

# How do higher education affect Iranian women's life choices?

A Minor Field Study of Female Higher Educational Opportunities in Iran

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# Abstract

Iranian women have since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, significantly improved their access to higher education, nonetheless they are remarkably underrepresented in the formal labour sector. The objective of this thesis is to explore how women themselves perceive their higher educational opportunities, and in what way this education can affect their life choices. A Minor Field Study of qualitative nature has thus been carried out at the University of Teheran during February and March 2012, where interviews were conducted with 15 female students. Moreover, empowerment theories have been employed to deal with the complex situation Iranian women are facing. The adopted analyse model here interprets women's perceptions of their life situation within three themes of recourses, agency and achievements. Findings indicate that patriarchal power structures exist within politics, economics and social affairs of the country, and that these significantly control the definition of a female position in society. In turn this affects Iranian women's own abilities to define as well as act upon their life choices. Iranian women's understanding of this female position and imbedded obligations are subjective, there exists a diverse understanding among female student of what they want and need from life as educated.

*Key words:* Women, Iran, Empowerment, Higher Education, Female Position

*Words:* 9884

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# Dictionary

<b>Islam</b>	Monotheistic and Abrahamic religion.
<b>Muslim</b>	Follower of the religion Islam.
<b>Quran</b>	A book of guidelines for Muslims.
<b>Sharia</b>	Islamic acknowledged law. Refers to the totality of Islamic rules encompassing all affairs of the Muslim community.
<b>Mehjer</b>	Bride price agreed between the families of the bride and groom, and written in to a marriage contract. It is supposed to be paid by the husband to the wife on demand after the consummation of marriage.
<b>Ayatollah</b>	Experts in Islamic readings.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research Problem

Gender analysis on development planning and the recognition of women's contribution to raise a country's political, economical, and social life, has been realised by global agencies and institutions (Moghadam 2010, p. 284). The United Nation Population Fund (2011) emphasises that education is one of the most important means to empower women, and that women with education are more likely to be found in the labour sector. However, in the case of Iran empirical facts indicate that female higher education does not necessarily lead to active labour participation.

The Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) shows that over the last decades women's higher educational attainment has steadily increased. In the academic year of 1998-1999, 42 per cent of students were female and in 2007-2008 as many as 51 per cent enrolled students were women. Nevertheless, Iranian women's economic status does not match the remarkable expansion in their educational achievement. Actually according to statistics from the SCI in 2006, the overall participation of women within the formal labour sector constitute of no more than 17 per cent (Mehran, 2009 p. 549-550). As demonstrated above, it could according to certain global agencies and institutions be seen as highly contradicting that such a large number of women are educating, and yet not many women can be found in the labour sector.

Since the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, women's issues have been a highly debated topic inside as well as outside the country. This as religious values with a distinct gender ideology pervades almost every part of the state, law and society (Poya 1999, p. 1-3; Tohidi 2010, p. 121). There is a need to question the extent in which the Iranian gender relations and the political setting can be seen as determinants in women's higher educational opportunities, as well as how higher education affects women's empowerment process within the country.

## 1.2 Specific Aim

This thesis concerns political, economical and social implications of Iranian women's opportunities with their higher education. The goal is to explore empowerment from women's own point of view, as well as to gain perspective on the value and significance of higher education and labour participation among

women in Iran. Since the thesis involves women's own reflections, a qualitative case study with 15 female students has been carried out in Iran during February and March 2012 at the University of Teheran. It is important to acknowledge that the female students whom participated in this case study has included women from middle class families, residing in an urbanised area. The research question in focus for this thesis is as follow:

- *In what way can women's higher educational opportunities be understood as a tool for empowerment in Iran?*

In order to grasp the concept of empowerment under examination in this thesis it is vital to clarify its intended meaning. According to Kabeer (1999, p. 436-437) empowerment can be defined as the ability to make choice, and to be disempowered hence implies to be denied choice. She argues that it is valuable to consider that the notion of choice is qualified by referring to the conditions of choice, its content and consequences. This will be further discussed and elaborated on within the theoretical part of the thesis.

Previous research has emphasised the important need to take socio-cultural and religious context in to account when exploring gender empowerment in non-Western societies. It has been argued that when attacking gender inequalities, it is important not to deprive women of their historical and political agency (Kabeer 1999, p. 437; Syed 2010, p. 283). From the fieldwork conducted in Iran, I have realised that this should be critically kept in mind and considered a vital aspect in order to recognise higher educational opportunities for Iranian women. Further it is vital to be aware that higher educational participation only represents a small part of women's life situation, although by accessing this issue I hope to visualise other significant aspects of women's reality and their empowerment process.

### 1.3 Disposal

Here the plan and procedure for this thesis will be presented.

In the second chapter an understanding of the female post-revolutionary position will be introduced, aiming to give the reader a background of women's access to higher education since the inception of the Islamic Republic. Further, some political influences on gender relations will be discussed and previous research on the topic presented. These to enhance knowledge of the complex relations women in Iran are facing today.

The third chapter will present the main theoretical framework to be used for the analytical part, which is Kabeer's (1999) theory on how to understand empowerment as a process of three unified dimensions: resources, agency and achievements. Two additional theories will also be applied in order to better comprehend empowerment within the Iranian context. These are Syed's (2010) critical thought on western interpretation of women's formal labour participation

and Suad's (2005) idea on how gender hierarchies in family impact state citizenship and in turn women's lives.

In the fourth chapter, methods employed during the fieldwork in Iran are in focus and the procedure with successes and limitations assessed. A special emphasis will be on ethical concerns, as these are valuable aspects to address for the reliability of this study.

