

**THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLICY-MAKING IN IRAN:
STUDY OF THE IMPACTS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL
ORGANIZATIONS ON WOMEN'S POLICIES DURING THE ISLAMIC
REPUBLIC ERA**

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Author's Declaration Form


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Abstract

The way non-governmental organizations under the machinery of authoritarian and non-democratic governments contribute to the policy-making process is not easy to track. When it comes to women's policies in a country like Iran, with theocratic laws and regulations, the story gets more complicated. However, by broadening our understanding of NGOs beyond formal and registered entities, we can observe a shift in Iranian civil society towards a new generation of civil activists advocating for women's rights. This research aims to investigate the contribution of NGOs in Iran to the advocacy of women's rights policies. To achieve this objective, the study will explore different dimensions of women's rights, evaluating the achievements and shortcomings of NGOs in advancing women's issues in each of them. By analyzing this, scholars and activists can gain insights into the core ideology of the Iranian government regarding women and evaluate the progress made in this area. The research will utilize secondary research methods and conduct interviews with NGO directors and politicians engaged in women's rights issues in Iran to gather relevant data.

Keywords: Non-governmental organization (NGO), Advocacy for Women's Rights, Iran, Civil Society

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List of Abbreviations

NGO Non-governmental organization

IRI Islamic Republic of Iran

CSO Civil Society Organization

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Iranian women face significant obstacles and experience control in both societal and personal aspects of their lives. The non-democratic nature of the government makes it exceedingly challenging for civil society to contribute to political issues, particularly women's rights, which is a highly politicized topic in many countries, including Iran.

Civil society, positioned at the intersection between society and government, exhibits a dynamic and context-dependent nature, making it difficult to define a specific and universally applicable framework. Therefore, in order to achieve the research goals and advance our understanding, it is necessary to examine civil society within the specific conditions and requirements of the examined country which is Iran.

NGOs, due to their very nature that tends to resist the absolute authority of governments, cannot function efficiently in countries like Iran, where the government has wielded the whole power (Koolai, 2005). In other words, as Homa Katouzian (2014), a historian and sociologist with a special interest in Iranian studies, has said, the most significant challenge for civil society organizations is the government as the real owner of power, which has tried to undermine the role of NGOs by giving its own solutions (Khosravi and Shahsavari Fard, 2016).

Considering these circumstances, a fundamental question which is also the main question of this study arises: “How have NGOs in Iran contributed to advocating for policies concerning women’s rights?” While individuals familiar with Iran and its context may be skeptical regarding the existence of women's rights policies and the influence of civil society, it is crucial to recognize that reality is multifaceted and fluid. As Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber states, "A core assumption I hold about the social world is that reality is multiple and fluid, and there are,

in turn, multiple truths out there waiting to be found" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p.8). Therefore, this study aims to delve into one aspect of truth by undertaking an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and perspectives of civil society actors in Iran.

By examining the role and potential impact of civil society, particularly NGOs, in the policymaking process concerning women's rights in Iran, this research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and possibilities for positive change within the Iranian context.

Chapter 2 – Context and Background

The pace of events in Iran is incredibly rapid, which makes the analysis of a situation challenging. Developments occur on a daily basis, such as the ratification of pro-women bills one day and the passing of anti-women laws the next. In some political administrations, women are highly regarded, with politicians advocating for their rights, while in others, their position is considered solely to their traditional roles as mothers and housewives. However, amidst the complexities and discrepancies, gaining familiarity with the context and history is crucial to gaining a clearer perspective of the current situation. In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the context, divided into three sections: “Women in Pahlavi Era,” “Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” and “Advocacy for Women’s Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” It is important to note that while the first section provides a historical overview of the subject during the Pahlavi Era, the subsequent areas focus on assessing the situation under the IRI Era, which is the primary focus of this study.

2.1 Women During Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)

During Pahlavi era (1925-1979), prior to the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women experienced various advancements in education and employment opportunities, which led to their active participation in society. Reza Shah, who established an authoritarian state, tried to promote secular and modern policies to standardize and europeanize everything, including the appearance of the people. As part of these policies, despite religious beliefs regarding the obligation for women to cover their hair, the first dress code was enacted into law in 1928, and Reza Shah enforced the unveiling of women. Besides, providing educational opportunities for women resulted in an increasing number of graduating girls from schools. While in 1925, only 120 girls, as compared to 475 boys, had graduated from the schools, the number of graduated girls in 1931-32 was 1,346 and 3,713, respectively (Nakhosteen, 1933, p.373).

Generally, despite the forceful and centralist approach of the state, the modern reforms, which included free education and employment opportunities for women, resulted in meaningful and significant changes in the lives of Iranian women, particularly those belonging to the middle-class (Yeganeh, 1993).

Following the resignation of Reza Shah, his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, continued the same cycle of societal modernization (1941-1979), and debates around women's rights became more significant. Conservative and fundamentalist groups, including the Devotees of Islam, opposed women's rights and demanded a return to traditional clothing and the veil in public (Akhavi, 1980). In contrast, leftist and liberal nationalist elements in the National Front pushed for women's suffrage and legal equality (Sadeghi, 1999). Women's rights organizations and independent activists also emerged during this period, advocating for women's education, social status, and awareness (Sadeghi, 1999). The Women's Party of Iran, which was founded in 1942, became an active organization promoting women's rights and lobbying for women's suffrage in the Majles (Iranian Parliament). In 1946, the party transformed into the Iranian Women's Council to better represent women of different political views and advocate for various issues concerning women's empowerment (Paidar, 1997).

In addition, there were also other women's groups and associations that advocated for various women's rights and had some significant positive achievements (Sadeghi, 1999). The most crucial action of these groups' collective endeavors was placing a woman suffrage bill before the Majles in 1944. While the bill faced opposition from clerics initially, in 1963, under the White Revolution (an aggressive modernization program), this law was enacted and granted women partial voting rights (Osanloo, 2020). Another outstanding advancement was adopting the "Family Protection Law," which granted women the right to seek divorce and obtain child custody. Based on this law, the husband's unilateral power to divorce and automatically gain

custody of the children was eliminated. Additionally, the minimum age for girls to marry was increased from 13 to 18, and men were required to obtain court permission to take a second wife (Hinchcliffe, 1968).

