



Dynamics of Political Participation of Women in Iran: A Factual Review

Farhad Hamzeh*

Department of Geography, Faculty of Literature and Human Science, Islamic Azad University,
Branch of Tehran Central, Tehran, Iran

Article History

Manuscript No. 35
Received 20th May, 2010
Received in revised form 3rd August, 2010
Accepted in final form 8th August, 2010

Correspondence to

*E-mail: geofarhad77@yahoo.com

Keywords

Women, participation, parliament election,
Iran

Abstract

Political participation means taking part in politics. The general level of participation in a society is the extent to which the people as a whole are active in politics: the number of active people multiplied by the amount of their action, to put it arithmetically. Perhaps the most remarkable political development of the 20th century is the global spread of democracy. The increasingly important role of election in regional, national and world level, has obtained it as a basic political topic. Iran has repeated the experience of democracy several times. The Islamic Consultative Assembly election is one of the most important political events in Iran which holds once in every 4 years. The main aim of this research is to evaluate the role of women in parliament of Iran (1st to 7th round) through participation in the Islamic Consultative Assembly elections. Parliamentary election of Iran is a developing and active process. This paper concentrates on the process of changing and growing rates of women's participation in the political affairs of Iran.

© 2010 PP House. All rights reserved

1. Introduction

More than a decade ago, a regional program was initiated explicitly focused on increasing women's political participation in recognition that women must be engaged as active citizens, educated voters, and effective leaders for their concerns to be addressed. The picture is more positive at the local level, where women have been more successful in attaining office, and where quotas reserving seats for women have helped increase women's representation. In 2002, women accounted for only about 14% of members of parliament worldwide (BBC News through Online Women in Politics). Out of over 180 countries, 14 are headed by women, six women are vice presidents (Women's Learning Partnerships, 2002). With 48.8% of seats won by women in the recent parliamentary elections, Rwanda became the country that has the most number of women parliamentarians in the world. Currently, women in Sweden hold 45.3% of seats in parliament, Denmark 38%, Finland 37.5% and the Netherlands with 36.7% (the Guardian, October 2003). Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Netherlands and Germany all have reached 30% goal of parliamentary seats taken by women by the end of 2002 along with Argentina, Costa Rica, South Africa and Mozambique (BBC News through Online Women in Politics). In May 2003, Qatar appointed Sheikha bint Ahmed Al-Mahmud as the state's first woman cabinet minister. The appointment followed April 29 referendum in which Qataris overwhelmingly approved a written constitution recognizing a woman's right to vote and run for office (DAWN Internet newspaper, May 2003). The proportion of woman parliamentarians in the United States is 14%, France 11.8% and Japan 10%. In Rwanda, women compose 48.8%, and in Uganda 24.7%. Kuwait and the United

Arab Emirates do not give women the right to vote or stand in election. 7% of the world's total cabinet ministers are women. Women ministers remain concentrated in social areas (14%) compared to legal (9.4%), economic (4.1%), political affairs (3.4%), and the executive (3.9%) (<http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/statistics.htm>). There are 9 women ambassadors to the United Nations. They are from Finland, Guinea, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Somalia and Turkmenistan. In the United Nations, women hold 9% of the top management jobs and 21% of senior management positions, but 48% of the junior professional civil service slots. In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to grant women full voting rights. Among the countries in the developing world that were the earliest to grant women the right to vote were Albania (1920), Mongolia (1924), Ecuador (1929), Turkey (1930) and Sri Lanka (1931). Some of the latest countries to grant women suffrage are Switzerland (1971), Iraq (1980), Namibia (1989) and south Africa-black population (1994). Some countries still do not have universal suffrage. Among them are Brunei Darussalam, Kuwait, Sultanate of Oman, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Among the developing nations which have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) are Bahrain, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, Syrian Arab Republic and United Arab Emirates. The United States is the only industrialized nation that has not ratified CEDAW. Women occupy only 18% of parliamentary seats around the world. But the regional average data for women in parliament varies greatly as mentioned below:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------|
| a. Nordic countries | - 41.4% |
| b. Americas | - 21.8% |



- c. Europe (excluding Nordic countries) - 19.1%
- d. Asia - 17.4%
- e. Sub-Saharan Africa - 17.2%
- f. Pacific - 13.4%
- g. Arab states - 9.6%

The US currently ranks 68th of 134 nations worldwide with only 16.8% women elected to the House of Representatives and 16.0% women elected to the Senate. In October 2003, Rwanda became the country closest to reaching parity between men and women of any national legislature. Currently, Rwanda has 48.8% of Lower House seats held by women and 34.6% held in the Upper House. From 1945 to 1995, the number of sovereign states with parliaments increased seven-fold but the percentage of woman members in parliament worldwide increased only four-fold. From 1945 to 1997, only 42 of the 186 states with a legislative institution have at one time or another selected a woman to preside over Parliament or a House of Parliament.