The fifth chapter will consist of the analysis where the material collected in Iran will be displayed and problematized. Here the theories presented as well as the background literature introduced are treated as important assets in order to examine and understand the material gathered. A discussion concerning the results will also take form, in order to realise how well the research question and aim of this thesis has been answered.

In chapter six some final remarks will be presented to address the significance and future procedure on the research topic of this thesis.

## 2 Background Literature

### 2.1 The Post-Revolutionary Female Position

In February 1979 the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown by a popular revolution, where both men and women were active participants. The state under Pahlavi favoured a capitalistic and imperialistic culture of consumerism, which promoted the selling of women's labour, and was highly criticised by Islamic scholars, such as Khomeini, Mottahari and Nouri. After the revolutionary movements a referendum decided that Iran was to be an Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the reinforcement of Islamic gender relations was a major feature of the ideology of the new rulers. Veiling and a specific dress code for women was one of the first reforms to be enforced. The Islamic leaders maintained that the Pahlavi era had resulted in moral degradation and breakdown of family values. Therefore the new Islamic state preached the ideology of seclusion, and withdrawal of women from the public sphere. Arguing that women's primary activity is in the home, nurturing and creating an atmosphere of shelter and comfort for her family (Poya 1999, p. 1-3, 9-11).

In terms of education an Islamic approach characterised the years following the revolution, and universities as well as several high schools were closed for three years. During these years faculty members were removed, new curricula's prepared and textbooks rewritten and censored from what was deemed inappropriate. After the re-opening of the universities in 1982, women were banned from a number of fields. Also quotas were placed on many of the fields open for women, this to control their access to enrolment (Moghadam & Rezai-Rashti 2011, p. 423-424). Moreover a law in 1985, stipulated that an un-married woman should be hindered from going abroad for graduate studies, this as her living situation may other ways have detrimental and immoral affects upon her life (F. E. Moghadam 2001, p. 197).

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the country suffered from an economical crisis and a high population growth. The next decade thus brought the emergence of a movement for reform of the countries cultural and political system. This included reducing Iran's isolation in the world market, applying family planning and other changes in gender policies. For example in 1989, quotas for women at the university were removed and since then most fields of study have been legally open for women. A liberation of the media led to the proliferation of a dynamic feminist press, including the creation of the influential women's magazine *Zanan* (Moghadam & Rezai-Rashti 2011, p. 424-425). The years that followed also brought awareness and growing visibility of Islamic feminists that challenged the interpretation of the

Quran made by Islamic clerics in favour of a more women centred perspective (Suad 2005, p. 161).

In the period 1992-2005, women started to dominate a great deal of branches at the universities. During the academic year of 2002-2003 women surpassed their male colleges in admission of humanities, sciences, medicine, arts, agriculture and veterinary sciences. The branches that women remained underrepresented in were technical and engineering fields (Moghadam & Rezai-Rashti 2011, p. 426-430).

After the elections in 2005, Iran has been characterized by a conservative outlook and neo fundamentalist approach to women's issues. Including rising concerns over the high female participation at universities and an on-going discussion to once again place gender quotas on enrolment. This based on the argument that women's performance might threaten the sacrosanct family structure that forms the basis of an Islamic society (Moghadam & Rezai-Rashti 2011, p. 428; Shavarini 2009, p. 133-135). Moreover the magazine Zanan was shut down on state initiative in 2008, as the authorities argued it displayed a ' "Threat to the psychological security of the society" ' (New York Times, 2008).

## 2.2 Gendering Laws

Shehadeh (2003, p. 76-80) argues that women during the revolution and after the revolution have served as political symbols of the Islamic Republic of Iran. How Iranian women dress and act has been interpreted as reflections of the society in which people in Iran live and exist. Therefore establishing laws especially concerning women can be seen as a way for the state to practice control and power.

Today many of the state laws emphasises biological differences of female and male nature with obligations imbedded. This is especially true in regards to the sharia-based family law and civil code, which denies women the right to initiate divorce and reinstated men's right to polygamy, as well as custody of children in case of divorce (Moghadam & Rezai-Rashti 2011, p. 423). Because of these rights men must pay Mehjer a sum of money given to the bride as a gift for marrying him and becoming his wife. It is custom that families of both parties decide on the amount, and that Mehjer is paid either at the beginning of the marriage or whenever the woman chooses to during the marriage. A husband is lawfully as well as culturally required to provide for his wife; in return for this economical support the wife should obey her husband (Moghadam 2009, p. 10-11).

Further, the Iranian labour law allows a husband to legally prevent his wife from working outside of the home, if he can prove to the court that her occupation is incompatible with the reputation and well being of their family. As well as the labour law stipulating that women are banned from dangerous jobs and hazardous working conditions (Tohidi 2010, p. 138). Nonetheless if a woman does work she is under no legal or cultural obligation to share her earnings with the family's economy (Moghadam 2009, p. 10-11). Additionally the state law accepts that a

woman's worth is only half of the value of a man in all-legal and financial affairs (Poya 1999, p. 9).

As discussed the cultural and economical relationship between men and women in Iran has created a bond of dependence, which is enforced by state laws. It inscribes specific gender roles of the society, where men are seen as the economical providers of a family and women should legally be able to rely on men for their economical wellbeing. Afshar (2007, p. 422, 427) argues that it is the process of development of laws that has been detrimental to women and their interests in society. She further argues that the patriarchal system that often can be found to exist in Muslim countries uses religion and faith to exercise patriarchal power.

That the political setting affects women's economical and labour opportunities seems evident. Still in what way these laws can be understood as decisive in women's economical and labour opportunities from their own point of view remains unsolved. In a country where state law invades gender and family obligations in such a distinct manner, what influences can higher education bring to women's life choices?