Overall, by 1978, just before the Iranian revolution, there were 22 women serving in parliament and 333 women elected to local councils (Esfandiari, 2010, p.1). In the 1960s, two women, Farrokhroo Parsa, and Mahnaz Afkhami, served as ministers, representing a significant milestone for women's participation in government (Baneinia & Dersan, 2021). Furthermore, women constituted one-third of university students, and over two million women were part of the workforce, with more than 146,000 employed in the civil service (Esfandiari, 2010, p.1).

However, it should also be considered that most of these advancements regarding women's status in society were limited to urban middle-class women. For instance, one study found that many women failed to pursue education because of their involvement in physical work, household, and reproductive activities in rural areas (Sedghi, 2007). Furthermore, the large-scale rural-urban migration between 1956 and 1976, combined with rapid and uneven economic development, resulted in the displacement of many rural immigrants who struggled to find employment opportunities in urban areas. As a consequence, women were compelled to seek work outside of the home without adequate job training or skills. This situation not only placed them in a marginalized position but also heightened their vulnerability. It shows that during that time, rural women continued to face discriminatory practices and were often excluded from the progress experienced by urban, middle-class women.

2.2 Women During the IRI (1979)

Women played a significant and influential role during the Iranian Revolution (1977-1979). They were involved in various roles and activities, such as disseminating news, providing shelter to activists or injured protesters, and active participation in street protests. Women's active participation in the revolution was driven by a combination of factors, including religious motivations and a desire for a democratic government (VAEZIAN, 2017). One group of these protesters were religious women from social classes who were formerly passive in social arenas and whose demands were ignored by the regime, and the other were educated women activists who aimed to challenge and resist Shah's dictatorship (VAEZIAN, 2017).

However, several months after the establishment of the new government, women found themselves as the major losers of the Revolution (M. Moghadam, 2004) due to a significant decline in their legal status and social positions. Women's daily lives and their entire status in society were drastically altered. Asef Bayat (2013), a scholar and professor of sociology, describes this shift in women's situation after the revolution: "Perhaps no social group felt the impact of the Islamic Revolution as immediately and extensively as middle-class women. Within months of the Islamic regime taking power, new policies with misogynistic undertones infuriated women who had recently been actively protesting against the monarchy."

By the end of March 1979, the significant legal victories for women achieved during Pahlavi Era were overturned in the name of religious revival. "The Family Protection Law" was immediately replaced by a family code based on an intensely patriarchal interpretation of sharia (a body of religious law derived from the Islamic tradition) (M. Brooks, 2008). Based on this new law, the minimum marriage age for girls reverted to 9 years old, women's right to initiate divorce was abolished, and men lawfully received custody of children. There were other restrictive laws and regulations which were the result of a top-down Islamization in society. In

the initial periods of the new regime, there were quotas against women in education and employment, and strict social control required women to wear the hijab in public. Right after the establishment of the new government, Ayatollah Khomeini revoked women's rights to serve as judges, and on March 29, 1979, he announced the gender segregation of all beaches and sports activities (Saeghi, 2007). These new regulations led to many women either retiring early, staying at home, or entering into family or informal businesses (Bayat, 2013).

It should also be noted that the Islamic Revolution had some positive impacts on certain groups of women, particularly those from more religious and traditional backgrounds. While the new moral order and the enforcement of the hijab had a repressive impact on secular and non-Muslim women, it resulted in a certain level of freedom for socially conservative women (Bayat, 2007). Traditional men, feeling more comfortable with the enforcement of religious practices, allowed their daughters or wives to attend school and participate in public events (Bayat, 2007).

Despite the deteriorating legal and social status of women under the IRI, women actively sought opportunities to improve their position in society. One oft-cited example here is the impact of the long war with Iraq (1980-88) on women's employment. Although the government sought to employ ideologically-correct women, the mobilization of Iranian men created employment opportunities for educated women in the public sector, particularly in health, education, and public administration (M. Moghadam, 2004).

Another opportunity that women took full advantage of was enrolling in higher education. Within a span of just twenty years, their remarkable enthusiasm for education resulted in a twofold increase in their literacy rate. Between 1976 and 1986, the literacy rate among females aged six years and older rose from 35 percent to 52 percent. In urban areas, the literacy rate increased from 56 percent to 65 percent, while in rural areas, it improved from 17 percent to

36 percent (Ahad, 2023). It is also notable that by 1998, more girls than boys were entering universities (Bayat, 2013, p.44).

In general, the status of women after the Islamic Revolution is not homogeneous and is highly influenced by the nature of the political administration in power. While the government's core ideology, based on Islamic regulations, may pose obstacles to advancements in women's equality, particularly in areas such as inheritance and family law, there are instances where political administrations can advocate for women's rights. In the following parts, I will provide a brief assessment of women's situation during six different eras in Iran, including the Iran-Iraq war and five presidential eras within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

During the Iran-Iraq war era (1980-1988), when the general situation in the country was unstable, women served as the workforce as nurses, doctors, and support for soldiers on the war front (Esfandiari, 2010). During that era, Ayatollah Khomeini delivered speeches in which he encouraged women to join the Basij force, a volunteer paramilitary organization operating under the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The purpose of their participation was to defend Islam from its enemies and support soldiers from behind the fronts (Saeghi, 2007).

In Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997) which was recognized as a development-oriented government, women's issues were not a focus of the government's agenda (Sadeghi, Khademi, and Najafi, 2015). In line with the government's development-oriented approach, women were just viewed as integral to the process of development. Consequently, there was a notable emphasis on increasing the number of educated women and enhancing their job skills during this period (Sadeghi, Khademi, Najafi, 2015).

After an economic growth period, there was a growing desire among the people for cultural and social freedom in Iran. This led to the election of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), who presented himself as a more liberal and reformist candidate compared to his conservative predecessors. Under Khatami's presidency, women experienced some notable positive changes compared to previous and future years. During that era, there were efforts to promote gender equality, expand educational opportunities for women, and increase their participation in various fields, including politics and the workforce. During that era, the Office for Women's Affairs was established at the president's office to find gender gaps and compile solutions for improving women's position in society (Moheimany, 2021). Moreover, for the first time, two women were awarded two seats in the governing board meetings. As a result of all these measures, women gradually penetrated the labor force in various areas such as politics, law, and different industries (Sadeghi, Khademi, Najafi, 2015).

