

Female-Headed Households in a Male-Dominated Society, Iran

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Abstract

Despite enormous rise in level of education of women since 1970s, labor force participation rate of women remains very low. Currently, only about 12% of women aged 10⁺ are known to be economically active and women's share of national production is estimated to be around 20% of the GDP. As a result, the majority of women depend on male relatives and women who do not have a husband, father or older brother to take care of them are referred to as "women without guardians". Some of these women are responsible for maintenance of a household referred to as "female headed households". The latter account for 8.5% of all households in Iran in the 1996 census. Using findings of two large-scale, nationally representative sample surveys conducted in 2000 and 2003, this paper summarizes major social, economic and demographic characteristics of female-headed households in Iran. The main findings are that female headed households are generally smaller in size, headed by older (mostly widowed) individuals with low levels of education and marketable skills and income. A small proportion of them are headed by very young girls who have been forced to shoulder the responsibility for the household due to loss of parents. Both types are mostly poor, disadvantaged, and not eligible for health insurance and retirement benefits available to the predominantly male employees of the formal sector. They constitute a disproportionately large segment of households and individuals covered by the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the main para-statal social assistance organization established since the revolution. Recent efforts by Iranian government to provide these female-headed households with some measure of social security benefits are briefly described.