## 2.3 Previous Research

Shavarini (2009, p. 134) as well as Hamdhaidari, Agahi and Papzan (2008, p. 235) argues that with the establishment of the Islamic republic of Iran, families were more tolerant with sending their daughters to universities, this since they did not believe that the education would harm their religious values. Further it has been argued that the country over last decades have suffered from an economic mismanagement and global economic downturn. This combined has left Iran with a high rate of unemployment, in which females now face difficulties entering the male-oriented labour market (Hamdhaidari et al, 2008, p. 235-240). As suggested, trust in the Islamic Republic allowed women to study at a higher level and economical implication has led to a lack of possibility for women to enter the labour market.

Nevertheless, in order to better understand women's higher educational opportunities, consideration should also be given to previous research on the socio-cultural as well as religious society that exists. According to Afshar (1996, p. 200-202) many highly educated Muslim women regard the interpretation of women's position in western societies as offering a poor example for them as followers of Islam. Their religion demands respect for women and the opportunity to be educated, while at the same time providing space for motherhood and marriage. They argue that women in the western culture have been reduced to sexual objects and that women's sexuality has become a marketing tool benefitting the patriarchal capitalistic system.

Mehran (1999, p. 202, 214) argues that the Iranian revolution led to the creation of a new Muslim woman based on the exigencies of a revolutionary state and the demands of a Muslim society. Women are expected to be good wives and

devoted mothers as well as active and educated members within the social, political and cultural affairs. However, Mehran reasons that it could be questioned whether improved access to education for women should be seen as a catalyst for change or mainly an element in order to preserve the patriarchal status quo. This pinpoints the question of whether education can be seen as an empowerment pull for Iranian women, or a political leverage for the state. Perhaps because of the extraordinary situation of this country one cannot exclude that it could be both.

As discussed the Islamic Republic of Iran created a major political influence over the social and economical situation of women's lives. Although efforts to remove women from the public sphere they have remained visible, and as displayed been especially progressive in expanding their higher educational participation. Still, there is a need for further understandings in order to better realise if and how empowerment for women is achieved through higher education. As well as in what way labour participation can be perceived as an active goal of the women who are educating. I believe that there should be no better way to examine these issues than through the interpretation of understanding Iranian women themselves.

## 3 Theory Description

### 3.1 The Notion of Empowerment

In order to better grasp the meaning of empowerment employed in this thesis and its relevance in Iranian women's lives further consideration will here be given to its definition.

According to Kabeer (1999, p. 436-437) empowerment is about change and refers to the expansion in one's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this was previously not possible. It is important to recognise that the notion of choice can be qualified in a number of ways, and that some choices have greater significance than others in terms of consequences within people's lives. Kabeer argues that a distinction can be made between first- and second-order choices, where the first-order choices can be interpreted as the options people have to live the life's they want, as for example the choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, and whether or not to have children. These strategic life choices can help to frame the second-order choices that are less consequential, yet important for the quality of one's life. Choice implies the possibility of alternatives, hence the alternative to have chosen differently.

### 3.2 Empowerment as Three Unified Dimensions

After expanding on the notion of empowerment some thought will now be given to the idea of understanding one's ability to exercise choice. Kabeer (1999, p. 437) states that empowerment can be realised in terms of three unified dimensions of resources, agency and achievements.

Here these will be presented as well as clarified.

*Resources;* identified as preconditions including material, human and social resources. It encompasses future claims to resources and the possibility for those to be exercised within the given society. Access to these resources usually reflects the rules and norms, which govern distribution and exchange of resources in different institutional arenas. It is important to be aware that rules and norms can give certain actors authority over others in determining the principles for distribution and exchange (Kabeer 1999, p. 437-438).

*Agency;* identified as the process of power involving the ability to define ones goals and act upon them. It embraces the meaning, motivation and

purpose that individuals base their decisions up on, and could be referred to as the ‘power within’. However, agency can also be identified in positive and negative meanings in relation to power. In the positive sense as the ‘power to’ referring to peoples capacity to define their own life choices, and pursue their own goals despite opposition from others. It can also be interpreted in a more negative sense as the ‘power over’ meaning the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of an individual. Additionally power can operate in the absence of any explicit agency, where norms and rules governing social behaviour can be in control of individuals, this without any considerable visibility (Kabeer 1999, p. 438-439).

*Achievements*; identified as the outcomes and well being of individuals within the given society. When interpreting achievements it is important to realise that a lack of observed uniformity in functioning achievements, not automatically can be seen as evidence of inequality. This because it is highly unlikely that all members of a society will give equal value to different possible ways of ‘being’ and ‘doing’. Consequently, it is important to keep in mind that where gender differentials in functioning achievements exist, there has to exist separation between variety in preferences and the denial of choice (Kabeer 1999, p. 438-440).



These three unified dimensions on the notion of empowerment will be used as the main analytical framework in order to interpret and explore Iranian women’s own reflection of their higher educational opportunities and what it can bring to their life choices.

### 3.3 Empowerment Within the Iranian Context

As discussed, this thesis concerns a society that exercises religious ideology at state level affecting women’s rights and freedom within that society (Poya 1999, p. 1-3; Tohidi 2010, p. 121). Therefore two complementary theories will be applied, to realise the complex socio-cultural and political context that affects Iranian women’s ability to exercise choice in resources, agency and achievements.

Syed’s (2010, p. 283-286) argues that the Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) advocated by the United Nations Development Program, does not adequately take into account gender diversity and its implication on empowerment. It is an outcome of western-sponsored research where the very idea of how gender relations ought to be has been in focus rather than how they actually are. There exists a critical concern that the capitalist bias on the definition of women’s income and participation within the formal labour sector as

measurements of empowerment, may be misleading or not valuable to assess when analysing women's situation. This especially when understanding a religious context like Islam within a society, where there is a great stress on women's traditional family role in form of motherhood and wife. According to Syed, women's empowerment process and its measurements within a society should be realised in correlation with other important socio-economic aspects of tradition, religion and politics.