Contrary to the previous period, during Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005,2013), the fundamentalist and traditional approach of the government caused the role of women to be limited to housework and motherhood. Soon after taking office, he started purging feminists and liberals in the Centre for Women's Participation, and other parts of the administration too (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2009). He also renamed the name of the Centre from Women Participation to the Centre for Women and Family (Moheimany, 2021). Since the changes were not just at the surface, women faced restrictions and limitations in certain areas, such as clothing and personal expression, with stricter enforcement of dress code and social codes of conduct.

Although the next president, Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) was more women-friendly, there was no tangible progress on women's rights during that era. During his presidential campaign, Rouhani raised expectations by expressing the need for increased female representation, stating

that “women should not be satisfied with having only one female minister” (Parizad & Bekand, 2019, p.41). However, once he was in office, he did not appoint any female ministers to the Majles (Iranian Parliament). In general, the administration's support for women's rights during this era appeared to be primarily expressed through verbal and promotional means rather than through substantial policy changes or legal reforms.

Finally, President Raisi, who assumed office in 2021, is widely regarded as one of the most conservative presidents in Iran's history, particularly concerning social and cultural matters, including women's rights. His presidency coincided with a significant women-led uprising in Iran, which had substantial implications for the status of women. As a response to this uprising, the government enacted stricter measures and increased the criminalization of issues pertaining to women's rights.

All in all, assessing the situation of women in Iran, particularly under the Islamic Republic, is a multifaceted task. The status and experiences of women in any society are influenced by a range of factors, including social, cultural, religious, and political dynamics. Iran, with its unique blend of Islamic values, historical traditions, and evolving social structures, presents a complex landscape for understanding women's rights and gender equality. While this study is not about assessing women's situation in Iran, acknowledging the complexities and challenges can help us to understand the context of the subject at hand more clearer.

2.3 Advocacy for Women's Rights During the IRI

Following the IRI's victory, women experienced substantial changes in their everyday lives, leading to their resistance against these impositions. Despite the government's quick labeling of any acts of defiance or resistance by women as "counterrevolutionary" to suppress them (Najmabadi, 1998, p.3), certain groups of women began mobilizing against anti-women regulations from the early stages of the new government's establishment. In this section, I will highlight the significant momentums of women's resilience and advocacy for equal rights during the IRI era.

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), Ayatollah Khomeini mandated the wearing of hijab in public administrations. In response, women organized six-day protests in March 1979, with various groups participating spontaneously. Despite the suppression of the protests, various groups of women, including nurses, teachers, students, and pupils, without any preplanned program, joined the protest and started moving. Since the last days of the demonstrations faced brutal violence, women's groups eventually decided to pause the protests for safety reasons and issued a statement: "At the current moment, the demonstration has become too dangerous... it is better not to demonstrate for a while; until we have better security and organization" (Hosseinkhah, 2019). Three years later, in July 1981, an edict of mandatory veiling in public was introduced, followed by an Islamic Punishment Law, which punished 74 lashes on women who failed to follow the Islamic dress code in public (Vakil, 2011).

From the early 1980s onwards and for more than a decade, there was a significant absence of women's presence in the public and social scene due to widespread repression of the government and the country's involvement in the Iran-Iraq war. The women's movement and its associated groups and publications were effectively suppressed, halting their activities.

Women activists faced arrests, emigration, or a loss of opportunities for public engagement, which resulted in their withdrawal from public life for over a decade (Hosseinkhah, 2019).

Following the war and the transition to a new administration (the 1990s), women sought alternative means to maintain their presence in society. As the establishment of women's organizations and associations was still challenging due to the prevailing circumstances, women turned their attention to engagement in less sensitive areas such as welfare, environment, and children's rights activities (Bayat, 2002). The establishment of these non-governmental organizations by women provided them with an opportunity for social activism beyond the confines of the government's ideology and framework.

Starting from the mid-1990s, a growing women's movement emerged, leading to more extensive discussions on women's issues. The women's media played a pioneering role in challenging traditional Islamic laws and regulations concerning marriage, divorce, custody of children, and inheritance. In 1998, the establishment of the Women Journalists' Trade Association marked a significant milestone (Rostami Povey, 2001). By the late 1990s, women's active participation in numerous women's NGOs, solidarity networks, and discourses indicated a significant level of organized activism (Bayat, 2007). From 1990 to 2002, a total of thirty-six new women's journals were published, reflecting the growing presence of feminist ideas. These ideas also found their way into universities, where female student groups took the initiative to print in newsletters focusing on gender issues (Bayat, 2007).

Influenced by the prevailing atmosphere in preceding years, in the early 2000s, the first joint activity in the women's movement was the attempt to join Iran in the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" (CEDAW). Women activists, through the publication of a book, comparative examination of Iranian laws, gathering signatures, and raising the issue in seminars and workshops held in various cities, sought to

emphasize the importance of joining this convention. In 2003, the convention was submitted to the parliament and approved, but it was rejected by the Guardian Council¹, and it remains unresolved to this day. Despite the lack of favorable outcomes from this collective action, the experience of advocating for a common demand brought together women from diverse backgrounds and identities. This experience served as an inspiration for many other women, leading them to establish websites, magazines, NGOs, and other platforms to raise awareness about women's issues and advocate for equal rights (Hosseinkhah, 2019).

