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# **Women in Management in Iran**

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## **Introduction**

In this chapter, we provide an assessment of the current status of Iranian women in workplaces. Since this is the first time that a chapter on Iran has been included in this series, we provide an overview on the status of Iranian women, their progress, or lack thereof, over the last ten years, and the challenges they face.

One key aspect of the progress made by Iranian women is their high levels of educational attainment. By any measure, women in Iran have surpassed men in post-secondary education, with 14.5 percent of women holding at least an undergraduate degree compared to 14.1 percent of men. Between 2002 and 2006, more than 50 percent of students in undergraduate programs were women. As a result, women who are currently in their late 20s or early 30s are more educated than their male counterparts (Majbouri, 2011). Despite rising level of education among Iranian women, their labour force participation rate has demonstrated a steady decline over the last ten years, standing at 13.4 percent now. In addition, their unemployment rate has increased to 21.1 percent in 2015. As a result of the low participation and high unemployment rates, only 9.9 percent of all jobs are held by women, and a large share of these jobs are in the form of part-time work or unpaid contribution to family business in rural areas.

We begin this chapter with information on the educational attainments of Iranian women. Then, we share information on labour force characteristics and examine the structure of women's employment from various perspectives including the ratio of their employment in public and private sectors, their share of different job categories, and the ratio of part-time to full-time employment. This section is followed by a discussion around the relationship between women's

education and employment. Next, we discuss women in leadership positions, including entrepreneurs, managers, and legislators. After a brief discussion on country legislation, we conclude by offering an overview of the major issues and our overall assessment of the current status of Iranian women.

## **Education Attainment**

### **Literacy Rates<sup>1</sup>**

Table 1 shows percentage of literate men and women (literate is defined as someone who can read a simple document and write) in different age groups in rural and urban areas. The first row in this table shows the literacy rate for the entire population. This rate is 82.4 percent for women and 90.8 percent for men. Although these numbers suggest a big gap between women's and men's literacy rates, it should be noted that, in recent decades, the government has placed a strong emphasis on enhancing literacy in both urban and rural areas. As a result, the percentage of literates in younger generations is very different from that in older generations. To get a better sense of the literacy rate in the younger population, it may be useful to examine younger age groups. In Iran, a child is usually six years old in order to start the first grade. Therefore, the 6-9 age group is not a good category to assess literacy rates in Iran. The literacy rate among 10-14 year olds is 99 percent and there is no difference based on gender. The literacy rate among 15-24 year olds is 97.8 percent, with female to male ratio equal to .99. So, based on these numbers, it seems to us that in terms of basic ability to read and write, there is no significant difference between girls and boys.

[Insert Table 1 here]

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<sup>1</sup> Literacy refers to the ability to write and read at elementary level.

## Higher Education

Table 2 shows the highest level of education among people who are considered literate. The percentage of women and men with university degrees is comparable, with the percentage of women with an undergraduate degree slightly higher than men (12.6 percent versus 11.7 percent). Figure 1 shows female to male ratio at the undergraduate level in different disciplines since 1990. The dashed line shows the percentage across all disciplines. As illustrated in this graph, female presence at the undergraduate level has had a steady growth for sixteen years (1990 to 2006). In fact, women's education level has increased to the extent that women who are currently in their late 20s or early 30s are more educated than their male counterparts (Majbouri, 2011).

[Insert Table 2 here]

[Insert Figure 1 here]

It should be noted that in Iran, all first-tiered universities are public and free, with students paying no tuition. Admission to these prestigious, public universities is based on an annual national exam, which is organized by a center called National Educational Assessment Center. The exam is based on multiple choice questions from a wide range of subjects studied at high school. Due to the structure of the exam, the evaluation process is completely objective and a student's mark in the exam depends only on her/his knowledge and ability to perform well in that exam—particularly the ability to perform under stress. Once the exams are graded, each student receives a mark that shows her/his ranking among all students who participated. Then, students submit a form indicating their preferred program of study to the organizing agency. Admission to public universities is based on a combination of test scores and student preferences. Students who cannot get into their program of choice at public universities would

have the option to attend the private university system including the Islamic Azad University, Payam-e-Noor and many other smaller programs.

It is estimated that about 2 million candidates take the national university entrance exam every year and only the top 5-10 percent are offered free admission to university. Historically women have outnumbered men in universities in Iran. The number of women entering university is evidence of their academic abilities and their desire to compete in a gruelling entrance process. As shown in Figure 1, for five consecutive years—2002 to 2006—more than 50 percent of first-year university students were female, with this percentage being the highest in medicine at 74.82 percent and the lowest in engineering at 23.43 percent.

We speculate that the low presence of women in engineering programs is mostly driven by the masculine image of the engineering discipline and associated work environments. Girls who are interested in engineering might be factoring in the perception that they will have to work in environments mostly comprised of men from the working class. In the Islamic culture, mingling of unrelated men and women is strongly prohibited and this principle seem to be most strongly practiced among people from the working class. Therefore, the presence of one or two women among a large number of men becomes both unusual and culturally inappropriate. In addition, there seems to be a widely held view that—due to strong patriarchal values of the society—these men would not accept a female boss or manager. We would like to mention that we do not believe that this difference is driven by any assumption regarding the ability of girls to excel in mathematics or the physical sciences. This is supported by evidence on the participation of women in education in the sciences.

In response to the increasing number of female students in universities, in 2002, the government started a plan to restrict women's presence in universities ("The History of Gender

Quotas at Universities since 61”, 2014). For four years, these limitations were minor and were not publicly announced (“The History of Gender Quotas at Universities since 61”, 2014). In 2006, the newly appointed conservative government led by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad publicly announced its plan<sup>2</sup> and imposed severe restrictions on women’s presence at public universities. While in some programs of study, these restrictions were in the form of quotas (30 to 40 percent males – 30 to 40 percent females – the rest remaining competitive), in many other programs female students were not accepted at all (“The History of Gender Quotas at Universities since 61”, 2014).

The sharp decline in the percentage of female students in 2007 (overall presence dropped from 52.4 percent in 2006 to 42.93 percent) shows the impact of these restrictions. We have not been able to find any information that could explain why the percentage of female students recovered to 51.02 percent in 2008. Our research does not suggest any change in the restrictions in 2007. Since the data presented in this graph shows the percentage of female students in both public and private universities (before 1995, the graph shows data of for public universities only), it is possible that women responded to these restrictions by attending less desirable private university that did not face such restrictions.

In August 2013, Iran experienced a change in the government and the new Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, who--compared to the previous government—advocates more liberal values assumed office. A report by Farhikhtegan newspaper in August 6, 2014 announced the reversal of gender segregation at universities (“Complete Termination of Gender-Based

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, in 2005, the minister of higher education submitted a bill to the parliament to turn these restrictions into a law. This bill was never approved by the parliament and the minister of higher education pursued the original plan without the approval of the parliament (“The History of Gender Quotas at Universities since 61”, 2014).

Restrictions in 29 Universities”, 2014). We have not been able to acquire information on the percentage of women in universities over the last two years, and are therefore unable to examine the impact of the new regulations.

The data presented in this section show that Iranian women have made significant progress in terms of education. The percentage of women with a university degree is closely comparable to men, resulting in a high percentage of educated young women. In the next section, we examine women’s presence in the labour force.

### **Labour Force Characteristics**

Table 3 shows labour force statistics for the population that is 15 years and older over the last 10 years and Figure 2 illustrates participation rate, employment rate, and unemployment rate based on sex in urban and rural areas. As shown in Table 3, in 2015, only 13.4 percent of Iranian women were employed or were looking for a job and they face an extremely high unemployment rate of 21.1 percent. Comparison of these figures between women and men shows an enormous difference of 55 percent in their participation rate and that the unemployment rate of women is more than twice men’s unemployment rate of 9.6 percent.

[Insert Table 3 Here]

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

### **Trend**

Examining the trend over the last ten years shows a steady decline in women’s participation rate from 17.4 percent in 2006 to 11.2 percent in 2014. It should be noted that we also see a similar decline in men’s participation rate from 72.5 percent in 2006 to 66.6 percent in 2014. Some analysts attribute this decline to a policy called the “Subsidy Reform Plan” introduced in 2010 by Ahmadinejad’s government (“The Statistical Center of Iran”, 2014).

Under this plan, each individual in a low-income household would receive a monthly payment equal to almost 15 USD. Even though this seems to be a very small amount, it could add up to a significant amount in a low-income family with several children at home. So, it could explain part of the observed decline in participation rate. However, examination of the percentage of decline shows a 35.6 percent decline in women's participation rate compared with 8.13 percent for men. Therefore, although we see similar trends for women and men, the decline in women's participation rate is much bigger than that for men. Another factor that might have contributed to the decline in participation rate is the steady increase in the unemployment rate, which could have discouraged job seekers from looking for a job and forced them to exit the workforce ("The Statistical Center of Iran", 2014). Despite similar trends in data for men and women, the gap between women's and men's unemployment rate has widened, with the ratio of women's unemployment rate to men's unemployment rate increasing from 157 percent in 2006 to 219 percent in 2015.

### **Urban versus Rural Areas**

Comparison of labour force characteristics in urban and rural areas shows that for both men and women, participation rates in urban and rural areas are comparable, with the rate being slightly higher in rural areas for both sexes. However, there are differences in the employment patterns of rural and urban women. While in urban areas, only five percent of women's employment is in the form of unpaid family work, 51.7 percent of rural women are categorized as involved in unpaid family work (compared with 5.9 percent of rural men) ("Labour Force Survey Results 1392", 2014). Comparison of unemployment rates between urban and rural areas shows a large difference in unemployment rate of women in urban and rural areas, with unemployment rate of urban women being more than twice that of rural women. The high share

of unpaid family work among rural women might explain part of this difference between women in urban and rural areas.

### **Wage Gap**

According to the most recent Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum in 2015 (Schwab et al., 2015), the estimated earned income for an Iranian woman is 4,787 USD compared to 27,744 USD for an Iranian man. As a consequence, Iran is ranked 142 out of 145 countries that were included in this report. According to this report, female to male ratio for wage equality for similar work is 0.59, which places Iran at 98 out of 145 countries. It should be noted this wage gap estimate is calculated based on a single-item question in the 2015 World Economic Forum’s Executive Opinion Survey. In the survey respondents are asked to indicate their answer to the question, ““In your country, for similar work, to what extent are wages for women equal to those of men?” (1 = not at all, significantly below those of men; 7 = fully, equal to those of men)” (Schwab et al., 2015, p.72). Therefore, this reported wage gap is somewhat subjective, and might not represent the actual wage differences.