Suad's (2005, p. 149-151) argues that in the Middle East, family is central to understanding the formal as well as informal relations that underpin state/citizen relationships. Suad argues that citizens of a state in this region, often belongs to families prior their membership of the state. These families do not only include nuclear family but extended kin and are often patriarchal in gender and age hierarchies, giving males and seniors privileged positions. There exists an expectation that family cares, provide and protect each other, in return family members are expected to privilege these relationships over and above the self. The priorities standing within these family rights and responsibilities are often formalised into law, receiving the endorsement and formal enforcement of the states legal apparatus. Nevertheless, even if the state in certain matters subsidises family hierarchies, they also make critical use of them to guarantee the states own structural priorities that may at times be at odds with family relations and practices.

## 4 Method

As mentioned earlier, the research topic of this thesis aims to address Iranian women's own perceptions of their higher educational opportunities and life situation. Therefore a field study has been carried out in Teheran, Iran over the period February and March 2012. Here an elaboration of the procedure for this field study will be examined.

### 4.1 A Case Study

The field study was conducted in form of a qualitative case study at the University of Teheran, a non-sex segregated and state run higher educational institution. This as I, the researcher had established contact with a professor at this university that offered and had the ability to help on spot.

A qualitative case study was adapted as it allows for the topic to be studied in depth as well as in its natural setting, recognising complexity and context. It moreover accepts that fewer people are studied intensively, in order for a profound connection to be created between the researcher and the ones being researched (Punch 2005, p. 133-136, 142).

### 4.2 Sampling

The plan when proceeding with the sampling of this case was that participants would be female and at that moment enrolled at the University of Teheran. It was considered necessary that the women participating came from an Iranian family and had been raised in the Iranian society. This, as the research question aims to understand norms and values existing within this society as well as from a woman centred perspective.

The sampling came to include 15 female students, and the interviewees were approached in two different ways. First, contact with female students was made through four professors at different departments, whom were reached through my original contact person. A purposive sampling was here in focus as a specific group of people were of interest for the research topic to be answered. Secondly a snowball sampling was applied, and implies that one participant helps the researcher to get in contact with another potential participant, who in turn does the same and so on (Bryman 2008, p. 414-415, 184-185).

These two approaches of sampling accomplished a broad and valuable understanding of women's different outtake position within the society. This as the women all came to differ in age, marital status and religious believes, as well as varied in fields of study. In the aftermath of this field study, I have realised that the opportunity to conduct research at a public university could be seen as highly valuable for the research problem. This as it has allowed the study to address women whom are directly affected by the Islamic Republic's gender relations and political context, in attending a university endorsed by the state. Limitation of the sampling of participants in this case, could be that they all came from a somewhat similar economical position of a middle class family, living in an urbanised area. Additionally most of the women who came to be in the case study could speak English. In the few cases the language barrier had to be bridged a translator was used, generally a friend of the woman interviewed whom they could trust.

### 4.3 Interview Method

At first one on one semi-structured interviews were applied and this approach was chosen to relate to the complex behaviour of the women involving this research, getting in touch with how they relate to the questions asked in a profound way, gain trust and achieve an active involvement. An interview guide was prepared before all meetings and included a certain amount of topic areas related to the research question (Bryman 2008, p. 438-439, 442). The interview guide was however not followed explicitly, but changed depending on the situation and responses of the woman in question. This presented the possibility for the discussions to unfold in a natural way and gave diversity in the material gathered. The one on one interviews were conducted in an environment that the participant picked out and felt comfortable in. These locations included the University of Teheran, cafes as well as homes of the students.

After the one on one semi-structured interviews were conducted, focus groups took place with some pre-established relatively scheduled questions. The reason for including the use of focus groups was that it allows participants to discuss and make clear reasons for their arguments, as well as raise issues more freely. Although, it is important to be aware that focus groups can bring problems of hierarchical and social structures, and that this can affect the credibility and outcome of the interview (Bryman 2008, p. 475, 488-489). During the group sessions some constrained relations could be interpreted between the women, as their opinions at times contradicted each other on a personal level. Although, my overall impression is that the participants felt comfortable enough to address the topics from a natural and honest position. Unfortunately all 15 students could not participate in the group session, this due to illness, Iranian New Year holiday and other obstacles. Two focus groups were thus held, with three respectively four women in each session. These focus groups were conducted in a classroom at the University of Teheran, in order for all the participants to feel familiar with the environment.

Further, all of the interviews were recorded on tape with permission from the female students. This in order to help me the researcher in being present during the interviews, and capture the students statements word by word (Bryman 2005, p. 206-207, 450-451).

## 4.4 Analyse Method

The method of analysis that has been carried out in this case study is the analysis of narrative and meanings. This as narrative and meaning analysis deal holistically with qualitative data right from the start and can take in to account that the data often come with storied characteristics, where people may give narrative responses to an interviewers questions. It is important to realise whose voices are telling the stories told. In a general sense stories are part of the representation of social reality, and narratives are therefore a good analyse method in understanding social constructions located within power structures and social environments (Punch 2005, p. 194-195, 216- 219).

Furthermore all the transcribing of the recorded interviews had to be conducted and deleted in Iran, this as it is not always possible to bring tapes out of the country. For the thesis writing this has both help speed up the process and created a dilemma of not having the ability to go back and listen to initial recordings.

## 4.5 Ethical Concerns

As discussed above the research methods selected in this field study has been chosen to relate to the difficult issue of understanding the female students own feelings of the research problem in focus. Since, it involves the understanding of perceptions and behaviour from an outsider's perspective, it is vital to recognise the problematic relationship of positionality, research ethics and reflexive account. Next these issues will be addressed as well as problematized.