2. Woman as Ministers and Heads of Government

Woman ministers remain concentrated in social areas (14%) rather than legal (9.4%), economic (4.1%), political (3.4%) and executive (3.9%) areas. There are only 13 women in the highest positions of State out of 189 governments as listed below:

- a. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany
- b. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President of Argentina
- c. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of Liberia
- d. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, President of the Philippines
- e. Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand
- f. Luisa Diogo, Prime Minister of Mozambique
- g. Mary McAleese, President of Ireland
- h. Micheline Calmy-Rey, President of the Swiss Confederation
- i. Michelle Bachelet, President of Chile
- j. Pratibha Patil, President of India
- k. Tarja Halonen, President of Finland
- l. Yulia Tymoshenko, Prime Minister of Ukraine
- m. Zinaida Greceanii, Prime Minister of Moldova

3. Women's Suffrage

Women still do not have the right to vote, or have the voting restrictions placed upon them in a few countries. Upswing of women's role is given in Table 1.

Indicators	1990	2000	2004
World	13	14	15.6
Nordic countries	34	39	39.7
Europe-OSCE member countries (including Nordic countries)	17	17	18.0
Europe member countries (excluding Nordic countries)	16	15	16.4
America	11	16	18.6
Asia	13	15	15.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	9	13	14.4
Pacific	5	13	12.5

- Brunei: Both women and men have been denied the right to vote or to stand for election since 1962.

- Lebanon: Partial suffrage. Proof of elementary education is required for women but not for men. Voting is compulsory for men but optional for women.
- Saudi Arabia: No suffrage for women. The first local election ever held in the country occurred in 2005. Women were not given the right to vote, to stand for election or to appear before a judge without male representation.
- United Arab Emirates: Limited, but will be fully expanded by 2010.

4. Quota System

There are currently many countries in the world that have instituted a quota system to ensure a minimum number of women elected to office. In 1994, South Africa ranked 141st in the world in percentage of legislative seats held by women. After the African National Congress enacted a 30% quota for female candidates, South Africa jumped to 13th place in 2004 with women elected to 32.8% of its lower parliamentary seats. The *Panchayati Raj* Act in India reserves 33% seats in the three-tiered *panchayats* (village council, council of cluster villages and the district council) for women. Today there are close to one million elected women leaders at the village level. A recent assessment revealed that corruption has gone down and transparency has greatly increased because of women's participation in the *panchayats*. Finland's law requires that at least 40% of each sex should be represented in the membership of various decision-making bodies which leads to an increase in women's membership from 25% in 1980 to 48% in 1996. Argentina has a 30% quota for women on electoral lists. As a result, the number of women in the House has remained the same from 2001 to 2003 at 34.1% in the lower house. Women have made no significant impact in Senate commissions where they are still traditionally represented in the social and family commissions while their male counterparts are in the commissions for industry, custom revenues, mining, energy, defense and foreign relations. The French Constitution was reformed in 1999 to state that 'the law favors the equal access of women and men to electoral mandates and elective functions. In 2000, French law was changed so that political parties must present equal numbers of men and women for most elections. Women's political participation encompasses a wide range of actions and strategies. It includes voting and voter education, candidacy in national and local elections, lending support to candidates who carry gender-sensitive agenda, campaigning against those who have policies that are 'anti-women's rights', and advocating for the integration of women's rights agenda in the platforms of candidates and parties. Political participation strategies include mechanisms that enhance women's political participation. Examples of these are gender quotas that allot 30 to 50 % of decision-making positions for women; gender mainstreaming strategies that promote a culture of gender sensitivity in government; national machineries for women, which have the primary role of leading and monitoring gender mainstreaming strategies of governments; gender or women's budgets that allot a percentage of national budget for gender mainstreaming and affirmative action for women's advancement. In legislatures of some democratic countries, women's sectoral representatives have been appointed on terms and capacities at par with elected representatives. A more recent mechanism that provides a leeway



for women's political participation is the party list system where women's groups can bid for seats in the legislature.