Figure 3--adapted from Alavian Ghavanini (2011, p.3)—shows the income gap between men and women from 1991 to 2011. The data presented in this diagram is calculated by averaging the annual income reported in household expenditure reports of the Statistical Center of Iran (Alavian Ghavanini, 2011). These numbers show a similar pattern of income shifts for men and women over this time with a gender wage gap between 20 and 30 percent. As Alavian Ghavanini notes, since this diagram represents overall income, the observed difference could be due to difference in the number of working hours.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

By analyzing household income and expenditure from 2005 to 2011, Alavian Ghavanini (2011) examined the wage gap between women and men. His research shows that different factors such as sector of employment and profession influence the wage gap. For example, he found significant wage gap in the private sector but not in the public sector. In addition, his findings suggest that the wage gap varies across professions. For example, female to male wage ratio is 23.6 among the technicians and associate professionals group, 65.4 among service and sales workers and 98.4 among craft and related trades workers. Probably the most interesting finding of this research is that, among professionals as well as legislators, senior officials, and managers, the female to male wage ratio is 1.16.

### **Part-time Employment**

The definition of part-time employment reported in the Iranian Statistical Center seasonal reports is different from the definition of part-time work in other countries. In fact, the term used to refer to part-time work in Farsi is *incomplete work*. According to this definition, part-time workers are those who work less than 44 hours and are willing to work more. These are employed individuals who worked less than 44 hours due to economic reasons such as recession, inability to find a work with more hours, or seasonal employment **and** indicate a willingness to work more (“Labour Force Survey Results Winter of 1393”, 2015). Based on this definition, the share of incomplete-work among women is lower than men at 4.3 percent, compared with 11.9 percent in 2015 (“Labour Force Survey Results Winter of 1393”, 2015).

If we use number of hours worked as a measure of part-time employment, similar to other countries such as Canada (see Sohrab, Karambayya, & Burke, 2011), the Netherlands (see Tijdens, 2011), and Spain (see las Heras, Chinchilla, & Leon, 2011), we find a very high rate of part-time employment among women. Table 4 provides information about number of hours that

women and men work in a week. As shown in this table, more than 50 percent of employed women work less than 40 hours per week (58.87 percent compared to 24.26 percent of men). The percentage of women working less than 32 hours per week is 44.85 percent, which is noticeably higher than 16.03 percent of men.

[Insert Table 4 Here]

### **Public and Private Employment**

Table 5 shows employment in the private and public sectors over the last ten years. This table shows that, compared to men, women have higher levels of employment in the public sector. Over the last 10 years, 26.1 percent of employed women have been employed in the public sector compared to 16.95 percent of men. This table also shows that in rural areas, the majority of employment—both men and women—is in the private sector. On average, over the last 10 years, 93.3 percent of employment in rural areas has been in the private sector, which is noticeably higher than 76.19 percent in urban areas.

[Insert Table 5 Here]

### **Employment in Different Sectors and Occupations**

In this section, we provide more detail on the structure and nature of women's employment. Figure 4 shows employment distribution in agriculture, manufacturing, and service sectors. As illustrated in this figure, compared with men, women have a higher involvement in service and agriculture sectors. We speculate that these differences are mainly influenced by socialized gender roles that assume manufacturing jobs are unsuitable for women. However, the overall distributions across these sectors are comparable.

[Insert Figure 4 Here]

Figure 5 shows a more nuanced picture of women employment and occupations based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88) guidelines (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015). As illustrated in this figure, the employment distribution of men and women in different occupations is noticeably different. The distribution for women shows that three job categories-- professionals, craft and related trades workers, and skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers--form more than 50 percent of women’s employment. In contrast, men’s employment has a more balanced distribution across different occupations. In Figure 6, women’s share in each of these job categories is illustrated. As shown in this figure, women have a very high presence (41.34 percent) in the professionals category which includes the following six occupation groups: science and engineering professionals, health professionals, teaching professionals, business and administration professionals, information and communication technology professionals, and legal, social, and cultural professionals (“Resolution Concerning Updating the International Standard Classification of Occupations”, n.d.). The second highest employment category for women is the clerical support worker category and the third is the skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery category.

[Insert Figure 5 Here]

[Insert Figure 6 Here]

In sum, these numbers show an imbalanced distribution of employment across different occupations for Iranian women in that they reflect high representation in white-collar jobs that require university education and low representation in other categories. As Esfahani and Shajari (2012) point out, the patterns of women’s employment reflect the high levels of education among women, suggesting that the university education has played a positive role in women’s ability to

enter the workforce. In the next section, we take a closer look at the impact of education on the employment of Iranian women.

### **Education and Employment**

Economists posit that increasing levels of education among women is expected to translate into higher level of female labour force participation. They argue that by enabling women to earn “higher income and social status through labour market participation, education increases the opportunity cost of homemaking” (Esfahani & Shajari, 2012, p.9). Considering the rapid rise in the education levels of Iranian women, it is important to understand whether education has had a positive impact on women’s employment. Table 6 provides information on participation rate and employment of women and men based on the highest level of education attained. The participation rate of men at all levels of education is above 54 percent and higher education does not increase that participation rate or employment. For women, however, higher levels of education are associated with higher participation rate and employment. This observation is consistent with examination of the relationship between education and employment data of population aged 25-54 years old in 2006 by Esfahani and Shajari (2012) who observed that labour force participation “rises very fast with educational attainment for women, while displaying little variation among men” (Esfahani & Shajari, 2012, p.14).

[Insert Table 6 Here]

In order to understand the impact of education on women’s participation rate, Esfahani and Shajari (2012) conducted a longitudinal analysis focused on the period between 1986 and 2006. During that time, the participation rate of women in both urban and rural areas increased. Esfahani and Shajari (2012) found that almost 60 percent of the rise in participation rate during that time period could be attributed to a decline in fertility rate and that education seemed to

account for only 10 percent of the increase in women's labour force participation rate. These authors also note that, in addition to its direct impact, education has an indirect impact by reducing fertility rate.

Figure 7 shows fertility rate in Iran from 1965 to 2013 (Google Public Data, 2015). As illustrated in this graph, the fertility rate during the period studied by Esfahani and Shajari has sharply declined from 6.02 births per woman (BPW) to 1.87. Since 2006, the fertility rate has remained stable, with a slight increase to 1.92 BPW. Unlike the earlier period, over the last 10 years both fertility rate and higher education attainment level have remained stable and the participation rate has declined. Considering the stable fertility rate and high education attainment levels, we speculate that the impact of these factors on labour force participation has declined. However, a more comprehensive discussion of this pattern requires in-depth analysis that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

[Insert Figure 7 Here]

*Education and Income.* We do not have detailed information on the relationship between education and income. However, Alavian Ghavanini's (2011) research on the wage gap in urban areas offers valuable insight into the relationship between education and the gender wage gap. This research reported a negative relationship between the gender wage gap and education. In other words, the wage gap was smaller in professions that require high levels of expertise and larger in low-skilled jobs. Alavian Ghavanini's study suggests that the wage gap disappears for professional jobs, and is sometimes even reversed. On the other hand, he found the wage gap to be significantly larger in the private sector. Considering that Esfahani and Shajari (2012) found educated women to be more likely to join the private sector, the impact of education on income and wage gap across the population becomes complicated.

In the next section, we take a closer look at some of the factors that seem to influence women's unemployment as well as their decision to leave the workforce entirely.

### **Understanding Low Participation Rate and High Unemployment Rate of Women**

Figure 8 and Figure 9 illustrate data on individuals' reasons for leaving their previous jobs—either voluntarily or involuntarily—in urban and rural areas. As shown in these figures, main reasons for leaving the previous job are different for men and women in both urban and rural areas. For urban women, low income is the most important reason (25.57 percent), followed by a temporary job (14.95 percent) and family issues (13.46 percent). Urban men have indicated temporary job (23.08 percent), end of military service<sup>3</sup> (17.22 percent), and low income (16.84 percent) as the main reason for leaving their job. In rural areas, seasonal job (24.63 percent), temporary job (21.25 percent), and low income (16.17 percent) are the top three reasons for women leaving their jobs. The top three reasons for rural men are temporary job (34.45 percent), end of military service (17.36 percent), and seasonal job (17.02 percent).

[Insert Figure 8 Here]

[Insert Figure 9 Here]

Figure 10 and Figure 11 offer some information about women's and men's reasons for not looking for a job<sup>4</sup>. Both urban and rural women have indicated personal or family responsibilities as the main reason for not looking for a job (69 percent of urban women and 72.95 percent of rural women). Both groups have indicated education as the second reason for not looking for a job (22.02 percent for urban women and 17.67 percent for rural women).

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<sup>3</sup> In Iran, military service is compulsory for men and women cannot attend the service. After turning 18, each man is required to complete military service for a period of 21 months. For men who attend university immediately after high school (most students finish high school when they are 18 years old), the military service is postponed until they finish their education.

<sup>4</sup> The report does not clarify the length of unemployment for these people.

Overall, low income and personal and family responsibilities seem to be two main factors that are driving women's unemployment. However, these categories are very broad and offer incomplete explanations for the problem. For example, although there is evidence that a wage gap exists, it is not clear whether low income refers to absolute income or the overall utility of the income, which could be influenced by other factors such as the high cost of childcare or transportation. Families, regardless of their income level, do not receive any government support for childcare. The daycare system is fully private and is not subsidized in any form. Some large organizations, mostly in the public sector, offer on-site daycare facilities, which are usually more affordable than private daycares; however, that option is available only to a limited number of working women. Similarly, "family issues" is a very broad term and it is not clear what kind of issues are inhibiting women from working.

In order to delve deeper into the reasons behind high unemployment rate of women, we reached out to friends and acquaintances of the first author on social media and asked them to share their opinions on this issue. In this section, we share some of the key themes that emerged from these conversations. Where possible, we use evidence from other sources to support and reinforce this anecdotal evidence.

We would like to note that the majority of people who shared their opinion on this issue have university education and have grown up in Tehran; therefore, their observations and understanding of this phenomenon represent the views of educated, urban professionals. Furthermore, while most of the people who shared their ideas live in Iran, some of them have been outside Iran for several years.