### 4.5.1 Positionality

There are three crucial aspects concerning my positionality in this case study that has been carefully considered. Firstly it is as Sultana (2007: 378) addresses that the ones being interviewed and the researcher share some commonalities that enable them to bridge gaps and make connections with each other. Depending on which woman interviewed, these commonalities have changed and the only permanent commonality shared has been our sex. Apart from that age, field of study, marital status, religion, and ability to speak English with each other, are

some of the factors that have differed from woman to woman. It is necessary to recognise that some of the women and I have been very close, and even become good friends and some of us have not. Sultana (2007, p. 382-383) discusses that, positionality and subjectivity are unstable and not fixed; dynamics change with context and insider-outsider boundary can become blurry. In order to conduct a reliable research it has been of highest significance that I as the researcher have been aware of these relationships, and tried to keep preconceived biases as well as inappropriate feelings out of the research.

A second critical aspect that should be considered is, as argued by England (1994, p. 85) that fieldwork is inherently confrontational in exposing other people's lives. She explains that endemic to fieldwork is the possible betrayal of the ones being researched. This has been a great concern of mine, and I have continually problematized to what extent I can represent the women's view without betraying their intended meaning.

My third critical aspect is the existing power relationship between me as the researcher, and the women interviewed. Rose (1997, p. 307) believes that the researcher holds a privileged position in being the decision maker of the research, and thus has the power to decide what questions should be asked. The power relationship is as Rose suggests a positionality barrier that always should be kept in mind. This, because even though me and the women may share common grounds or they may be superior to me in certain aspects like level of education, the power relationship between us will always be pre-determined.

#### 4.5.2 Research Ethics

The positionality will often be determined by the research ethics of the researcher, and some precautions can be made to insure the reliability and integrity of the people participating in the study. In my case this was for example to hand out an information sheet about the aim of my research and myself. This information sheet also explained that the women have the right to follow up the study, withdraw information or quit their participation at any time given, as well as choose to be anonymous (Bryman 2008, p. 118).

As argued by Sultana (2007, p. 375) it is imperative that ethical concerns should permeate the entire process of the research, from conceptualisation to dissemination, and also that the researcher is especially mindful towards negotiated ethics in the field.

#### 4.5.3 Reflexive Account

It is essential to handle a reflexive account as attempted here, this because it can reveal problems of positionality and research ethics. However as England (1994, p. 86) discusses, one should keep in mind that though reflexivity can make us more aware of the asymmetrical or exploitative relationships of a research, they couldn't remove them. Hence, even though precaution can be made to insure the

integrity of my participants, the study will be biased and under my influence of moral and interpretational ideas. The positionality and research ethics of my field study should thus be seen as very problematic, and one might even ask if it is possible or even desirable to conduct research like this?

As Sultana (2007, p. 375) explains there is a deadlock in feminist geography today, where fears of misrepresentation and inauthenticity have led to a general withdrawal from fieldwork in parts of the world where it is most needed. This means that fewer scholars are engaged in research that can be politically and materially useful for people. Although my study faces many challenges, I believe like Sultana that it is important to continue conducting field studies, especially concerning the situation of women in Iran, this as there is a need to further visualise their situation both for themselves and others.

In order to enable and conduct a reliable research, it is vital to continually problematize and question the researchers abilities in the areas discussed above. This has been one of my main challenges through out this field study and thesis writing.

## 5 Analysis

In this part of the thesis, female students own opinion concerning their higher educational opportunities and life situation will be discussed and analysed. This, within Kabeer's (1999) three themes of empowerment as; resources, agency and achievements. The names of the women adopted here are pseudonymous in order for the participants of the study to remain anonymous.

### 5.1 Resources

Next consideration will be given to Kabeers (1999, p. 437) take on preconditions and future claim to material, human and social resources within a given society. The aim is to clarify some of the identified resources female students perceive to access with their higher education, as well as how these resources can be understood within the Iranian context.

Overall the women expressed that their studies gave them access to valuable resources in life, though several of the students stressed that the main priority with these resources was not to attend their own needs, but rather to comply people involved in their life and society. Anna claimed: "Everyone needs education, we are humans and to study gives us knowledge about life. For me my education is good to have for my marriage, my future plan to raise children, and to be a good member of the society".

Another student Ava, likewise defined her higher education as giving cherished resources for her society and family, still her understanding differed: "Education will be really good to have for taking care of my children, but since I am an excellent student I think I should work to. It will not be to earn money I believe my husband should do that[...] some women like me, it is good that we can be in the society and work, so that we as in university continue to develop knowledge both for our families and the society". A often described outlook among students were that their education was a step towards finding a job, although not for the value of economical compensation but in order to gain more knowledge. This as they did not believe that it was their obligation in society to be the breadwinner of their families.

Nonetheless there were also students whom regarded education as primarily giving them the chance to become economically independent in form of gaining employment in the formal labour sector. Pegah, felt that education was a resource to fulfil her own needs in life and that it could significantly help her gain employment, as well as distance herself from family relations: "Since I began my higher education I see the world differently: I have been able to develop my

personality, ideas and life choices. Also as an educated woman I can find a job and be independent from my family, I think that this is most important for me with my education, that I could be economically independent”.

The students overall argued that education gave them knowledge about life and a chance to improve their living situation, both for themselves and people surrounding them. Further, they conveyed that education could be a step towards finding a job, although the necessity and rooted reason for claiming this resource considerably varied. As described above feelings towards the female role within families seems to be a major factor in regards to what resources students intend to claim in life and as educated women. Mehran (1999, p. 202) argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran emphasises women to be good wives and devoted mothers, as well as active and educated members within the social, political and cultural affairs of their society. Hence, several of the female students perception of their future as an educated woman in relation to wife and mother, very well ascribes to the state enforced gender ideology.