5. Political Participation in Iran

Political participation applies to any voluntary act to influence elections or public policy, including voting, protesting, lobbying, and many other activities. Historically, the groups excluded from the participation current have found little chance to peacefully create a democratic arena for their presence. Political participation is not a sheer ethical inclination, but a method for enjoying equal social opportunities and obliterating unilateral situations. Yet, political participation is not to be considered an all-sufficient proviso though it is a requisite for the achievement of social freedom and equality. Political participation can be interpreted as 'the process of empowerment' during which a neutralizing power is generated through availability of the required resources, countering a previous order and power structure. Therefore, participation is a means for increasing and redistributing opportunities for participation in political decision-making.

There are two main types of political participation: conventional and unconventional. Voting, political debate, election campaign and formation of a party are among the prominent features of conventional participation whereas interdicting elections, political gatherings and protests, disturbed demonstrations and riots, violence, guerrilla warfare and revolution are to be defined as the sub-categories of unconventional participation. It is widely held that the republicanism reflected in the post-revolutionary Iranian Constitutional law is intrinsic to the Iranian social context. Pluralism has come to limelight on account of the tribal, religious, linguistic and ethnic pluralities in Iran. Also, different languages and dialects such as Farsi, Baluchi, Kurdish and Azeri as well as the existence of Shi'ism and Sunnism indicate indigenous pluralism in the country. As enshrined in paragraph 8 of article 3 of the Constitutional law, the government is duty-bound to secure the participation of the entire people in determining their political, economic, social and cultural fate. Article 6 also states, 'In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution'.

Although pluralism is intrinsic to the Iranian society, it has not been a hindrance to unity rather it has consolidated the Iranian solidarity and identity. History shows that any prosperous government in Iran has been capable of embracing all the existing heterodox groups; otherwise, it has encountered a crisis whenever the political axis was riveted upon a certain social group. By virtue of the same reason, article 12 of the Constitution states, 'The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school (in usual al-Din and fiqh), and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafite, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali and Zaydi, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites. These schools enjoy official status in matters relevant to religious education, affairs of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance and wills) and related litigation in courts of law. In regions of the country where Muslims following any one

of these schools of fiqh constitute the majority, local regulations within the boundary of the jurisdiction of local councils, are to be in accordance with the respective school of fiqh without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools'.

Also, article 13 of the Constitution states that the Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities who are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.

Despite the plurality of tribes, all heterodox groups have suffered a crisis during the critical periods. The necessity of such a unity has been long known to be the creation of an all-embracing government; however, whenever such a government has sought to limit the national identity to a part and/or to ignore the existing ethnic and regional plurality, it has suffered a crisis.

The Safavid government can be counted as one such example as depriving people of political participation. Although the Safavid government built consolidated borders for Iran, it considered only one important segment thereof, i.e. Shiite identity because of the limitation of Iranian identity, and lost a remarkable set of components of the political society through ignoring other aspects of the Iranian identity. In the Safavid period, the government was limited to the Shiite government. So, the Sunnite Kurds who made up a large portion of the Iranian society found the federal government alien; consequently, the Ottoman government availed themselves of this opportunity to segregate a wide part of Kurdistan from Iran. The fall of the Safavid government may be chiefly attributed to the limitation of Iranian identity. The Afghan society apparently neglected during the Safavid period took advantage of the Safavid King Hussein's weaknesses and launched an offensive on the Iranian capital from the eastern part with the fatwas of the Saudi Sunnite Ulama.

As opposed to the Safavids, there stood the broad-based government of Nader Shah which due to the presence of such ethnic tribes as Fars, Baluch, Kurd, Arab, etc. in his army, he managed to occupy Baghdad and Caucasus regions and maraud through India in a short time although it was considered as a military government by some. With no praise for Nader Shah's plundering and marauding, reference should only be made to his critical role in the reformation of a broad-based government; a role which caused him to be accepted as the political leader by all Iranian heterodox groups.