The next momentum of advocacy for women's rights during the IRI Era was The One Million Signatures Campaign with the aim of collecting one million signatures on petitions advocating for equal rights for women in all aspects of life. This campaign which started in 2006 and lasted for about 3 years, was one of the most significant experiences of face-to-face and door-to-door campaigning to promote the reform of laws pertaining to women's rights (Ahmadi Khorasani, 2009). The campaign aimed to advocate for the following specific objectives: equal rights for women in marriage and divorce, the abolition of polygamy and temporary marriage, raising the age of criminal responsibility to 18 for both boys and girls, establishing equal compensation for bodily injury or death regardless of gender, securing equal inheritance rights, reforming laws that reduce punishments for honor killings, and ensuring equal testimony rights for women, along with other proposed changes (Passanante, 2011). In the end, several organizers of the campaign were arrested, prosecuted, and handed prison sentences. However, despite the government's attempts to suppress the movement, it did not succeed in extinguishing the campaign's spirit and determination.

lastly, the Women, Life, Freedom movement, which began in September 2022 following the tragic death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini by the actions of the so-called morality police, marked a

¹ The Guardian Council in Iran is responsible for vetting candidates, supervising elections, and ensuring that laws passed adhere to Islamic principles and the Constitution.

significant milestone in the ongoing struggle for women's rights in Iran. This movement has attracted significant attention and has received widespread support, leading to a series of demonstrations, protests, and grassroots initiatives across different cities and communities. Women from diverse backgrounds, along with allies and activists, have come together with a shared objective of challenging gender-based discrimination and advocating for substantial changes, particularly regarding discriminatory laws, such as the mandatory hijab. It is worth noting that, at the time of writing this thesis, eight months have passed since the movement's inception, thereby making it a challenging task to interpret its current state and impacts.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

The literature review section of this study comprises two parts. The first part examines the general situation of civil society and non-governmental organizations in Iran under different governing administrations. The second part focuses on studies that specifically analyze the impacts and contributions of civil society organizations in Iran after the Islamic revolution. These studies are more relevant to the research topic and receive greater emphasis. The studies highlight the role of NGOs in social change, improving women's status, and their contribution to policy and attitudinal shifts.

The Volunteer Activists Institute conducted a comprehensive study on Iranian civil society organizations, covering the period until 2018. The study highlights the prominent role of women and youth in driving the expansion of civil society in recent years. The researchers gathered data through desk research and interviews with 12 civil activists, providing valuable insights into the subject. The report reveals that charities and health-related CSOs in Iran tend to be politically apathetic and align themselves with government policies. On the other hand, NGOs working on women, youth, and environmental issues face different challenges based on the nature of the government in power (Volunteer Activists Institute, 2018). Under President Ahmadinejad, independent women's organizations were viewed as a threat, while they were welcomed under the 11th government. The report notes that recent years have seen significant progress in Iranian civil society, particularly in areas such as women's rights and youth activism.

The fact that NGOs' performance and effectiveness are dependent on the nature of the working government and it varies in different presidential terms, is supported by two other studies as well. The first study which is conducted in Iran, is about the status of civil society and non-governmental actors in public policy from 2005 to 2013. The authors of this research illustrate

that in the 9th and 10th governments, civil society, and non-governmental actors had limited involvement and influence in public policy. This was partly due to President Ahmadinejad's stance on democratic issues and partly because of his independence from all political parties and groups, which resulted in the government's autonomy (Agharezaei Tarkhorani, Mohseni, and Ellahi Manesh, 2019). To prove this assumption, the authors identify four different categories and analyze the marginalization of civil society into these spheres: domestic policy, international policy, economic policy, and women's policy.

So far, it is evident that previous studies on the activities of NGOs in Iran have analyzed this issue through the obstacles and opportunities that each government and president had provided during different periods of the Islamic Republic Era. However, there has been a notable lack of focus on the effects and contributions of NGOs and independent associations in Iran, despite their significance as a crucial component of civil society. In the following part of the literature review, I aim to examine this issue more closely by analyzing three studies that have specifically investigated the activities and impacts of civil society organizations regarding policy-making in Iran.

Elaheh Rostami Povey's article (2007) explores the significant role of trade unions and women's NGOs in Iran, highlighting their efforts in bringing about social change and providing new sources of identity. The article declares that despite structural limitations, women's NGOs have made progress in challenging gender barriers and expanding their advocacy and policy influence. However, organizing women as workers and engaging in collective actions remains challenging for women's NGOs, although they have been successful in influencing social welfare policies. Based on this study, the involvement of women in these organizations has the potential to enhance working conditions and social status. It's important to note that the study

was conducted in 2007, during a period of greater freedom and support for women's NGOs under a reformist government. The subsequent fundamentalist government may have posed challenges to their claims of driving fundamental social change, necessitating further examination of the findings across different presidential terms.

Drawing on interviews with registered NGO leaders, another study by Shahram Akbarzadeh, Rebecca Barlow, and Sanaz Nasirpour (2021) argues that NGO activists are completely aware of state sensitivities and the potential risks they may face by advocating for more radical changes, which is why in most cases they do not tend to enter the areas where women's rights are still being violated. Since the focus of the study is on registered NGOs, the fact that they endeavor to affect social change without violating the regime's redlines is not surprising. These NGOs are "neither government insiders nor anti-regime activists" (Akbarzadeh, Barlow, and Nasirpour, 2021, p.2), thus is apparent that they should adopt a more conservative approach and avoid an ambitious agenda for legislative change that could lead to a crackdown on their NGO. Nonetheless, we cannot conclude that if women's NGOs have not had a crucial role in legislative change, they were also unsuccessful in other fields. Even registered NGOs that should follow government guidelines and avoid taking action about taboo topics have made small but crucial changes in women's real lives by causing behavioral, attitudinal, and procedural changes.

In the same vein, this matter is also discussed in the most complete and comprehensive study about NGOs in the Islamic Republic Era; "NGOs, Policy Networks and Political Opportunities in Hybrid Regimes (A Case Study of the Islamic Republic of Iran)". In this book which is written by Mohsen Moheimany, a separate chapter is dedicated to national women's policies under the topic of "National Women's-Rights Policy Networks: From Polarity to Homogeneity". It is discussed in the book that despite the regime's tendency to resist modern

women's rights, women's social status and political activism have gradually improved. The book also provides some tangible examples of legislative changes and the general situation of women's NGOs during various periods of the Islamic Republic era that could not be found in other relevant literature. The examples provided in the book demonstrate that during the reformist era, civil society organizations, including women's rights NGOs, enjoyed direct access to officeholders, governors, and members of Parliament. As a result, direct lobbying emerged as the primary approach employed by NGOs to advocate for laws pertaining to women's rights.

As can be seen here, most studies highlight the impact of Iranian administrations on NGOs' role in policymaking and legislative change for women's rights. However, they often overlook specific dimensions where NGOs have succeeded or failed. Examining these dimensions provides insight into the regime's ideology and the innovative approaches which lead to legislative changes. This research aims to explore where NGOs have succeeded and failed in national-level advocacy for women's rights, uncover the government's core ideology, and contribute to a more equitable society by improving NGO advocacy.