The concept of how Iranian women should act and appear can be understood as significantly affect their ability to access certain resources. This because of the gendered laws, where a man not only has legal rights to exercise power in a woman's life choices, but also has legal obligations to be the economical provider of a family (Moghadam 2009, p. 10-11). Furthermore these inscribed male obligations should be realised as creating a problem for women who feel the need to gain employment. Another student Farnaz clarifies: “As men are responsible for the family and are the economical providers in the Iranian society, men are prioritised in getting a job. Unless the employer wants cheap labour, then a woman might have a chance in getting a job”. As indicated here, some of the female student felt that their social position in society limits them in accessing resources that are not assigned their female role in society.

However, the present economical and political situation that Iran is facing should also be recognized as a barrier for women to access a male oriented labour market (Hamdheidari et al, 2008, p. 235-240). There were women who expressed a concern over these issues both generally in life and in gaining employment. Hana clarifies: “Today it is not only women who cant get a job but men to, this worries me a lot, as it makes me feel unsafe for my future here in Iran. I think the political situation will not getting better and the economy is really sick”.

According to Kabeer (1999, p. 437) access to resources often reflects the rules and norms that give certain actors authority to determine the principles for distribution and exchange of resources. The female students ability to access intended material, human and social resources with their higher education is as demonstrated not equal, this as the state laws as well as society favours gendered roles of female and male obligations (Poya 1999, p. 1-3; Tohidi 2010, p. 121). Further it should be recognised that while some female students feel a discomfort with their handed gender role and imbedded resources, others are content with the gender ideology practiced in Iran. There is a need to further distinguish how the surrounded environment and power structures from Iranian women's own point of view both can affect their ability to conduct, as well as define objectives in life.

## 5.2 Agency

Kabeers (1999, p. 438) idea on agency as the process of power concerning one's ability to define goals and act upon them will here be addressed. It is essential to identify meaning, motivation and purpose that Iranian women base their decisions up on. Therefore key influences that female students perceive as affecting their life choices, in regard to higher educational opportunities are next discussed and problematized.

Syed (2010, p. 283-284) argues that women's empowerment within Islamic societies should be understood in correlation with socio-economic aspects of politics, tradition and religion. This as women's social position is often connected with the female traditional family role, where they are perceived as wives and mothers restricted to the private sphere of the house. The perception of a female traditional family role is as mentioned earlier an active reality in Iranian women's lives, and a concern in their ability to act up on intended goals with their higher education. It is of interest to explore how students perceive this traditional family role and in what way it can affect their meaning motivation and purpose to identify objectives in life.

Fatemeh explains that for her religion is a major influence in how she identifies her abilities and role in society: "The Quran explains women and men's position very well and that they have different strengths. Men should work outside of the house and women should work inside of the house. This is good because our bodies, power and mentality differ". For some of the students, Islam was a key factor in relation to their perception of female position in society as well as their future life as educated women. Religion should be understood as an important affect in Iranian women's lives and choices, especially as state laws are based on Islamic rules and laws (Poya 1999, p. 1-3; Tohidi 2010, p. 121). Still, other aspects of culture and tradition must also be realised as consequential.

Masha did not perceive herself as a particularly religious person but still argued that sexes have obligations that control what they are suited to do in life: "I think a man should work outside of the house, it is important for him and his ways of being. A woman has other duties she can attend to in life, like being a mother and taking care of the house[...] it is probably my family and their values that have affected me to think like this". Suad (2005, p. 149-151) argues that in the Middle East, family is central to understanding the formal as well as informal relations that underpin state/citizen relationships and duties. Several students as Masha expressed that the idea of the Iranian family is vital to consider in relation with the Islamic gendered laws and female position in society.

Furthermore, it should be recognised that all students did not find comfort and satisfaction in the female traditional family role. Em, argued the following in regards to her perception of Iranian women's position in society: "I don't want to be a housewife and dependent on my husband economically[...] because a woman's duties as a housewife in Iran, it entails trading her body with sexual favours for a man's economical support". In contrast with Afshar's (1996, p. 200-202) description of Muslim women believing that in Muslim societies women are

respected, and not treated as sexual objects benefitting the patriarchal capitalistic system. Em, expresses that she felt obliged to comply a man's sexual needs if she were to fulfil the emphasised gender roles by state and society. It is however necessary to address that Em did not perceive herself as a Muslim woman, though she does reside in a Muslim society of rules and laws. The idea of female role and obligations in the Iranian society, reasons for this position as well as consequences of it, are as discussed not unified among women. It depends on subjectivity of different power structures including religion, tradition, culture, society, upbringing and family, as well as most likely additional aspects not mentioned here. Although, what can be recognised as highly relevant in regard to this female traditional family role, is that it defines a woman's position in society next to a man's participation in her life.

The idea of a union between men and women in form of marriage could from the discussions with the female students be realized as a highly natural course in life, yet feelings and reason concerning this union considerably varied. The women expressed that marriage had to do with "a search for love" (Em), "economical security" (Sia), "pressure from family and society" (Hanna) as well as that "Islam encourage the union between men and women" (Farah). It is important to in relation with marriage realize that men are legally handed the decision making position in marital arrangement, this in issues of divorce, custody of children, as well as rights over a woman's opportunities to engage in work (Moghadam & Rezai-Rashti 2011, p. 423; Tohidi 2010, p. 138).