Fundamentally, in the traditional government of Iran which was qualified for the traditional participation, there was a King in the center, and the tribes and their heads participated in this government; but with the advent of Reza Shah, the mentioned listing, i.e. the relatively decentralized government and traditional participation completely collapsed and the different aspects of modern government were gradually formed by suppressing the centrifugal groups in Iran. The authoritarian government survived regardless of the Iranian pluralism until the 1979 Islamic Revolution; and temporary changes could not shake its pillars. The fifty-year reign of Pahlavi regime showed that the Iranian society could have been deeply vulnerable if its native pluralism had not been reflected in the established governments. In other words, expansion of political participation in contemporary era is deemed as a national necessity. Fortunately, the Constitution has largely catered necessary tools for political participation. Article 19, for instance, stipulates that



all people of Iran regardless of their ethnic group or tribe enjoy equal rights. Color, race, language, and the like do not bestow any privilege. On the other hand, apart from the nationality, sex has not been considered as a privilege either.

According to article 20 of the Constitution, 'All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social and cultural rights in conformity with Islamic criteria'. As to the freedom of expression, article 23 provides that 'The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief'. Publications and the press have freedom of expression according to article 24. Besides the publications and press activities, the formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted. No one may be prevented from participating in the aforementioned groups, or be compelled to participate in them according to article 26. In addition, article 27 provides, 'Public gatherings and marches may be freely held, provided arms are not carried'.

Therefore, the Islamic Republic Constitution accords special attention to the participation objectives and provides legitimate

grounds for its implementation. On the other hand, in order to impede governmental violations against the active civil and political groups, the Constitution formulates some articles to guarantee the protection of these freedoms. For example, according to article 25, 'The inspection of letters and the failure to deliver them, the recording and disclosure of telephone conversations, the disclosure of telegraphic and telex communications, censorship, or the willful failure to transmit them, eavesdropping, and all forms of covert investigation are forbidden, except as provided by law'. On the other hand, article 38 states, 'All forms of torture for the purpose of extracting confession or acquiring information are forbidden'. According to article 39, 'All affronts to the dignity and repute of persons arrested, detained, imprisoned or banished in accordance with the law, whatever form they may take, are forbidden and liable to punishment'.

In general, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran claims that innocence is to be presumed, (article 37) and no one is to be held guilty of a charge unless his or her guilt has been established by a competent court.

Figures (1-7) showing political participation in Parliament election from 1st to 7th round are drawn based on the data given in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of men (M) and women (W) candidate in Parliament elections of Iran (1st to 7th round)

Districts	1 st		2 nd		3 rd		4 th		5 th		6 th		7 th	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
Hamedan	11	0	9	0	9	0	9	0	7	2	9	0	9	0
Lorestan	10	0	8	0	7	0	7	0	8	0	9	0	9	0
Gilan	16	0	13	0	14	0	13	0	13	0	13	0	12	1
Kougiloueh & BouerAhman	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	3	0
Kermanshah	7	0	8	0	8	0	6	1	6	0	6	0	8	0
Kerman	11	0	10	0	11	0	10	0	10	0	9	0	8	0
Kordestan	8	0	6	0	6	0	8	0	6	0	5	0	5	0
Sistan & Balouchestan	8	0	7	0	7	0	7	0	7	0	8	0	7	0
Semnan	4	0	5	0	4	0	5	0	4	0	4	0	3	0
Khozestan	21	0	18	0	17	0	17	0	18	0	18	0	18	0
Charmahal & Bakhtiari	5	0	3	0	3	0	4	0	3	0	4	0	3	0
Eilam	1	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	3	0	3	0
Azərbayjan W	11	0	11	0	11	0	11	0	11	1	10	1	12	0
Hormozgan	5	0	3	0	4	0	5	0	4	0	1	0	5	0
Bousherhr	5	0	3	0	3	0	3	0	3	0	4	0	4	0
Khorasan	31	0	26	0	25	0	24	1	23	2	25	1	0	0
Yazd	4	0	3	0	3	0	3	0	2	0	4	0	4	0
Fars	20	0	16	0	25	0	18	0	17	0	17	0	16	0
Esfahan	26	0	19	0	20	0	18	0	18	2	18	1	18	1
Markazi	11	0	9	0	7	0	7	0	6	0	6	0	7	0
Azərbayjan E	27	0	25	0	27	0	23	2	16	0	19	0	16	1
Ardabil	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	6	0	6	1
Tehran	26	3	31	3	31	4	32	5	31	7	30	6	30	6
Qom	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	3	0
Zanjan	9	0	8	0	9	0	9	0	6	0	5	0	4	1
Qazvin	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	3	0
Golestan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	6	0
Mazandaran	21	0	17	0	17	0	17	0	18	0	12	0	11	0

Figures show poor participation of women from different districts. Women's attendance in parliament is remarkable in Tehran, only in rounds 6th and 7th of Parliament election. It is notable that social structure, ethnic and tribal roots are effective on participation and chances appeared for women's political activities.