## **Discrimination in Employment and Lack of Growth Opportunities**

Systematic exclusion of women at from employment as well as lack of growth opportunities at workplaces form the main themes that emerged from our data. In October 2014, a bill was put forward to the parliament to inhibit employment of single women as faculty members of public universities (“Another Employment Restriction for Single Women”, 2014). Additionally, there is some evidence that women are likely to face hurdles in employment due to the application of gender-based quotas. A report by Al-Monitor (“Beyond Glass Ceiling”, 2015) indicates that the current government has imposed very strict gender-based quotas on its employment exams for different organizations in the government and public sector. The Iranian Ministry of Education announced on September 18, 2015, just prior to its nationwide exam for new job applicants that of the 3,703 positions up for grabs only 630 would go to women (“Beyond Glass Ceiling”, 2015). During the summer of 2015 the Iranian Central Bank advertised several positions open to university graduates. Of 47 vacancies 36 were reserved for men and 11 were available to both genders (Blair, 2015). These quotas appear unchanged despite a relatively moderate government and vocal resistance from women’s groups.

In addition to these official reports, we have received abundant anecdotal evidence suggesting that women face overt discrimination and are systematically deprived of promotion and employment opportunities. While many of the factors that inhibit women from growth in organizations are similar to what women in other countries experience, our participants mentioned a factor that seems to be unique to Iran and to some extent legitimizes systematic discrimination against women. This factor is related to the socialized gender roles, which see men responsible for bread winning and women responsible for family care. As a result, a cultural expectation seems to have emerged that a woman’s income is not expected to be used to support

her family. One respondent shared his experience with a company that would not hire any woman because the manager believed that by hiring a man he supports—and protects—a family, rather than an individual. Others shared stories that indicated that employers and managers promote a less qualified man based on the argument that he is supposed to provide for his family and therefore he should be the one who is being promoted. Here is the story shared by a university professor:

In our department, we have eight women and two men--this shows to what extent the number of educated women is higher that they have been able to take these positions—and one of these men is the chair of the department. At one point we needed to appoint a new department chair. The previous chair suggested that considering that female professors do not need money, they all vote for the other male professor—the chair position came with salary increase.

Another respondent shared her experience in the film industry. Although in her workplace they had very clear rules for promotion, she was denied promotion when she became qualified for the higher position. She explained that her manager told her she was not promoted because she is a woman and during the eight years of her tenure at this company, the manager did not promote any woman to that particular position.

### **Impact of Childcare on Women's Employment**

Another major theme that emerged from the data is childcare and marriage. Research shows that birth of a child is a strong driving force behind a woman's—even highly educated ones—decision to leave their job and the workforce entirely (Esfahani & Shajari, 2012; Herr & Wolfram, 2009). Socialized gender roles that hold a woman responsible for family care and childbearing have a strong presence in Iran. Social pressure on women to stay home and take

care of their children seems to play a substantial role. Women who shared their opinion suggested that “a mother who returns to work and leaves her baby at daycare is considered selfish and devoid of maternal instinct”, and that “a woman who decides to leave her work to take care of her children is more valued by the society than a woman who decides to continue working in spite of all the difficulties”. In addition to the social pressure, lack of high quality and trustworthy daycares combined with the high cost of daycare and the gender wage gap creates a setting in which women’s employment does not seem an economically viable choice.

### **Marriage and Means of Wealth Generation**

Income and wealth generation seem to play an important and complex role in women’s decision to work outside home. Independent generation of wealth through employment outside home seems to be very difficult to achieve for Iranian women. As mentioned in a previous section, according to the most recent Global Gender Gap Report (Schwab et al., 2015) there is a significant gender wage gap in Iran. This large disparity between men and women’s ability to earn income seems to have influenced women’s beliefs about their ability to earn a decent income.

On the issue of wealth generation, to our surprise, many of our respondents did not discuss the external factors that inhibit women from earning high income and generating wealth. Instead, many of people who shared their opinions placed the responsibility squarely on women, blaming them for being lazy, lacking ambition, and relying on others to support them. In particular, many respondents argued that women do not value their jobs and their careers because they do not see their careers as a path to wealth generation. These respondents argued that, higher education is seen as a personal asset that would enhance a woman’s attractiveness for marriage and enhance their chance of marrying a man who can provide adequate financial

support for her and their family. It was argued that once women get married to a man who can provide for the family, they decide that they do not need a job and choose to stay home. We would like to note that according to the data shared in Figure 10, while 44.59 percent of urban men indicated that they are not looking for a job because they do not need a job, only 2.46 percent of women chose this option as the reason for not looking for a job. Therefore, the claim that women do not work because they do not think they need one does not seem to be supported by this data.

A factor that adds to the complexity of this relationship is the cultural expectation that a man is responsible to provide for his family. In fact, not only is a man responsible to provide for his family, according to Islam, a man should pay his wife for her work at home and raising their children. Additionally, a man should pay his wife for breastfeeding. To the best of our knowledge, these laws are not commonly practiced in Iran. However, they shape the cultural expectation that a woman does not need to work to provide for her family. Some of our respondents shared stories of working women who invest their income independent of their husbands because they believe that their income belongs to them and they are not expected to share their income with the family or spend it on household expenses.

There is evidence suggesting that an unusual pattern has emerged among young, and educated women—even among the upper class in Tehran—who seem to welcome the idea of staying home if their husbands can provide for them. Mehrkhane has conducted research asking three female bloggers to pose a question to their readers to inquire about possible reasons for women’s decisions to leave their work (“Returning to Home”, 2015). Out of 120 responses to the questions, high workload and stress was indicated as the most popular reason (47 percent) followed by marriage and childbearing (31.67 percent) and preference to embrace their

femininity at home (27.5 percent). In addition, several respondents mentioned that they would prefer to stay home if they have financial security.

Absence of responsibility for family financial support and the expectation of future wealth generation seem to influence young women and men. Iranian families expect their sons to work early on and plan for their careers while they hold no such an expectation for their daughters. As one respondent mentioned: “Most families do not see any problem with having an unemployed 25-year-old daughter; however, they would be *ashamed* to have a 25-year-old son who does not have a job”. The interesting point here is that financial support from the family and lack of societal pressure seem to have created a setting in which girls have a *choice* to work with no financial obligation, an option that is not available to boys<sup>5</sup>.

Overall, Iranian girls seem to be in a setting in which their parents, their families, the political system, and the social system discourage them from pursuing work outside home. They have grown to believe and accept that successful careers and wealth generation belong to men. In addition, we speculate that in the absence of successful role models and a period of stagnation of women, these young women are discouraged from investing in careers that do not promise an appealing future. Combination of all of these factors seem to have created a situation in which women are often complicit in a discriminatory system by exercising their ‘choice to not work’. As one of our respondents said, discrimination is so widespread and overwhelming that women are not seen as having a responsibility for their lives and careers.

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that unlike western countries, in Iran, girls and boys are not expected to leave their parents’ home in their twenties. Both girls and boys are expected to live with their parents until they get married.

## **Women in Leadership Positions**

We do not have the exact number of women in management positions in Iran. Based on the data presented in Figure 5, in 2015, three percent of employed women, compared to 2.9 percent of employed men, are categorized under the legislators, senior officials, and managers category. According to these data, women's share of these positions is 15.16 percent. This figure is in accordance with the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report (Schwab et al., 2015) in which percentage of women in this category in 2015 is reported at 17 percent.

Figure 12 shows the distribution of women and men based on status in employment. The first row of this figure shows the distribution of individuals listed as legislators, senior officials, and managers. Sixty percent of women, compared to 37.48 percent of men, who are listed under this category, are employed in the public sector, compared to 27.58 percent of women and 20 percent of men in the private sector. Considering that only 26.37 percent of working women are employed in the public sector, these numbers suggest that the public sector provides better opportunities for growth for women. In fact, these data show that 22.77 percent of employees in the public sector are women and 22.24 percent of individuals listed as legislators, senior officials, and managers in the public sector are women, suggesting better growth opportunities for men and women in public sector. However, we find these numbers puzzling, as they are not compatible with information received from other sources. For example, as discussed below, only three percent of parliament members are women and Iran has no female cabinet members. In addition, Al-Monitor reports that women hold only one percent of managerial positions in the ministry of education (Beyond the Glass Ceiling, 2015).

[Insert Figure 12 Here]

Considering that senior officials and legislators fall under the public sector, we can assume that the percentage of individuals listed under this category in the private sector would represent people in management positions. Using that assumption, these data suggest that in the private sector women occupy 11.43 percent of managerial positions. However, we should note that in 2015, several news agencies including Shargh Daily (“The 2.5 Percent Share of Women from Management Positions”, 2015) and the Iranian Students’ News Agency (“Strategies against Female Managers”, 2015) reported on a public talk by Forough Azizi--a gender equality activist— at Rahman Institute. According to these news agencies, in this public presentation, Azizi has indicated that women hold only 2.5 percent of decision-making positions. None of these news agencies provides details of Azizi’s methodology and we could not locate a publication by Azizi herself. Therefore, the method of data collection is unknown and it is not clear what she meant by decision-making positions.

### **Women in Parliament and Senior Officials**

Figure 13 shows the percentage of female members of parliament (also known as Islamic Consultative Assembly) since the revolution. As shown in this diagram, although we see some progress in representation of women in the parliament, the overall percentage of women is very low at between three and five percent.

[Insert Figure 13 Here]

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1977, only one woman has been appointed to a cabinet. In the beginning of his second term as president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad nominated three women to his cabinet. Only one of these women, Dr. Marzieh Dastjerdy, was approved to become the head of the Ministry of Health. In the current government led by Hassan Rouhani men hold all cabinet positions. At vice president level, women hold three out of 12 positions.

## **Women Entrepreneurs**

We were not able to find published statistical data on the number of women entrepreneurs. However, a recent research by Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014) offers very interesting insight into women's entrepreneurship in Iran. Bahramitash and Esfahani found that female-owned firms tend to be relatively young, with a high percentage of them established in early 2000s. During this period, the government developed policies to encourage private ownership as well as an increase in entrance of women with higher education into the labour force (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2014). Research by Esfahani and Shajari (2012) shows that women with higher education, compared with those without a university education, tend to have a higher chance of joining the private sector as employers or self-employed. Therefore, the high percentage of women with higher education seems to have influenced patterns of women's entrepreneurship.

Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014) also found that women entrepreneurs seem to have higher representation in large firms compared to small and medium sized enterprises. In fact, they found the percentage of female ownership of large firms was comparable to the rest of the world. In addition, they found that these large female-owned firms tend to be relatively young and that women entrepreneurs have a "high presence in the service sector, especially gender-segregated activities, as well as in some new and growing industries such as electronics and information technology" (p.1).

The census data offers some limited information about entrepreneurship among women. The data provided in the second row of Figure 12 provides information on individuals who are considered employers. According to the International Classification by Status in Employment guideline (ICSE), employer refers to "a person who operates his or her own economic enterprise,

or engages independently in a profession or trade, and hires one or more employees” (“International Classification by Status in Employment (ICSE)”, n.d., para. 1). Therefore, according to this definition, an employer could be a small business owner or an entrepreneur. The percentage of working women categorized as employer is 1.21, compared with 4.31 percent of working men.

*Initiatives to Support Women as Entrepreneurs.* Historically, the concept of entrepreneurship and the role that it could play in economic development has not received much attention in Iran (“The History of Entrepreneurship in Iran and the World”, n.d.). Over the last two decades, however, the government has started various programs to promote and support entrepreneurship among men and women (“The History of Entrepreneurship in Iran and the World”, n.d.). We have identified several non-profit or government funded agencies that focus on women entrepreneurs. For example, the Association of Iranian Women Entrepreneurs was established in 2004 with the purpose of supporting women entrepreneurs, with a focus on education and consultation. In addition to ongoing workshops, each year, the association has organized a conference focusing on different aspects of women’s entrepreneurship. The National Association of Women Entrepreneurs, Women, and Youth Entrepreneurship Development Foundation are two other examples of organizations devoted to development and support of women entrepreneurs.

Another example of government support for women entrepreneurship is the International Exhibition and Conference on the Role of Women in Sustainable Development, which was organized annually over the last two years. The most recent conference, focused on entrepreneurship and employment, was held in September 2015 in Tehran. The Best Woman Entrepreneur of the Year award and a collection of female entrepreneurs’ profiles (in the form of

a book) were among the highlights of the program (“Iran to host Int’l exhibition on women’s role: VP”, 2015).

Overall, in recent years, the notion of women entrepreneurs and the role they could play in economic development has received some attention from the government. The important question that remains to be answered is the effectiveness of these programs.

### **Country Legislation**

Under the Islamic Republic of Iran, a married woman needs her husband’s permission to work and travel. In other words, a husband has the right to forbid his wife’s work outside home at any point in time. In addition, if a woman needs to travel for her work, she would need her husband’s permission to travel. We do not have any data to explore to what extent men exercise this right. Based on anecdotal evidence, it seems to us that not many men pursue legal actions to prohibit their wife’s work. However, a significant number of men seem to demand their wives to quit their work and stay home after marriage.

*Maternity Leave.* The duration of maternity leave in Iran is 270 days (9 months) and women receive 100 percent of their last salary and employment benefits during their leave. If a woman gives birth to twins, duration of her maternity leave can be extended to 365 days (12 months) (“Implementation Complications of Working Women’s Breastfeeding Leave”, 2015). Duration of parental leave for men is 10 days—30 days in case of twins (“Implementation Complications of Working Women’s Breastfeeding Leave”, 2015). In addition to maternity leave benefits, women can benefit from a program called *breastfeeding time* or *breastfeeding leave*. According to this program, each working day a woman can reduce her hours by one hour to breastfeed her baby. This accommodation is available until the baby turns two years old (“Implementation Complications of Working Women’s Breastfeeding Leave”, 2015). Although

according to the law all employers in public and private sectors are obliged to offer breastfeeding time, more than 50 percent of employers do not follow the guidelines (“Implementation Complications of Working Women’s Breastfeeding Leave”, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has been an eye-opening experience for us and we hope that it will shed some light on the status of women in Iran. On the one hand, we found there were many sources of published data that challenged our original impressions of women in Iran. On the other hand, we struggled to make sense of data that was sometimes contradictory and incomplete. For example, we found widely varying accounts of the gender wage gap, putting the gap at anything between 40 and 20 percent. Perhaps this requires a finer grained analysis, looking for differences across professional groups, part-time, full-time and seasonal work, government, private and public sectors. We faced several unanswered questions and puzzling contradictions that we were not able to resolve. For example, why are highly educated women leaving the workforce permanently, and in large numbers? Why are women paying the “motherhood penalty” despite paid maternity leaves that are more generous than those in many other countries? We hope that this chapter will encourage others to look beyond the numbers to women’s stories of life and work in Iran.

While women in Iran are often compared with women in others in the Middle East living under sharia law, their situation is unique, and somewhat paradoxical. Women in Iran achieved the right to vote in 1963, have been politically active and were important participants in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Women have demonstrated academic excellence, entering universities in large numbers, competing academically in a national system that is both demanding and highly selective. Despite several periods of conservative government, Iran has

experienced socio-demographic changes that appear to improve the status of women. These changes include growing educational attainment, increase in the age of first marriage, lower fertility rates and rising rates of divorce.

Most economic arguments would propose a positive effect of education on income. The data on Iran suggests just that pattern with women in professional jobs more likely to close the gender wage gap. However, women are still economically disadvantaged as demonstrated by lower levels of employment and higher levels of unemployment. Some experts attribute this to the shift from the private patriarchy of the family to the public patriarchy of the state (Moghadam, 2004). While women are required to seek permission from their fathers to marry and from their husbands to work and travel, there is little evidence that those restrictions are generally practiced. Meanwhile women are facing increasing restrictions on both employment and education, ranging from quotas in university admissions and employment to discrimination at work. These challenges have sometimes been referred to as “iron fences” rather than the glass ceilings faced by women in the Western world (Al-Monitor, September 22, 2015).

Women appear to be stuck in a vicious cycle in which their lower participation in the workplace is often used as an argument to reduce their access to publically funded university education. Without access to education, they have even fewer options for employment, income generation and egalitarian gender relations. When Iranian women choose to work outside the home they face overt discrimination at work, lower opportunities for advancement, lower income and socio-cultural norms that force them to opt out when they become mothers. Also troubling is the fact that women are often blamed for their compliance with and lack of resistance to archaic gender norms that value their family roles at the expense of their paid employment. Shirin Ebadi, noted human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner has been quoted as saying, “Women

are the victims of this patriarchal culture, but they are also its carriers. Let us keep in mind that every oppressive man was raised in the confines of his mother's home.”

Women in Iran may be unable to claim gender equality until they achieve economic independence. They appear to be trapped in a gilded cage because the very factors that liberate them from having to be family bread-winners also restrict their access to fair and equal employment, forcing them to rely on men in their family for financial support and social status.

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**Table 1: Literacy Statistics (%) (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2014)**

Literacy Statistics	Both Sexes				
	Entire Country	Urban	Rural	Women	Men
6 and older	86.6	90.2	77.2	82.4	90.8
6-9	96.2	96.2	96.2	96.2	96.3
10-14	99	99.2	98.5	99	98.9
15-24	97.8	98.6	95.9	97.4	98.1
25-64	85.8	90.3	72.6	80.4	91.3
65 and older	34.3	44.5	12	22.5	46.6

**Table 2: Highest Level of Education of Literates (%) - Six Years and Older (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2014)**

	Both Sexes	Men	Women
<b>Diploma or less</b>	78.9	79.3	78.5
<b>College Degree</b>	4.5	5.1	3.9
<b>Bachelor Degree</b>	12.1	11.7	12.6
<b>Master</b>	2	2.2	1.8
<b>PhD</b>	0.2	0.2	0.1
<b>Uncategorized</b>	2.2	1.4	3.1
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

**Table 3. Labour Force Statistics (%), 15 Years and Older Population, 2006-2015**  
**Source: Winter Labour Force Survey Results of Years 1384 to 1393. Available from [www.amar.org.ir](http://www.amar.org.ir).**

		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>Participation Rate (%)</b>											
Total	Women	17.40	16.70	15.40	14.10	13.40	14.00	13.10	14.10	11.20	13.4
	Men	72.50	71.10	68.80	68.00	67.70	67.80	65.70	66.80	66.60	68.30
Urban	Women	15.40	14.90	13.50	12.70	12.40	13.40	12.90	13.60	10.90	13.20
	Men	71.80	69.90	67.90	66.60	66.40	66.60	64.00	65.10	65.30	67.10
Rural	Women	21.60	20.60	19.80	17.60	16.10	15.80	13.50	15.70	11.80	14.00
	Men	74.20	73.80	71.20	71.70	71.10	71.20	70.60	71.70	70.30	71.70
<b>Employment Rate (%)</b>											
Total	Women	14.40	13.90	12.80	11.50	10.90	11.10	10.20	11.30	9.10	10.60
	Men	64.50	63.20	61.40	60.30	58.80	58.80	57.50	59.60	60.60	61.80
Urban	Women	11.70	11.40	10.40	9.70	9.30	9.90	9.50	10.40	8.50	9.90
	Men	63.40	61.70	60.30	58.60	57.40	57.30	55.80	57.70	59.20	60.70
Rural	Women	20.00	19.30	18.50	16.00	14.80	14.30	11.90	14.00	10.50	12.40
	Men	67.10	66.70	64.10	64.60	62.50	62.90	62.60	64.90	64.50	64.90
<b>Unemployment Rate (%)</b>											
Total	Women	17.30	16.90	16.80	18.50	19.20	21.20	22.40	19.60	19.00	21.10
	Men	11.00	11.10	10.80	11.30	13.20	13.30	12.50	10.80	9.10	9.60
Urban	Women	23.90	23.60	23.10	23.50	24.60	26.50	26.40	23.20	22.10	24.80
	Men	11.70	11.70	11.20	11.90	13.60	13.90	12.90	11.30	9.40	9.60
Rural	Women	7.20	6.40	6.70	9.50	8.40	9.30	11.70	10.90	11.10	11.30
	Men	9.50	9.60	10.00	9.90	12.20	11.60	11.30	9.60	8.20	9.40
<b>Part Time to Total (%)</b>											
Total	Women	5.1	4.1	3.4	4.9	5.4	4.2	4.5	3.9	4.6	4.3
	Men	10.6	9.4	8.9	12.1	14.3	11.7	11.5	10.2	11.9	11.9
Urban	Women	5.1	3.3	3.2	4.5	5.4	4.4	3.8	3.9	4.5	4.6
	Men	6.9	6.5	6.6	8.5	10.8	8.6	8.9	8.3	9.9	9.8
Rural	Women	5.1	5.1	3.6	5.4	5.6	3.9	6	4	4.8	3.4
	Men	18.5	15.7	14.1	20.6	23.1	19.5	18.2	15.2	17.1	17.5

**Table 4: Hours Worked per Week (%) (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2014)**

<b>Hours Worked</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
16 Hours or Less	14.49	4.16
17-24 Hours	16.36	5.42
25-32 Hours	14.00	6.45
33-40 Hours	14.02	8.23
41-48 Hours	23.33	29.82
49 Hours or More	17.80	45.92

**Table 5<sup>6</sup>: Employment in the Public and Private Sectors (%) – 2006 to 2015**

Source: Winter Labour Force Survey Results of Years 1384 to 1393. Available from [www.amar.org.ir](http://www.amar.org.ir).