Mary explains that because of these laws it is for her very important to marry someone that will share fundamentally the same ideas as her: "When I marry it will be very important that our minds are similar cause otherwise my husband could if he wanted to legally hinder me from pursuing some of the things I want from life, like educating and working". It is necessary to point out as Afshar (2007, p. 422, 427) that there exists structured gender inequality at state level that can for women significantly determine interests in society. The gendered laws in Iran should be considered as essentials in women's ability to both define and practice their intended goals. Although it is also important to in relation with these laws take in to consideration different context of a woman's life situation. This, as several women expressed that their husband would never practice his "solitary right to divorce" (Ava), or deny them the opportunity to work if this was what they "really wanted" (Anna). Furthermore there were also women who argued that according to their religion and cultural upbringing, these laws were highly appropriate. Ada conveys the following in relation to her opinion of gendered laws in Iran: "I believe that there are some Iranian women today who have misinterpreted what they are fighting fore. They think that if the laws changed they would gain rights, but what they would gain are responsibilities. Why do women think it is so fun to work outside of the house all day? It is really hard work, the Quran has decided a good path for women suitable to their natural sensitiveness".

Again religion can be seen as a significant power in women's appreciation of their life situation, yet the reality also includes the assessment of family relation and its imbedded traditions and culture. Suad (2005, p. 149-151) argues that in the

Middle East families are often patriarchal in gender and age hierarchies, giving males and seniors privileged positions. The priorities standing within these families' rights and responsibilities are often formalised into law, receiving the formal enforcement of the states legal apparatus. This aspect should be understood as an important influence in relation to Iranian women's life situation, since there were several students who indicated that although they or their families were not religious, female subordination within family structures were still in place.

An often-discussed topic was for example women's opportunity to nowadays arrange a pre-marital settlement of female legal rights before marriage. In this agreement the man can resign his initially given lawful rights over a woman's life choices. However Negar, stressed that for many women in Iran this pre-marital settlement is not an alternative: "General it is seen as very bad by society and family, if you want these rights. My sister for example she does not have these rights because of what our and her husband's family may think or say". As argued by Suad (2005, p. 149-151) families many times expect its members to privilege family relationships over and above the self. Hence, even if a woman could legally access rights to abort some of the structured gender inequality enforced by state, this was not always considered an option because of what especially families may think.

As argued by Suad (2005, p. 149-151) state laws within the Middle East often subsidises family concerns of roles and obligation. However, Suad also reasons that the state can make critical use of families to guarantee the states own structural priorities. Mary argues that women's position in society is in need of change and that it is the government in control that is the main power in preventing this: "I think that if we women want to change anything in our preconditions and what we according to the society should do. We first need to attack the legal system that controls our society and families ideas". The Islamic Republic of Iran and its gendered laws are as discussed at times favoured by family relations, although they also as in Mary's example posses power to affect and control family values.

According to Kabeer (1999, p. 438) power can operate in various ways, either through individuals themselves, by actors determining a woman's goals, or in an invisible shape where norms and rules can govern social behaviour within a society. From the discussions with the female students women's social position with obligations inscribed should be realised as a major force for the condition of their life situation and opportunities with higher education. Further this position is maintained and has been created through politics, religion, tradition as well as families, all of which are overlapping and implies various realisations for different women. It is further necessary to be aware that the environment and circumstances in which Iranian women reside has helped form their opinions.

The female students are not homogeneous in their perception of how and what their future, as educated women should look like. Depending on if they oblige with the gendered role given them or recent this female position will be a major determinant in how they define and if they can act upon identified goals with their higher education.

## 5.3 Achievements

In this part of the analysis Kabeer's (1999, p. 438) definition of achievements in Iranian women's lives will be approached. The aim is to recognise different outcomes of higher educational participation, this in order to better comprehend the content of women's intended life choices and their wellbeing.

According to Kabeer (1999, p. 436-437) empowerment refers to change in women's ability to make strategic life choices where this was previously denied them. Leylah expresses that the opportunity for her to educate improved her possibilities in life: "Education has enabled me to change my family's ideas. Before they wanted me to marry, but I fought and now I am continuing my education and could even go to study abroad, something that a couple of years ago were completely out of the question". Several women described as Leylah, that education had significantly improved their living conditions. This through providing them with an ability to argue for their cause of what they wanted and needed in life. Nonetheless, as mentioned previously the idea of what students wanted and needed in order to achieve wellbeing is not unified and depends both on external as well as internal factors of a woman's life situation.

Pegah, argued that for her higher education was important in order to find a job, this as she considered it to be vital for her wellbeing to be economically independent: "I think that if a woman makes money by herself, maybe she can stand up for herself more and become self confidence to for example get a divorce if she is in a bad relationship, because she knows she can afford to be on her own". A common argument among the students who experienced their education as a resource to pursue a career was that a personal economy would increase their ability to make choices. Farnaz expressed that: "If I for example want to attend a music class or an English class I can do so with my money, and I don't have to ask my husband or someone else to afford it. Money gives a woman freedom to choose for herself".

However there were other students who argued that working outside of the house for a woman in Iran was not a necessity to achieve a personal economy. Hale argued that: "After I graduate I will work part time, because being a wife and raising children is very important for me as a woman. But it is a job to and your husband should give you money besides Mehjer, for raising his children and taking care of the house. If a woman wanted to in Iran she could be very rich, because she has the right to demand money from her husband for her housework". Hale interpreted housework as a job that could equally to working outside the house be rewarded with economical compensation in Iran. This was a widespread argument among the student who saw their future as an educated woman within the female traditional family role. Syed (2010, p. 284) expresses a critical concern that the definition of women's income and participation within the formal labour sector as measurements of empowerment, may be deceptive or not essential to assess when analysing women's situation. Perhaps as Syed explains, empowerment in Iran should not be measured simply through labour participation or a personal economy. This, as it is not necessarily the case that a woman feels

disempowered from conducting housework. Although formal labour participation can as indicated above be associated with increased life choices and improved living conditions.