Chapter 4 - Research Design

This research aims to examine the impact of civil society on the policy-making cycle in contexts with weak or nonexistent democratic constitutions, focusing on women's rights policies in Iran. To reach this purpose, a qualitative research design with a focus on data analysis is used in order to answer the main question of the research by analyzing people's experiences and perspectives in detail. This chapter highlights the study's research design in detail through four sections; case selection, data gathering method, research ethics, and challenges and limitations.

4.1 Case Selection

To explore the complexities surrounding the topic of this research, Iran, with its theocratic laws and regulations, is selected as a challenging case study. There are two compelling reasons why Iran is an interesting and relevant case in this regard. Firstly, numerous changes have been made to women's laws in Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), while the legacy of the Pahlavi Era has led to the coexistence of women's rights discourse in society. Consequently, as highlighted in the literature review and background chapters, women have persistently fought for their rights throughout the IRI Era. Secondly, despite the closed structure of political power in Iran that hampers contributions from outsiders, civil society is playing an increasingly vital role in the nation's development process (Namazi, 2000).

This study delves into four crucial areas of women's rights, placing particular emphasis on three bills that have been subjects of contentious debate for over 10 years: Citizenship Law, Child Marriage, and Preventing Harm Against Women. The selection of these policies was based on two primary factors. Firstly, civil society organizations have been actively advocating for the passage of these policies over a considerable period of time. Secondly, these policies

encompass various dimensions of women's rights. Specifically, two of them are directly and exclusively associated with women's rights, while the other two can be seen from a dual perspective, involving both immigrant and children's rights.

Here, I present a list of three assessed bills and one area, along with a brief description of each:

1. Amendment of Citizenship Law: In 2019, the nationality law was amended to grant Iranian citizenship to children below 18 years of age with Iranian mothers. Prior to this amendment, Iranian women married to non-Iranian husbands were unable to pass on their nationality to their children.

2. Child Marriage: According to Sharia-based Iranian law, the minimum age for marriage is 13 for girls and 15 for boys. However, it is important to note that marriages can still occur at younger ages if fathers provide consent and court judges grant permission.

3. Preventing Harm to Women and Improving their Safety Against Maltreatment: This law aims to strengthen penalties for perpetrators of violence against women.

4. Sexual harassment in public spaces

When considering the selection of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as representatives of civil society, it is crucial to take into account the overall situation and atmosphere in Iran. The sensitive fields of women's rights, particularly concerning issues like sexual harassment, have given rise to a considerable number of civil society actors in society. Despite lacking official government approval, several unregistered and informal associations and NGOs have emerged, playing a crucial role in advocating for women's rights. Among the three organizations assessed in this study, two are registered while the one focused on addressing sexual harassment in public is unregistered. It is noteworthy that despite the legal constraints,

all three organizations make significant contributions to the ongoing efforts aimed at advancing women's rights.

Given the context, it is important to adopt a broad definition of civil society that encompasses a wide range of organized and unorganized activities in order to effectively address the research objectives. For this purpose, the definition provided by the Civil Society Index (CSI) is chosen. The CSI defines civil society as "the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, where people associate to advance common interests" (Fowler, 2010, p.5). This definition encompasses not only NGOs but also social media communities, social movements, and unions. Since this definition portrays civil society as a political concept rather than an economic one, it fits the purpose of the study.

4.2 Data Gathering Method

The data for this study has been collected using a combination of in-depth interviews and analysis of legal documents, specifically the text of the assessing bills. This approach has ensured the gathering of concrete, up-to-date information from primary sources. The interviews have provided insights into the process of pushing for the passage or amendment of the mentioned bills from the perspectives of NGOs and politicians. On the other hand, analyzing the text of the bills has yielded information regarding their legal coverage, details, opportunities, and shortcomings.

In addition to gaining familiarity with the content and obligations of these laws, analyzing the text of the mentioned bills has been also helpful to me in order to understand the context and formulate more effective interview questions. This has been particularly crucial during interviews with politicians, where precision and attention to detail are important.

All five interviews, including interviews with politicians, were conducted with individuals who have actively advocated for women's rights policies in Iran. These individuals specifically focused on the amendment or passage of the three key bills examined in this study. To identify potential interviewees, a combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling methods have been employed. Two interviews have been conducted with directors and members of NGOs who have played crucial roles in advocating for these laws. Additionally, an interview has been conducted with the founder and organizer of an informal social group dedicated to addressing the issue of sexual harassment in public and raising awareness about it. Besides, the selection of these individuals has been based on their engagement in the advocacy process for these laws, as well as the level of recognition and reliability of their respective organizations. It is important to note that each NGO director has actively advocated for at least one of the four areas of women's rights or bills.

Furthermore, two interviews have been conducted with politicians who possess years of experience in the legislative process and have also actively participated in voluntary activities within non-governmental organizations. As a result, they bring a comprehensive understanding of both sides of the subject under investigation: the challenges faced by NGOs and the considerations involved in legislative institutions. One of them was a former member of the Majles (Iranian Parliament) and has been engaged in passing amendments to the child marriage and citizenship bill. Another interviewee served as the responsible person for one of the most important legal departments of the government between 2013 and 2021, possessing extensive knowledge of the entire process of proposing and passing women-related bills during that time.

Regarding an Interview Guide, semi-structured interviews have been conducted to allow for open-ended questions and reciprocal conversations. This approach will facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the influence of civil society organizations on women-related

policies, aligning with the interpretative nature of the research. The interviews were conducted in my native language, Farsi, and I personally translated them into English.

The collected data from the interviews and document analysis will be analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The main objective of the analysis is to identify the strategies employed by Women's Rights NGOs in Iran to advocate for legal reforms, provide support services to women, and raise public awareness about gender-based discrimination and violence.

4.3 Research Ethics

In conducting this research, maximum care has been taken to uphold ethical considerations. To prioritize confidentiality and safeguard interviewees from potential risks, all information has been obtained from the interviews was presented anonymously, with fictitious names assigned to the involved NGOs. The sensitive nature of the subject in Iran has required a deep respect for participants' privacy and confidentiality, including the assurance that their personal information would be kept secure and all recording files would be destroyed once the research is completed. Furthermore, all interviewees were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, ensuring their informed consent and understanding of their participation in the research process.