		<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
<b>Women Rural &amp; Urban</b>	Private	74.6	74.5	73.8	74.7	76.6	75	69.4	73.5	70.9	73.4
	Public	24.5	24.7	25.2	25.3	23.4	25.1	30.6	26.5	29.1	26.6
<b>Men Rural &amp; Urban</b>	Private	81	81.3	81.1	82.5	83.1	83.3	83.9	84.2	84.1	84.7
	Public	18.5	18.3	18.5	17.5	16.9	16.7	16.1	15.8	15.9	15.3
<b>Urban Both Sexes</b>	Private	73	73.4	73.8	75.9	76.8	77.1	77	77.8	78.1	79
	Public	26.3	26.1	25.7	24.1	23.2	22.9	23	22.2	21.9	21
<b>Rural Both Sexes</b>	Private	92.9	92.8	92.4	92.8	94.1	93.8	93.8	94	93.1	93.6
	Public	6.9	6.8	7.1	7.2	5.9	6.2	6.2	6	6.9	6.4

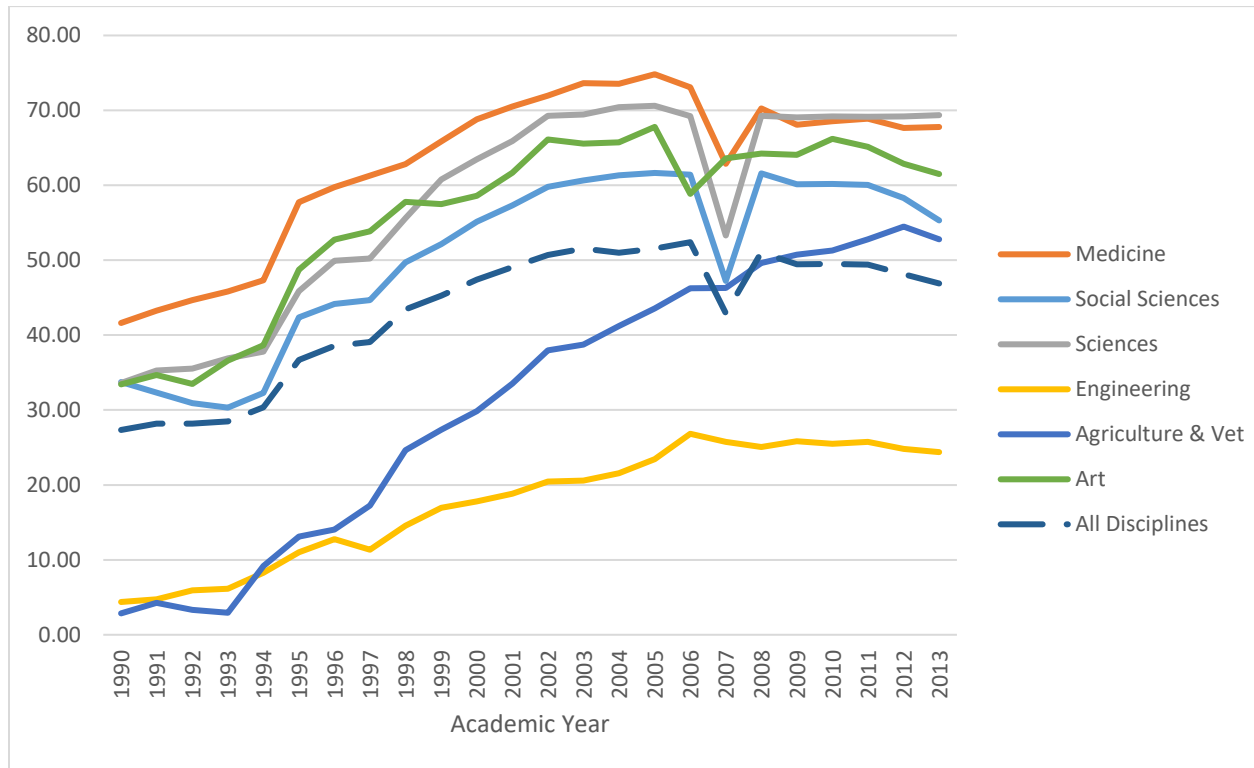
<sup>6</sup> For each category, the table is supposed to indicate the percentage employed in private and public sectors. However, the numbers in 2006, 2007, and 2008 do not add up to 100. This is a mistake in the official documents available on the website of the Statistical Center of Iran. We decided to report the numbers as presented in these documents.

**Table 6: Employment Characteristics of 15 Years and Older Population based on Highest Educational Level Attained or Being Attained (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2014)**

	<b>Women</b>			<b>Men</b>		
	Employed (%)	Participation Rate	Unemployment Rate	Employed (%)	Participation Rate	Unemployment Rate
Illiterate	8.28	8.37	1.14	52.34	54.22	3.47
Elementary School	9.13	9.48	3.77	74.57	79.20	5.85
Middle School	6.98	7.86	11.22	75.35	82.44	8.60
High School	7.04	9.15	23.03	56.93	63.34	10.12
College Degree	20.59	27.14	24.15	52.29	59.40	11.96
Undergraduate	22.59	34.63	34.77	51.41	59.97	14.27
Graduate	36.08	46.93	23.13	63.28	69.47	8.91
Other	11.15	11.49	2.89	60.78	62.45	2.67

**Figure 1: Percentage of Women at Undergraduate Level in Various Disciplines – 1990 to 2013.**

**Source: Number of University Students based on Major Disciplines and Sex – Time Series. Retrieved from [www.amar.org.ir](http://www.amar.org.ir)**



Note: From 1990-1994, the graph shows the percentage of female students in public universities. Starting in 1995, the graph shows the percentage of female students in public and private universities.

**Figure 2. Labour Force Statistics (%) based on Sex in Urban and Rural Areas - 15 Years and Older Population, 2006-2015**

Source: Winter Labour Force Survey Results of Years 1384 to 1393. Available from [www.amar.org.ir](http://www.amar.org.ir).