Kabeer (1999, p. 439) argues that a lack of observed uniformity in functioning achievements not automatically should be understood as evidence of inequality. This as it is highly unlikely that all members of a society will give equal value to different ways of being and doing. In the Iranian context there is a need to recognise that women's outcome and wellbeing is different depending on how they reflect and appreciate their life situation. When discussing Iranian women's higher educational opportunities and empowerment there has to as argued by Kabeer (1999, p. 439) exist separation between preferences and the denial of choice. This as there does not exist a unified cluster of women but individuals with personal dreams and hopes imbedded within their life choices.

Still, it is inevitable factual that the Islamic Republic of Iran practices laws that affect women's ability to exercise life choices. In turn this affects women's wellbeing, since all women do not have equal chance in pursuing identified life goals. Thus even though one cannot determine that women are negatively affected by the gender ideology practiced by state and through society, it has to be recognised that as an outcome of the political setting some women's life choices are significantly limited, and their living situation could at times be interpreted as destructive.

## 5.4 Discussion

The goal of this thesis has been to examine in what way higher educational attainment can be understood as a tool for empowerment. This through visualising Iranian women's own opinion of their higher educational opportunities, with a special emphasis on the ability and necessity to participate in the formal labour sector.

As discussed previously, empowerment can be defined as the ability to make choice and to be disempowered hence implies to be denied choice (Kabeer 1999, p. 436-437). In relation to this definition of empowerment, my interpretation is that higher education and its influence on a woman's life choices can be realised as having an empowering affect, although it does not necessarily have to be understood as an empowerment instrument. This as it relates to the condition of whether a woman feels disempowered in her life to begin with. Several of the female students who participated in this study felt content with their life situation, and believed that the Iranian society provided them with what they as women needed and wanted. However as also clarified there was in contrast to this interpretation, women who felt discontent with their existing living situation and experienced that they were denied abilities to make choices.

In cases were female students felt a need to increase their life choices, higher education can significantly be understood as helping them expand their opportunities, through giving them abilities to both act and argue for their cause.

Moreover, female students who already were content with their social position and choices in life also expressed satisfaction with higher education in being able to conduct their life goals in a more fulfilling way. Hence, higher education should definitely be considered from women's point of view, as having a positive impact and outcome on their living conditions.

A central issue in relation to women's perception and abilities with their life choices and whether or not they are in need of being empowered, are women's feelings towards how the female position in Iran are perceived by the state and society. This, interpretation was often connected with the importance for women to gain employment in the formal labour sector. The general feeling I could detect was that if a woman was not comfortable with her handed gender role, a personal economy and job were considered vital to improve her living conditions. There were however also women who felt content with the female position in society and still wanted to work, although usually not for an economical income but often to gain an enhanced perspective of society and life. As Syed (2010, p. 283) indicates there is a need to take gender diversity in to account when understanding empowerment processes in non-western societies. In Iran this is essential, since no such process can at least from women's own point of view be measured as unified. It is important to realise that religion, tradition, family, society and state are key powers in women's ability to both form their perception and practice their future goals in Iran.

I believe that it is vital to keep in mind that only Iranian women themselves can value their living situation as well as what their higher education should and can bring. It is important to recognise that higher education will not necessarily assist as an empowerment tool, since it relates to the issue of whether or not a woman feels the need to change her existing living situation. Nevertheless it can for some women act in an empowering way, by giving enhanced life choices. To determine an outcome of what education or empowerment should be and entail for women in the Iranian context is not suitable, this as it includes various truths for different women.

## 6 Final Remarks

In this thesis higher educational affects on Iranian women and their life choices has been examined from women's own point of view. It has been realised that the complex and interconnected political, economical and social setting, in which women reside has provided them with a female role of obligations that are of great relevance to their living conditions. As demonstrated, female higher educational opportunities are subjective and there is no straightforward plan of what an educated woman's future in Iran will entail. Furthermore, education represents a minor part of women's lives, although through accessing this realisation other important issues of religion, tradition, family, marriage and women's social situation has been addressed.

There is a need to recognise that this study is limited and only have been able to focus on a particular group of women in Iran and the life situation they are facing. Perhaps in future research it could be valuable to investigate female students perception of their higher education in smaller cities, rural areas as well as from lower class families. This as women's understanding of higher educational participation may differ in these environments. It could also be interesting for the research problem in question to conduct research on how men perceive women and their female position in society. This, since men possess the means to significantly affect women's abilities and life situation in Iran.

Even though this study has limitations, it provides an in depth understanding of these female students perception concerning their higher educational opportunities, which represent part of the Iranian reality and women's life conditions. The experience of this thesis reveals that women's empowerment process within this country cannot be homogeneous, as female reflections of their existing living situation is not unified.

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## 7.2 Interviews

- "Ada" (Semi-structured interview, February 28, 2012)
- "Anna" (Focus group, Teheran, March 14, 2012)
- "Ava" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, March 7, 2012)
- "Em" (Focus group, Teheran, Mach 15, 2012)
- "Farah" (Semi-structured interview, February 6, 2012)
- "Farnaz" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, February 4, 2012)
- "Fatemeh" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, February 12, 2012)
- "Hale" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, March, 10 2012)
- "Hanna" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, February 20, 2012)
- "Leylah" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, February 14, 2012)
- "Mary" (Focus group, Teheran, March 11, 2012)
- "Masha" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, February 29, 2012)
- "Negar" (Focus group, Teheran, February 26, 2012)
- "Pegah" (Semi-structured interview, Teheran, February 18, 2012)
- "Sia" (Semi-structured interview, March 5, 2012)