4.4 Limitations and Challenges

The study encountered numerous challenges that significantly impacted the research and data collection processes. One of the major challenges was the difficulty in accessing resources and information concerning women's rights in Iran. This was primarily due to the government's strict control over such matters and the heightened sensitivity surrounding women's issues within the country. The situation became even more complex following the widespread

women-led uprising in September 2022, as it introduced various political and security dimensions that further complicated the research undertaking. Consequently, both the collection of data from documents and the conduct of interviews were adversely affected by these circumstances.

Regarding the accessibility of documents, it is important to note that certain legal documents pertaining to laws and bills, although not classified as confidential, are not readily available to the public on state websites. In order to obtain this information, I had to rely on contacts within my network who have worked in the public sector. Additionally, government and ministry websites primarily serve as platforms for promoting propaganda and showcasing the accomplishments of respective ministries, often lacking a comprehensive database for legal or research documents.

Furthermore, despite contacting several interviewees through personal contacts, the number of women's activists and NGO directors who agreed to have an interview with me was limited. Many individuals declined to discuss the subject of this research due to concerns about their personal security and the potential risk of arrest. Consequently, the number of available interviewees was significantly reduced, and only five out of the initially identified eight individuals agreed to participate in the study.

Additionally, when attempting to engage politicians to gain insights from different perspectives, security concerns became even more pronounced. To address this issue, a journalist friend acted as an intermediary and assured the politicians about the confidentiality and ethical considerations surrounding the content of the thesis.

These challenges underscore the limitations of the research, particularly in terms of obtaining diverse ideas and perspectives from both NGO directors and politicians. Despite the presence of over 30 women politicians who possess valuable insights into the process of women-related policy-making in Iran, accessing them proves to be extremely difficult.

Chapter 5 - Impacts of NGOs on Women's Policies During the IRI

Despite Iran's constitutional provision for equal rights between men and women, the country has witnessed significant disparities and discrimination against women in reality. In accordance with Article 20 of the Iranian constitution, ratified after the establishment of the IRI in 1979, “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.” However, the civil code of the IRI, which encompasses property, personal status, and the law of evidence, contains a significant number of discriminatory laws against women. Following the establishment of the IRI in 1979, the legal system underwent a transformation by merging elements from pre-revolutionary sources with Sharia law, which encompasses a set of religious regulations that hold a significant place in the Islamic heritage. The most significant parts of the civil code which clearly put women inferior to men are marriage, divorce, dress code, child custody, nationality, travel, and inheritance.

This chapter examines three significant bills and one area, namely the Amendment of Citizenship Laws, Child Marriage, Preventing Harm to Women, and Improving their Safety against Maltreatment, and Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces. The objective is to evaluate the role of NGOs and show how they have navigated the challenges and successfully influenced the policymaking process in an innovative way. The assessment is based on a series of interviews conducted to gain insights into the innovative approaches employed by NGOs

within a closed political system where everything is tightly controlled and the issue has a political rather than a human rights facet.

The interviewees	The Role
Interviewee 1	Founder of the Vulnerable Women's Empowerment NGO
Interviewee 2	Director of the Migrant Rights NGO
Interviewee 3	Founder of the Social Group for Confronting Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces
Politician 1	Former Member of Majles
Politician 2	Former Government Legal Official

5.1 Amendment of citizenship laws: Granting citizenship from mother to child

Until 2019, Iran was among the five countries in Asia and the Pacific where women did not have the right to confer nationality to their children. Consequently, only children born to Iranian fathers were granted Iranian nationality, regardless of whether they were born inside or outside the country. However, in 2019, this law was amended after several years of arguments and negotiations. The amendment granted Iranian citizenship to children under the age of 18 who have Iranian mothers. In this section, I will discuss the details and the historical process of regulating citizenship in Iran, and then I will provide information about the amendment process of this law. The process section information is based on interviews conducted with two NGO directors who advocated for this amendment for more than 10 years, as well as a former member of Majles (The Iranian Parliament) who was involved in the process of passing this law. These interviews offer first-hand perspectives and highlight the role of civil society actors in pushing for the amendment of this law.

5.1.1 Citizenship Law in Iran

Article 976 of Iran's Civil Code specifies the criteria for Iranian nationality, which was later amended. Prior to the amendment, the article emphasized that Iranian nationality is granted to individuals born in Iran or born outside of Iran with an Iranian father. Article 8 of this law incorporates elements of both principles of *ius soli* (right of soil) and *ius sanguinis* (right of blood), but both provisions put women at a disadvantage (Delvari, 2020). Consequently, Iranian women could not transfer their nationality to their children on an equal basis to Iranian men.

Due to ongoing war and insecurity in neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran has experienced a significant influx of immigrants over the past four decades. This influx has had numerous implications for the country, with one of the most notable being the impact of marriages between Iranian women and non-Iranian men. Under the previous law, children born from such marriages were not recognized as Iranian citizens, resulting in a range of severe consequences for these individuals. They were unable to obtain essential identity documents such as birth certificates or residence cards, consequently depriving them of fundamental rights including access to education, insurance coverage, property ownership, and formal employment (Amini & Amini, 2019).

The growing prevalence of these social problems drew the attention of politicians and legislators to the shortcomings of this law. As a result, a Constitutional Amendment was enacted by adding a single Article and two Notes to Article 1060 of the Civil Code in 2006. This amendment allowed children who were born in Iran to Iranian mothers and foreign fathers to apply for Iranian nationality once they reached the age of 18 (Delvari, 2020).

Howbeit, the problem remained unresolved, and numerous complications surfaced with the 2006 version of the law. One significant challenge was the requirement for parents to possess an official marriage certificate in order to benefit from this law. However, some couples were still ineligible for the benefits provided by the law, especially those who were economically disadvantaged or did not register their marriages due to a lack of understanding or fear of potential deportation. Furthermore, another glaring omission was that the law did not address the status of children born to Iranian women and foreigners before they reached the age of 18, resulting in the denial of social benefits for this group (Nikou, 2015).