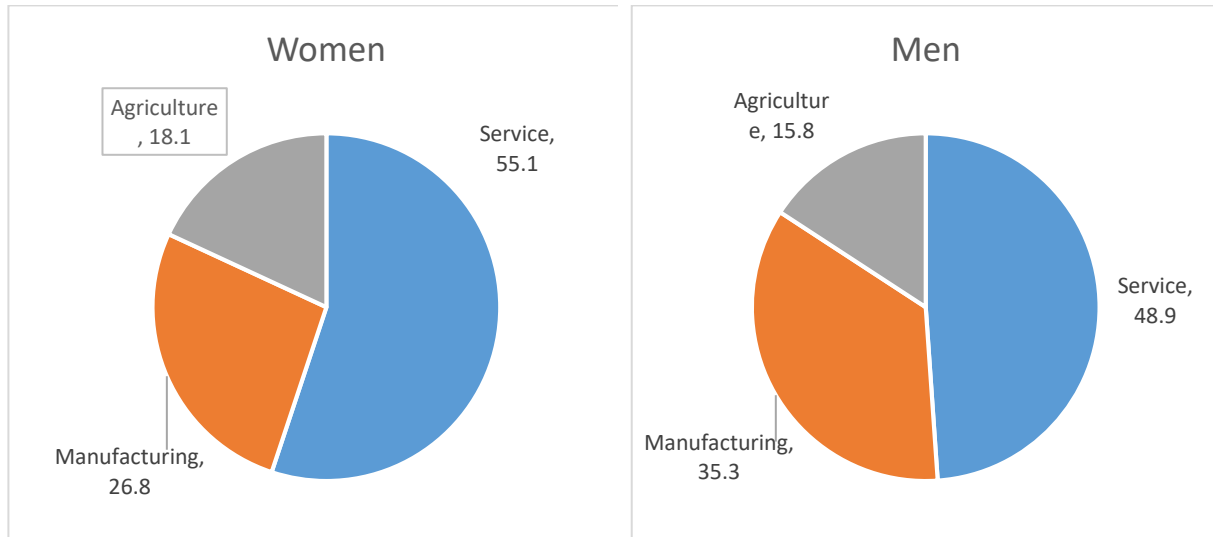


**Figure 3: Income Gap from 1991 to 2011 (Alavian Ghavanini, 2011, p. 3)**



**Note:** Numbers on the horizontal axis show the year according to the Iranian Solar calendar.

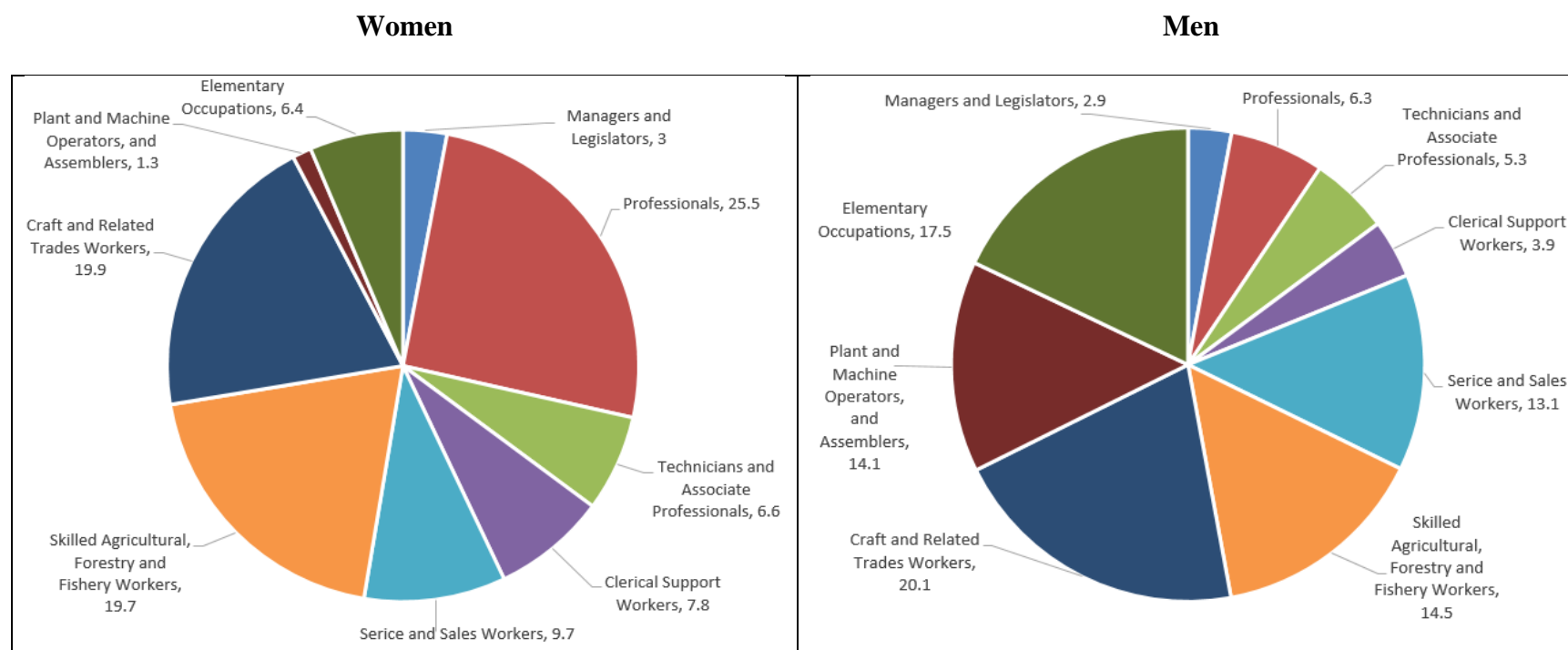
**Figure 4: Employment Distribution of 15 Years and Older Population in Different Sectors<sup>7</sup>**  
**(“Labour Force Survey Results Winer of 1393”, 2015)**



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<sup>7</sup> Agriculture includes farming, hunting, forestry, and fishery

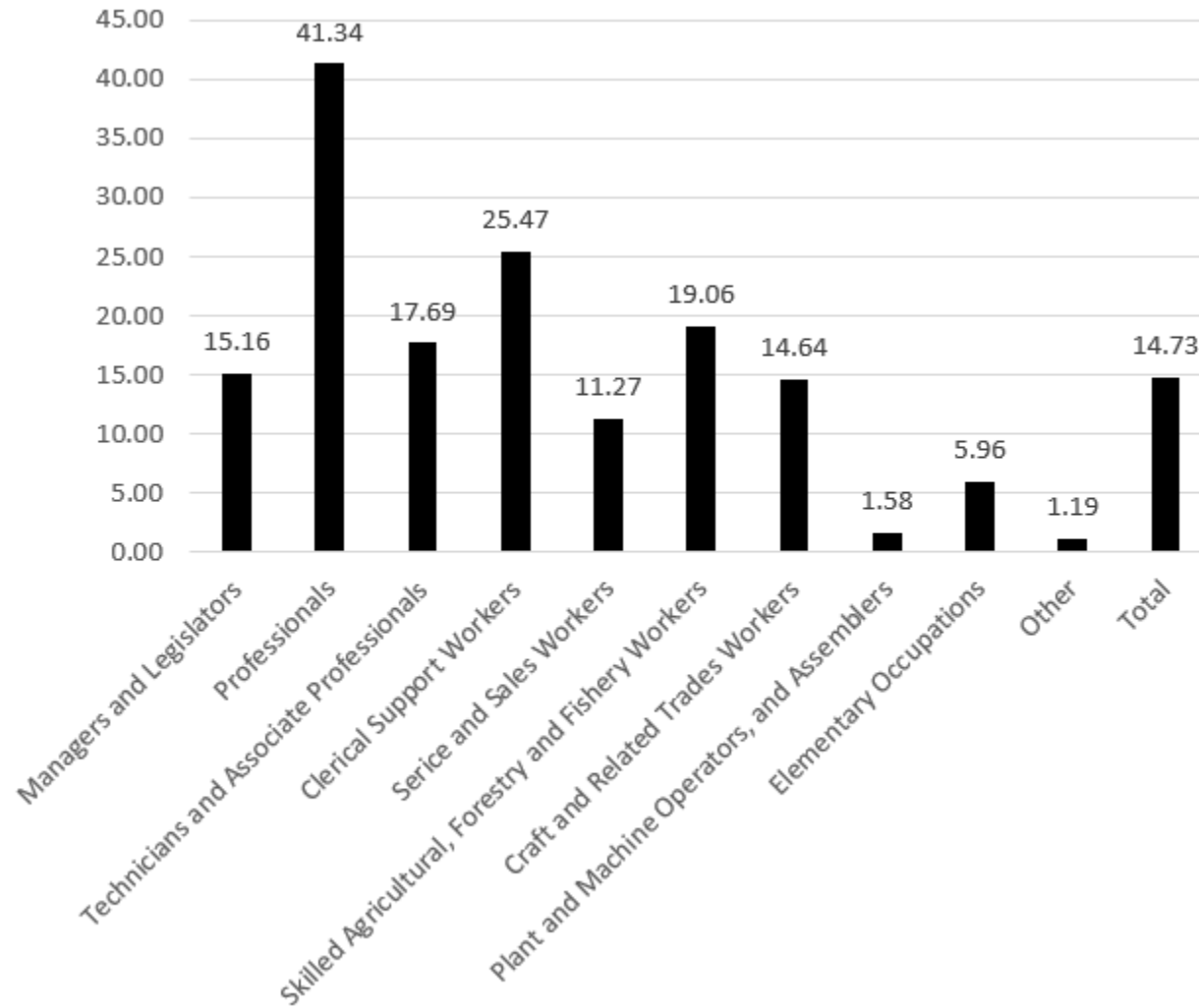
**Figure 5: Employment Distribution in Different Occupations<sup>8</sup> (%) (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015)**



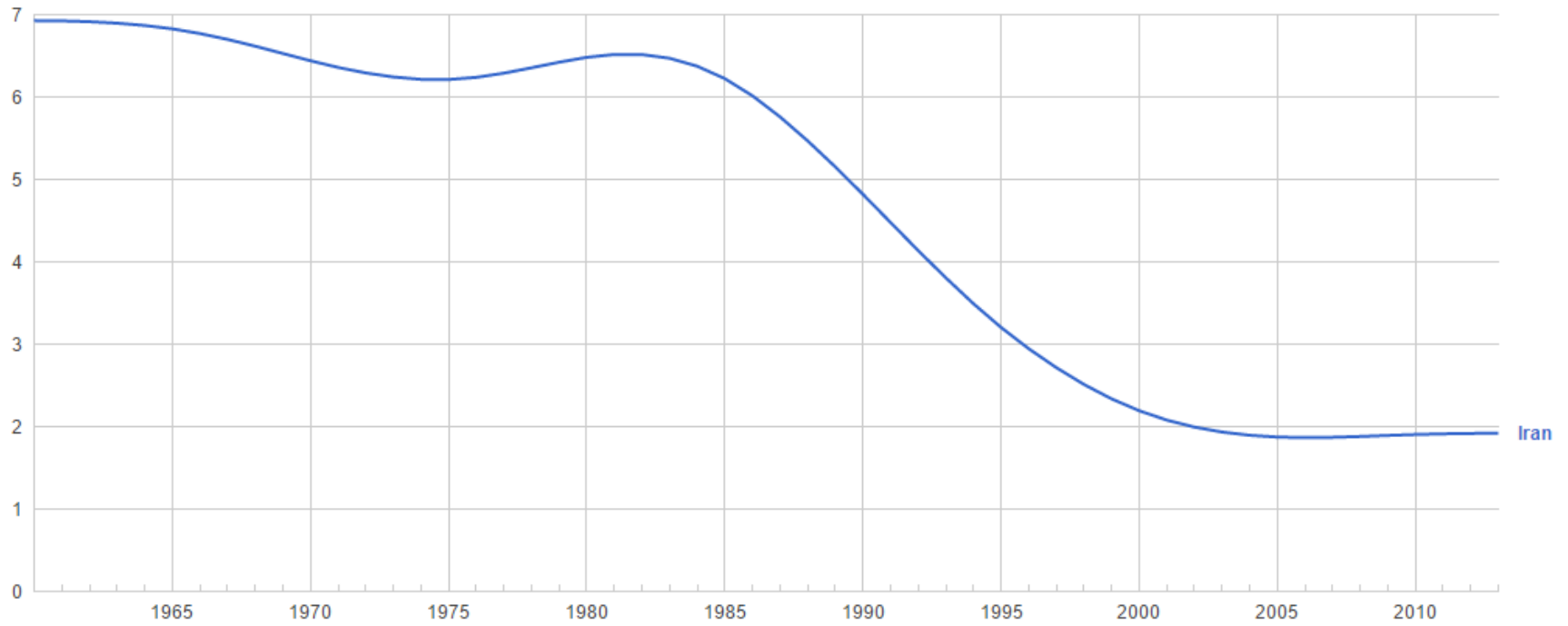
Note: Numbers are rounded to one decimal place

<sup>8</sup> Classification of different occupations follows the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88) (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015)