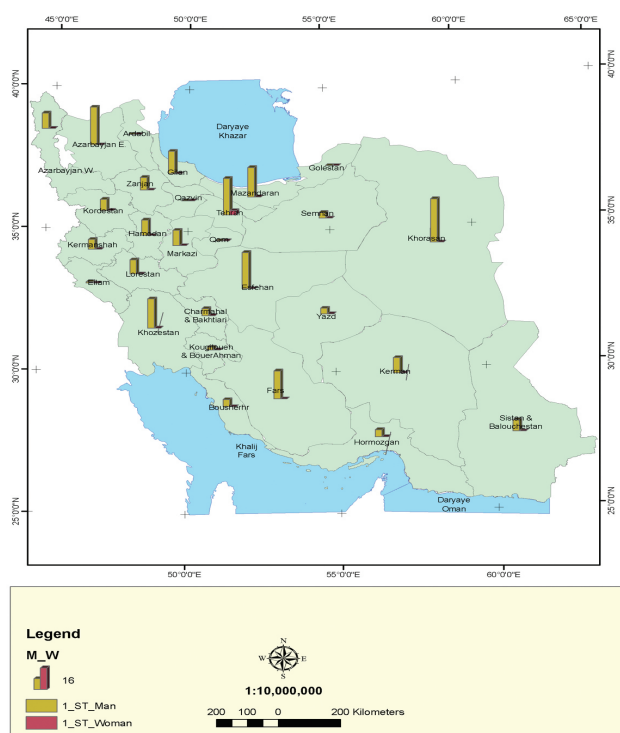


Figure 1: Number of men and woman candidate in Parliament elections from State-1

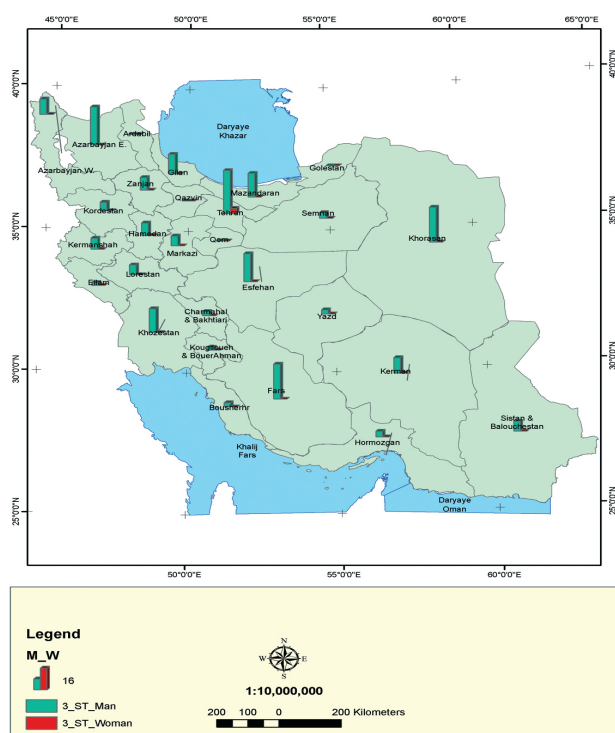


Figure 3: Number of men and woman candidate in Parliament elections from State-3

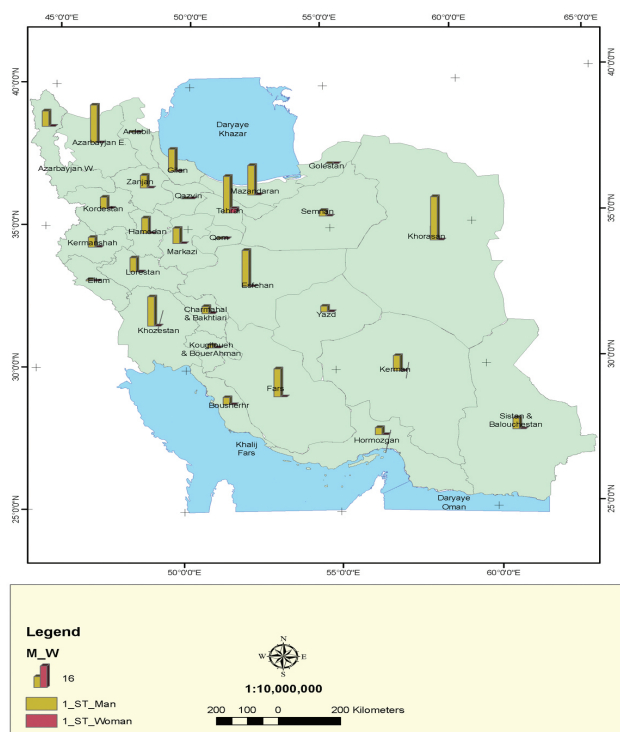


Figure 2: Number of men and woman candidate in Parliament elections from State-2

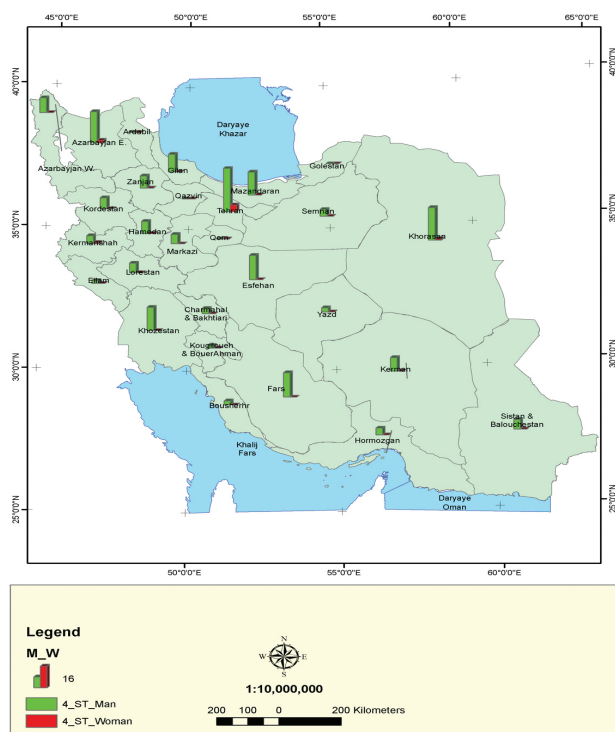


Figure 4: Number of men and woman candidate in Parliament elections from State-4

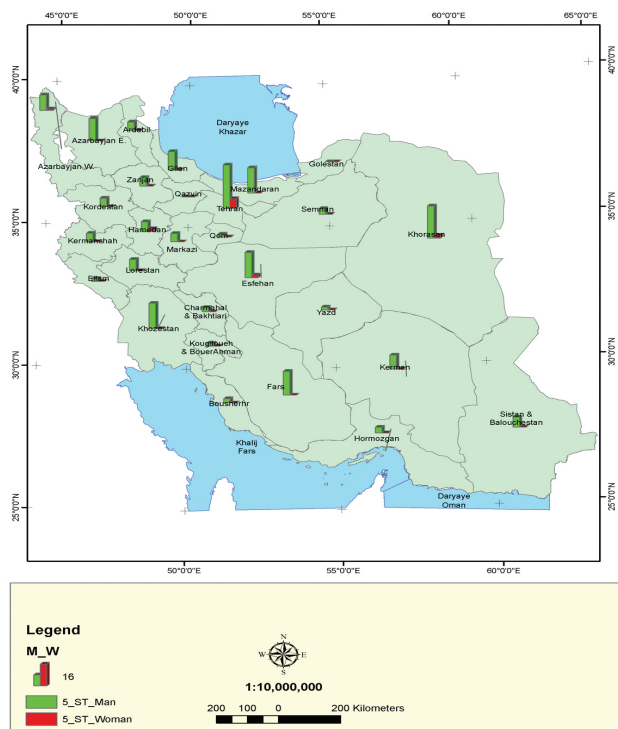


Figure 5: Number of men and woman candidate in Parliament elections from State-5

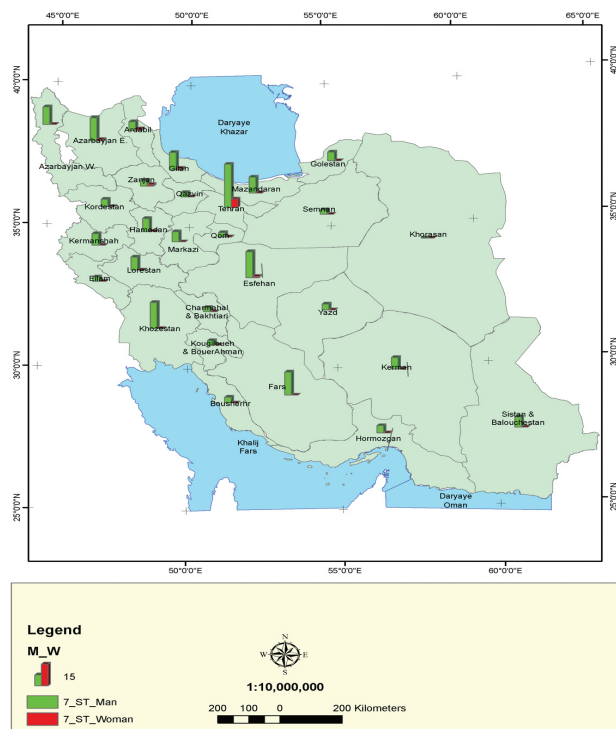


Figure 7: Number of men and woman candidate in Parliament elections from State-7

6. Conclusion