Finally, in 2019, the nationality law was amended to grant Iranian citizenship to children below 18 years old with Iranian mothers. Although only three years after this amendment, the new conservative parliament suspended the law in 2022, this is still a great step forward regarding the advancement of women's rights in the country.

5.1.2 NGOs Advocating for the Amendment of the Citizenship Law

In this section, I will analyze how NGOs and civil society actors advocated for the amendment of this law by examining the information revealed in three interviews. Two interviews are with the NGO directors, which I refer to them here as "Interviewee 1" and "Interviewee 2". "Interviewee 1" is a women activist who is also a founder of one of the oldest NGOs providing services for vulnerable groups of women. "Interviewee 2" is the director of an NGO with a specific focus on addressing migrant issues in Iran. Additionally, there is an interview with "Politician 1," who is a former member of Majles.

Migrants' issues and challenges have long been focal points for various civil society organizations and NGOs. The detrimental impact of this law on numerous groups, particularly women and children, has drawn substantial attention from both women's rights and children's NGOs, urging for its amendment.

"Interviewee 1, the founder of an NGO dedicated to providing services for vulnerable groups of women such as prostitutes, drug addicts, and homeless individuals, emphasized interacting with politicians to advocate for these women's demands such as issuing birth certificates for their children. Reflecting on over a decade of voluntary work, Interviewee 1 stated that she never turned down any invitation or meeting with politicians and media outlets. She expressed, "Our initial plan was to be the voice of marginalized women," and despite her unconventional appearance and use of taboo words, she met with high-ranking government officials, municipalities, and members of parliament for this purpose. She also acknowledged, "Many advised me not to establish such connections with politicians, but I saw all these interactions as opportunities for changing their perspectives towards these women."

Interviewee 1 also discussed the challenges she encountered while working with marginalized women and how she managed to impress politicians to address these challenges. She confronted these individuals by sharing impactful stories she had come across. For instance, once she told the story of a client who fell behind on rent and was exploited by her landlord, who forced her into providing sexual services to various men for money. She would then pose a question to the politicians, asking for their expert opinion on what she should do in such a situation. By sharing compelling stories and challenging the politicians with thought-provoking questions, Interviewee 1 aimed to raise awareness and generate action toward addressing the pressing issues faced by marginalized women such as the issue of not having birth certificates for their children

One specific example she mentioned was a discussion she had with a deputy prosecutor about the issue of children without birth certificates. The deputy prosecutor argued that they couldn't provide birth certificates to these children as they were considered illegitimate. In response,

Interviewee 1 passionately protested, bringing up the concept of temporary marriage contracts which is accepted in Islam and can be conducted everywhere.

She also challenged them by asking what happens to a child conceived through rape, leaving them with no answer. She highlighted the dire consequences of not having a birth certificate for these children, emphasizing that their lack of identity could lead them to seek revenge against adults. While some politicians acknowledged the validity of her arguments, they were certain that nothing would be done about the issue. They raised concerns that providing birth certificates to children of vulnerable women would somehow validate their actions. However, Interviewee 2 emphasized that these individuals were not responsible for the circumstances they found themselves in but were victims of their conditions.

Despite the persistent advocacy efforts of NGOs dedicated to women's and children's rights, as exemplified above, a new NGO has emerged in the past decade with a distinct focus on addressing migrant issues and prioritizing the amendment of relevant laws. Known as "KHANEH," Interviewee 2, the founder of this NGO, emphasizes that the organization's establishment and advocacy endeavors were motivated by the recognition that charity activities alone cannot offer sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by migrants. Instead, they have chosen to pursue a path of pushing for legislative changes and exerting pressure on policymakers in order to bring about meaningful and lasting transformations.

In order to achieve their objective and effectively advocate for the amendment of this law, they employed a variety of innovative approaches and strategies. Interviewee 2 emphasized that, despite the issue being rooted in women's rights, they deliberately avoided framing it solely within that context. Instead, they strategically highlighted the impact of the issue on migrants in their discussions with government authorities, aiming to advocate for change.

He acknowledged that, following the approval of this amendment, many individuals and activists interpreted the change in the law from a women's rights perspective. It is noteworthy that Iran had received consecutive warnings in three cycles of the United Nations Human Rights reports regarding the impact of this law on women's rights. These reports were utilized by activists to exert pressure on the foreign ministry, urging collaboration on this matter (Interviewee 2, 2023).

Politician 1 also admitted the effectiveness of this strategy and shared her own approach in Majles. She personally focused on highlighting the issue from the perspective of children's rights during parliamentary discussions, emphasizing the crucial need for these children to possess proper identity documents. This issue was particularly significant as it led to various social problems for these children, such as deprivation of education and an increased risk of child labor in impoverished families (Politician 1, 2023). By framing the matter in this context, without invoking religious jurisprudence, policymakers were more inclined to accept and address the issue (Politician 1, 2023).

There were additional strategies that both Interviewee 2 and Politician 1 found instrumental in the success of this law. One significant approach was utilizing various media channels to raise public awareness about the issue and sensitize society to its damaging consequences. KHANEH NGO, from the early stages of advocating for this law, created a Telegram channel where they shared news and articles related to migrants. They also collaborated with a newspaper to have a regular column dedicated to migrant issues.

As the bill proposal was about to be introduced in parliament, they orchestrated a Twitter storm and encouraged religious groups, who held influence within the government, to tweet about the social harms caused by the existing law. Additionally, they approached a popular television talent show to create a program in this regard. The program centered around the experiences of

a mother with a 6-year-old deaf child who went missing in the market. The mother faced difficulties when trying to retrieve her child from the police station due to the absence of a birth certificate. In another segment, the audience saw that her Afghan husband, lacking his own and their child's birth certificates, had decided to migrate and cross the sea by boat, in order to go somewhere they could obtain a birth certificate for their child. This TV show gained widespread attention during the law's deliberations in the Majles, ultimately becoming viral.

It is worth noting that throughout the policy-making process, various obstacles arose at each stage. The desired outcome was to grant Iranian women the same right as Iranian men to pass on their citizenship to their children. However, the enacted law stipulated that an Iranian mother could apply for an Iranian birth certificate for her child under 18 years old, subject to approval. In the subsequent stage, as the law reached the Guardian Council, additional obstacles came to light. Of particular concern was the provision in the amended law that mandated the approval of both the Intelligence Ministry and the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to ensure there was no "security problem" before granting citizenship through these specific applications.