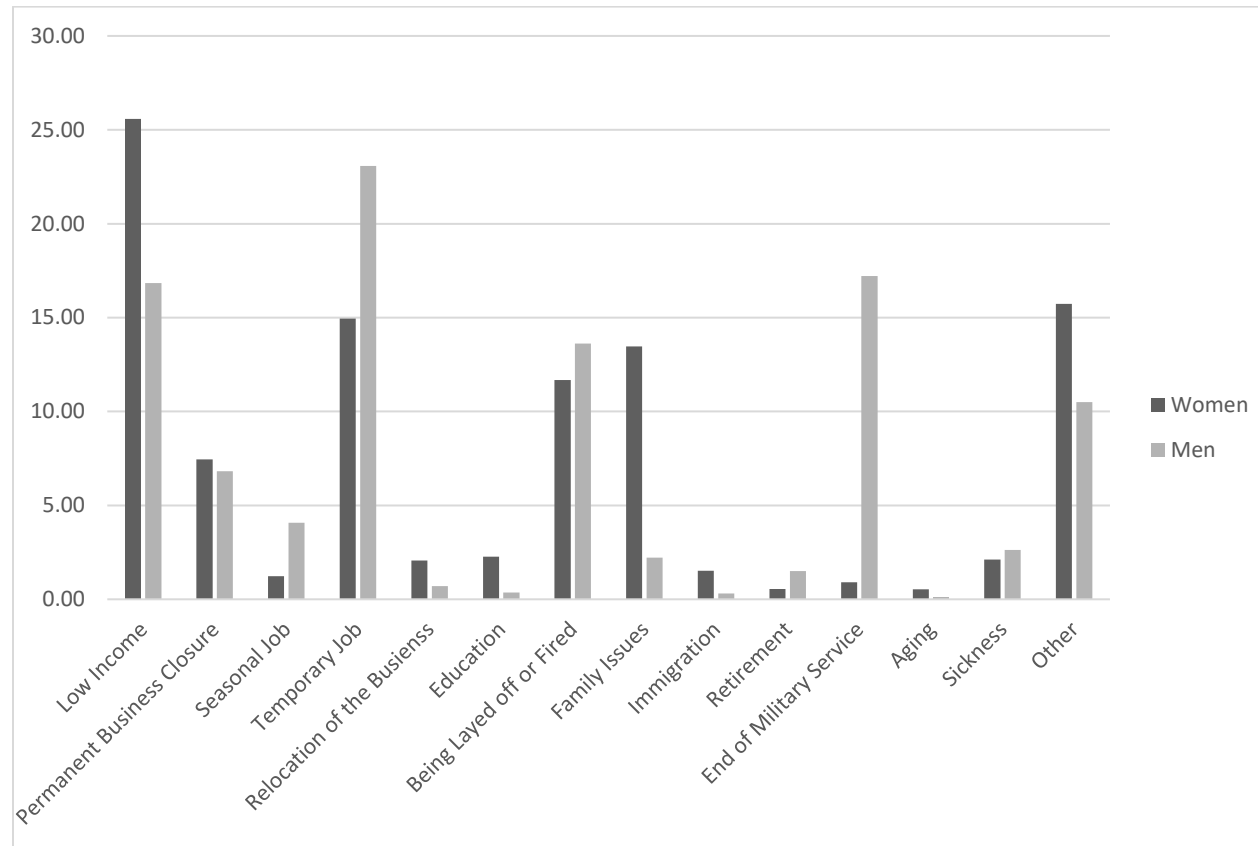
**Figure 6: Women’s Presence in Each Occupation (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015)**



**Figure 7: Fertility Rate – 1960 to 2013 (Google Public Data, 2015)**

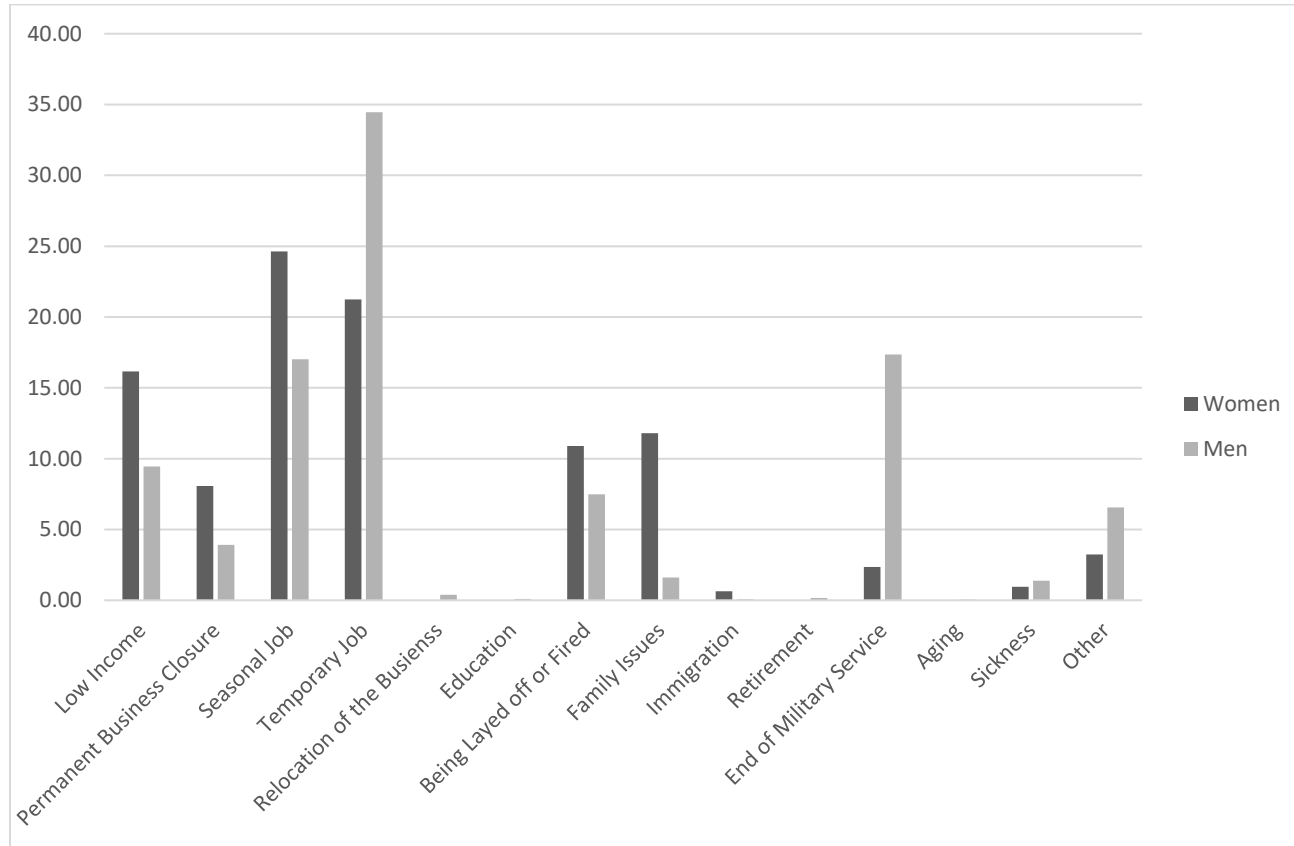


**Figure 8 – Reasons to Leave Previous Job – Urban Areas (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015)<sup>9</sup>**

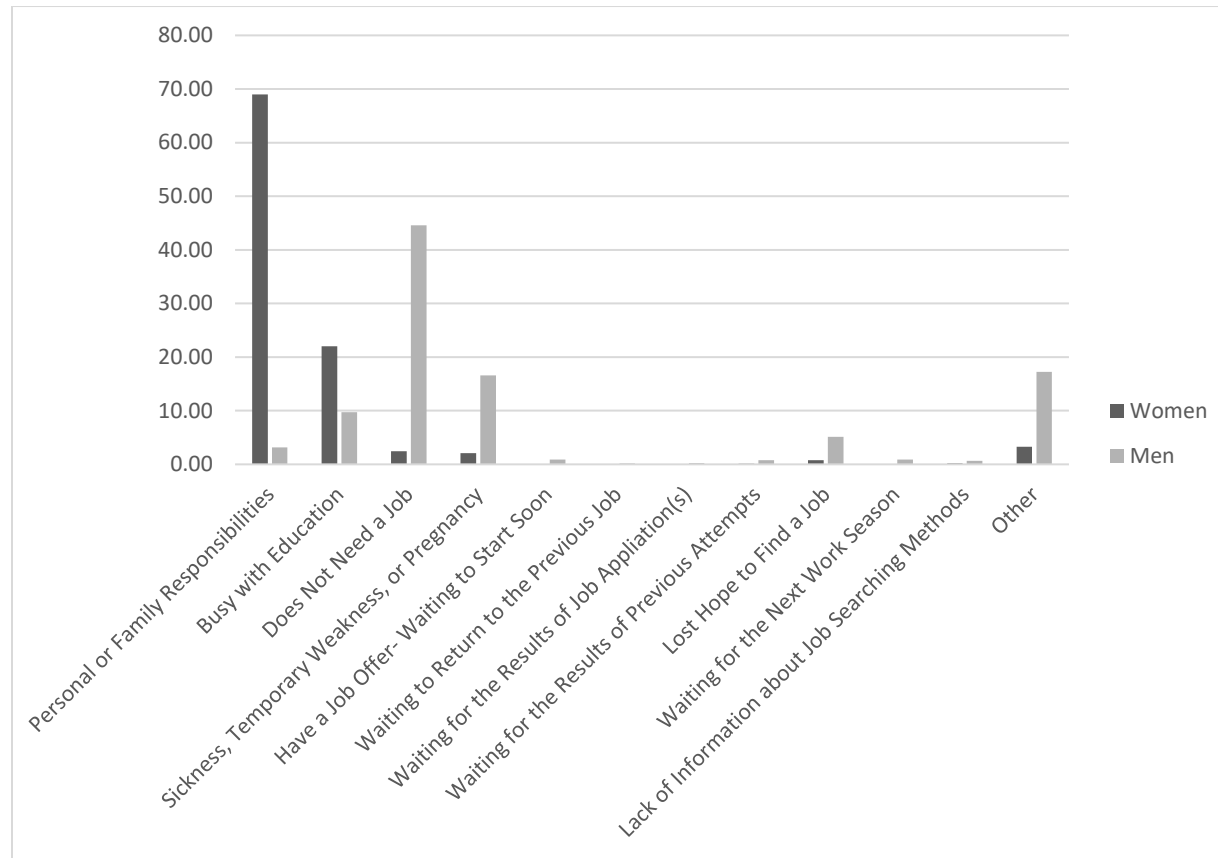


<sup>9</sup> This table shows that some women have chosen “End of Military Service” as their reason for leaving their previous job. Considering that women do not attend the military service, it is not clear what this item means. It is possible that they have left their previous job because their husband’s military service ended or that they misunderstood the question. The terminology used to refer to military service is very similar to end of employment contract. Therefore, that might be another explanation for this item.

