cultural initiatives—initiatives that take the religious, cultural and socio-economic dimension of women's role into account—could be taken to advance women's development in I. R. Iran.

• Develop an applicable model for women's cultural development that makes reference to criteria such as cultural creativity, equal access to information and education, and the preservation of cultural originality and authenticity.
• Adopt an integrated approach to cultural decision-making at the macro level and coordinate macro-level policies aimed at improving the status of women.
• Assure the flexibility and dynamism of cultural policies concerning women by emphasizing, particularly, the expansion of cultural research activities conducted jointly by religious centres and universities.

The role of I. R. Iran’s cultural institutions is made more onerous by their need to present the important role of women in I. R. Iran.