

Women graduates challenge

Iran By Frances Harrison

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The number of women graduating from Iran's universities is overtaking the number of men, promising a change in the job market and, with it, profound social change.

Twenty postgraduate students are sitting in a plush modern classroom listening to a lecture on environmental management at the Islamic Azad University - a private institution with 1.6 million students across Iran.



In some subjects 70% of Iran's graduates are women

The room is darkened so the students can watch the lecturer's slide show comparing energy consumption around the world.

Three quarters of the students in this class are women - the five men in the class are huddled together in a corner.

As Professor Majid Abbaspour explains, this is a far cry from the past:

"When I was doing my bachelor's degree in Iran we had a class of 60 in mechanical engineering with only four women.

"Now the number has changed a lot - I think this may be because the attitudes of families have changed."

Well over half of university students in Iran are now women. In the applied physics department of Azad University 70% of the graduates are women - a statistic which would make many universities in the West proud.

It is a huge social shift since the 1979 Revolution: Iran's Islamic government has managed to convince even traditional rural

families that it is safe to send their daughters away from home to study.

Alarm

But in some areas the larger number of women than men is beginning to alarm the authorities.

"As a matter of fact it's starting to get worrying - in some fields maybe they will put some limitations?" says Professor Abbaspour, referring to suggestions that there should be positive discrimination for men in certain key subjects.

He explains: "In the oil and gas industries at the present time there is no discrimination but... for example when they want to work on the oil and gas platforms in the Persian Gulf area it might be very hard for women to do so."

“ We women want to show we are here and we have a lot to say - for years we have lived under the heavy shadow of men - our fathers and brothers and now we want to come out of that ”

Massoumeh Umidvar
Student and working mother

Part of the reason for more women in university education seems to be that many young men are more interested in making money.

"We women want to show we are here and we have a lot to say," says Massoumeh Pahshahie Umidvar.

"For years we have lived under the heavy shadow of men, our fathers and brothers, and now we want to come out of that."

Massoumeh holds down a job in a factory, has a child and is doing a postgraduate degree. Her life is completely different from that of her mother who stayed at home, cooking and looking after children.

'Historic opportunity'

"Before the revolution everybody supposed that if you wanted to be a rich person with a good standard of living you needed to be educated," explains journalist and social commentator Sayed Laylaz.

"But after the revolution because of a lot of changes - especially because of the Iran-Iraq war - this mentality changed.

“ I will choose a person as a husband who lets me work because I love my job...”

Sudabeh Shahkhudahee
Nurse

"At the moment boys don't think that if they want to be a successful person they should be educated and because of this they leave free more places for girls to go to university."

Mr Laylaz calls it a historic opportunity for women that they have eagerly seized. He hopes this new generation of educated Iranian women will force social change in the decades ahead.

It will not be long, he argues, before women are in charge of recruitment in offices. Already he sees signs that Iran's politicians recognise the importance of women's votes in elections.

Massoumeh tells her husband that it will not be long before Iranian men will be forced to sit at home while their wives run the country.

Already it has become a problem for women with degrees to find husbands with the same level of education.

Marriage or a career

Another social change is that young women who do have careers are now beginning to think twice about getting married. Especially as under Iranian law a woman needs her husband's permission to go to work.

Sudabeh Shahkhudahee has just finished a night shift as a nurse and is relaxing in front of her cousin's satellite TV and reading her horoscope.



Graduating women are not accepting traditional social roles

After studying at university and finding the right job Sudabeh is nervous about her future - she could lose it all if she marries the wrong man.

"I will choose a person as a husband who lets me work because I love my job," she says.

"I will not give up my job after I get married."

This is a sentiment that is increasingly being heard in a society where a single woman even has trouble hiring an apartment to live alone.

Sudabeh knows it is going to be hard to find a man who will not have a problem with her doing night shifts and being away from home for long periods, especially when she has children.

Working mothers are a relatively new phenomenon in Iran but attitudes are changing among the younger generation of working women, many of whom will no longer accept a husband who does not share the workload at home.

"Our men are coming out of this macho shell and becoming more co-operative," says a young married student.

Many believe Iranian women who have worked hard to overtake Iranian men will be the ones to bring about social and political change.

"Maybe in the near future we can get our rights - at least I hope," says another student.