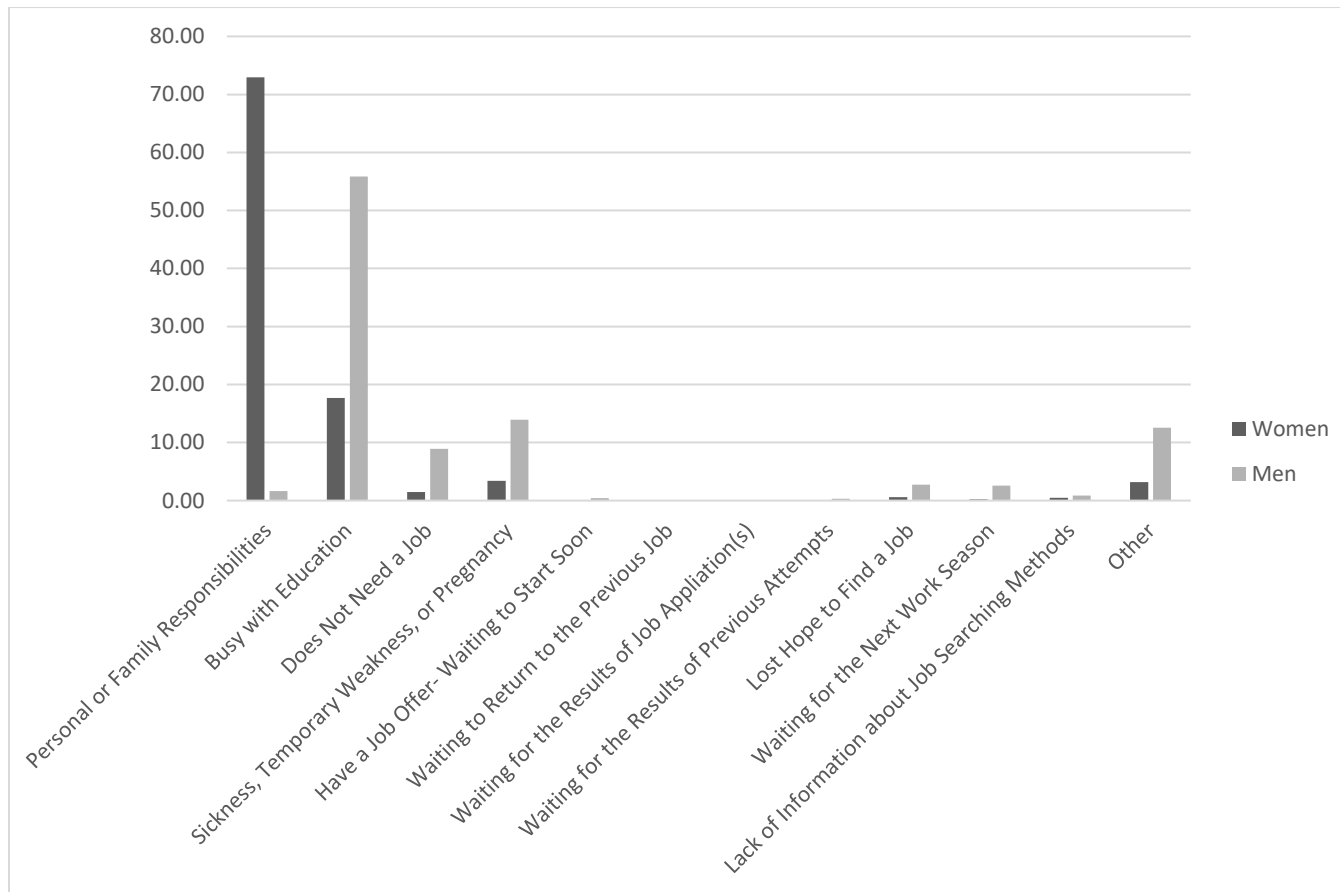
**Figure 9 – Reason to Leave Previous Job – Rural Areas (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015)**



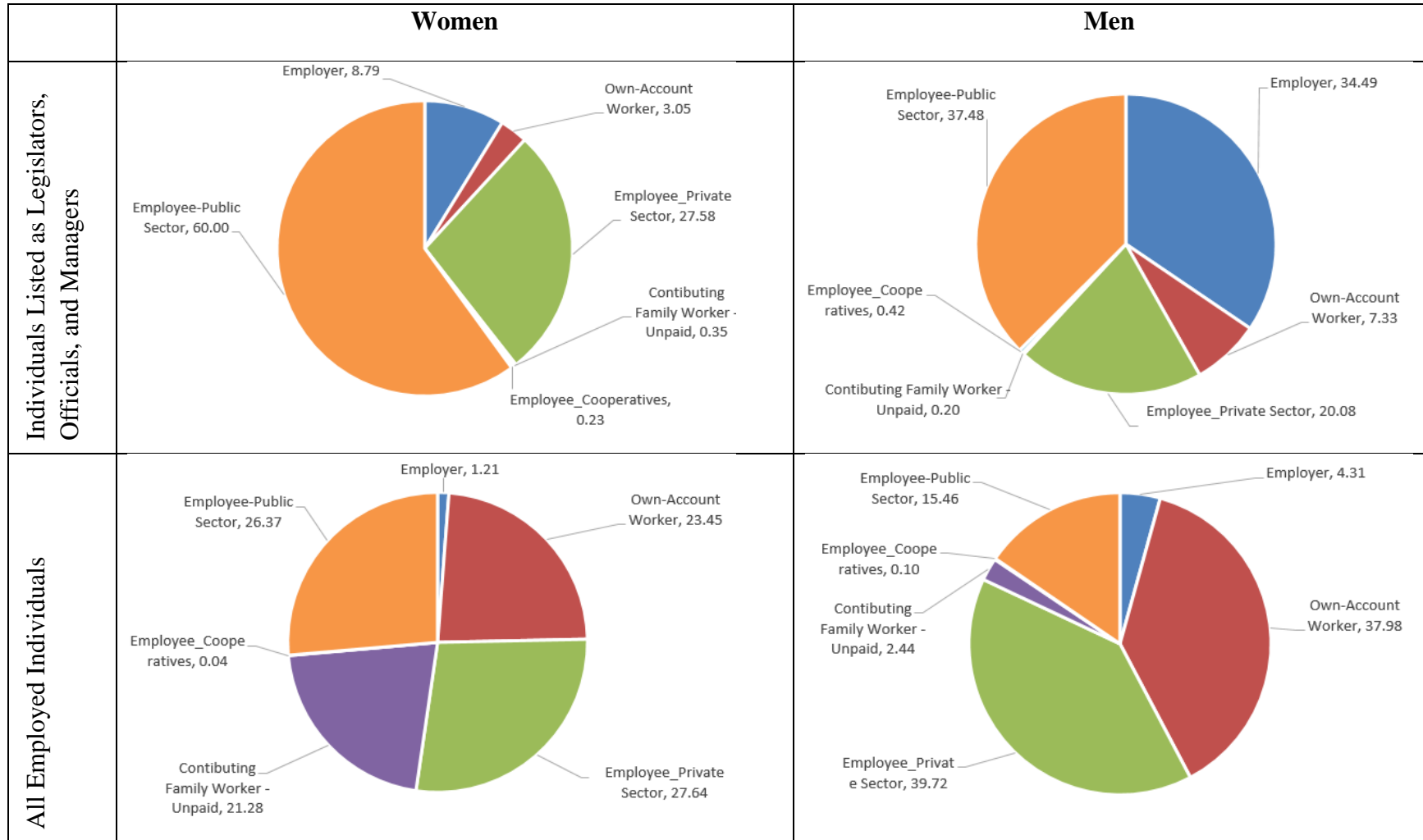
**Figure 10 – Reasons for Not Looking for a Job- Urban Areas (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015)**



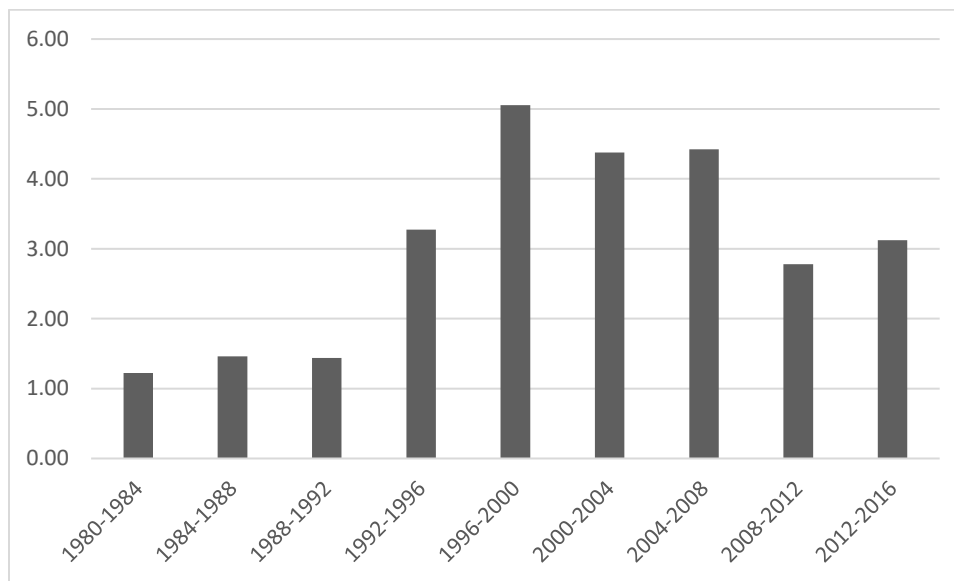
**Figure 11 – Reasons for Not Looking – Rural Areas (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2015)**



**Figure 12: Distribution of Individuals Listed as Legislators, Senior Officials, and Managers based on Status in Employment (“Labour Force Survey Results 1392”, 2014)**



**Figure 13: Percentage of Women in the Parliament<sup>10</sup> (“Table of the Number of Female Representatives in 9 Parliaments”, 2012)**



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<sup>10</sup> Also Known as Islamic Consultative Assembly