The factors that limit women's political participation and act as barriers to political equality can be roughly divided into cultural and institutional realms. Cultural factors are more fundamental, while institutional factors tend to be derived or constructed. Although interdependent to some extent, cultural factors in isolation require considerable time to modify or influence because they are so basic and deeply ingrained. Therefore, a more effective short-term method of reducing barriers involves focusing on the institutional component rather than attacking cultural factors. Of course, it needs not be an either of the two propositions. In fact, sustainable and effective measures to reduce barriers for women's political participation require that what we think of as short and long-term interventions or institutional and cultural factors be brought to play concurrently. The key to success, and one of paramount importance in today's reality, lies in the effort of women themselves, not as individuals, but collectively. Women's organizations, NGO's and citizen's organizations, when acting in a concerted manner have considerable power to alter both cultural and institutional conditions to expand political empowerment for women. Networks based on shared interest need to be established and strengthened. The United Nations can play an invaluable role in supporting women's NGOs in developing networks, in organizing and directing research, and in finding application of research findings around the world.

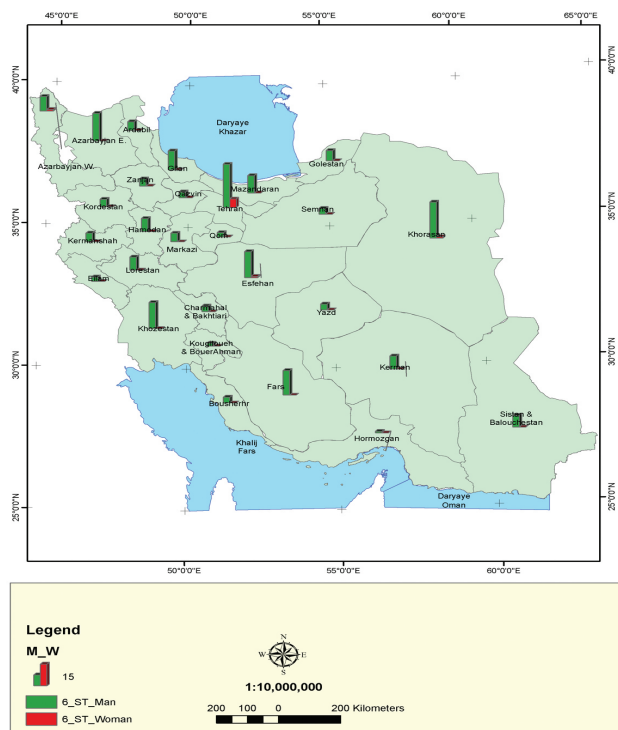


Figure 6: Number of men and woman candidate in Parliament elections from State-6