Overall, there were several key factors that contributed to the success of this advocacy campaign. One crucial aspect was the strategic framing of the issue within the context of migrants' and children's rights, effectively capturing the attention of both conservative and reformist policymakers (Interviewee 2, 2023). Furthermore, they highlighted the example of Maryam Mirzakhani² to illustrate the impact of the restrictive law (Law 85) on elite Iranians and their connection to their homeland. Mirzakhani's desire for her child to have Iranian citizenship underscored the importance of addressing this issue (Interviewee 2, 2023).

² An Iranian mathematician and a professor of mathematics at Stanford University who was the first woman and first Iranian to win the Fields Medal.

5.2 Increase in the Legal Minimum Age of Marriage

Based on the civil code of the IRI, the legal age for marriage in Iran is 13 for girls and 15 for boys. Besides, there is a provision within the same law that permits marriages below these ages with the consent of the father of the girl and approval from a court judge.

The combination of this law, along with religious and traditional beliefs in some parts of the country, serves as one of the primary factors contributing to the widespread occurrence of child marriage in the country. According to the latest report from the Statistical Center of Iran, from winter 2021 to the end of autumn 2022, at least 27,448 cases of marriage involving girls under the age of 15 were recorded in various parts of Iran (INDEPENDENT FARSI, 2021).

In this section, I will discuss the details and historical process of this law in Iran. Additionally, I will provide information about the advocacy process for amending this law carried out by NGOs and the challenges they faced. The information presented in the process section is based on an interview conducted with a women's rights activist who had also served as the director of a women's NGO which I refer to here as “ZAN”. Furthermore, valuable insights are offered by two influential politicians who played a significant role in advocating for the amendment of this law: Politician 1, a former member of the Majles, and Politician 2, who held a prominent position within one of the government's legal departments from 2013 to 2021. It is important to note that the law has not been amended yet and still permits girls over 13 to be eligible for marriage. However, the advocacy process for this change has spanned over 20 years, and the reasons for its failure shed light on crucial aspects related to the subject of this study.

5.2.1 Child Marriage Law in Iran

As mentioned in the background section, after the establishment of the IRI, the "Family Protection Law" was abolished, resulting in significant changes to its provisions. Notably, the

clause that had previously set the legal minimum age of marriage for girls at 18 was modified. Under the new family code, the minimum age of marriage for girls was reduced to 9 years old, a shift justified by reference to Islamic traditions and principles (M. Brooks, 2008).

In the wake of the new millennium and the rise of a reformist government in 1997, Majles initiated a series of legal reforms with the aim of aligning Islamic laws with the realities of Iranian society (Asghari, 2019). One significant aspect of these reforms occurred in 2002 when a group of lawmakers proposed a bill advocating for an increase in the minimum age of marriage to 15 for girls and 17 for boys. Consequently, the minimum age for girls to marry was raised to 13 in 2002, and for boys to 15. However, despite this change, Article 1040³ of the civil code still posed a challenge, as it allowed girls under the age of 13 to be forced into marriage if their legal guardian provided consent and a court judge approved it (Justice for Iran, 2013).

Consequently, discussions among advocates for children's rights have continued to take place due to the flaws in Article 1041 of the Civil Law and the social problems it has generated. The concerns surrounding child marriage initially emerged in 2006 when reports revealed that over 33,000 girls under the age of 15 had already been married (Reyhani, 2020). The situation remained disheartening as the 2010 census indicated that over 40,000 individuals were married between the ages of 10 and 14, and 716 cases involved children under the age of 10 (Reyhani, 2020). These persisting concerns and the high prevalence of child marriages prompted the Women and Family Affairs Deputy of the Presidential Office to propose an amendment bill to the tenth parliament in 2016.

³ Article 1041 of the Civil Code (amended in 2002): "Marriage of girls before reaching the age of 13 full solar years and boys before reaching the age of 15 full solar years is subject to the permission of the Guardian and on condition of taking the child's best interest into consideration and approval of the relevant court."

Despite the fervent efforts of civil society actors to bring about changes to this law, their endeavors have ultimately proven unsuccessful. In the subsequent section, I will delve into the underlying reasons for the law's resistance to amendment, examining it from three distinct perspectives in order to understand why NGOs were unable to achieve their goals.

5.2.2 Challenges of Advocating for the Amendment of the Law

As explored earlier, in 2002, the minimum age of marriage for girls was increased from 9 to 13 due to significant pressure from civil society actors. However, subsequent endeavors to further amend this law proved unsuccessful. Providing valuable insights, Politician 2, who served as the women's counselor in the Majles during that time, highlighted the factors behind the initial success and subsequent challenges. According to her, the presence of both a reformist government and reformist representatives in influential positions played a pivotal role. Their resolute commitment to implementing legislative reforms, coupled with the diminished influence of bill opponents, fostered a favorable environment that regrettably waned in the following years (Politician 2, 2023).

Moreover, the presence of multiple NGOs further contributed to the approval of the law (Politician 1, 2023). This fact is also supported by other research conducted on the influence of NGOs during the Reformist Era in Iran. For example, in an interview, a feminist activist highlighted that women's rights members who had direct contact with MPs played a significant role in advocating for bills and laws aimed at criminalizing child marriage and raising the legal minimum age of marriage for women (Moheimany, 2021, p.172). Politician 2 further explains that although the Majles initially proposed a minimum marriage age of 15 for girls, it was ultimately approved at 13 years by the Expediency Discernment Council⁴.

⁴ The Expediency Discernment Council is a governmental body for resolving disputes between the Guardian Council and the legislature in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Politician 1, as a member of the Majles, offered an insightful perspective on the underlying reasons for the failure to amend this law during the last decade. She highlighted the obstacles they faced, explaining that their efforts were impeded by the stronger lobbying efforts of the opposing group, hindering their progress. Politician 1 further elaborated on the challenges they encountered due to the significant gender disparity within the Majles, saying, "Despite our dedication, we faced a challenging situation with only 17 female representatives compared to approximately 270 male representatives." She emphasized that the limited number of women in positions of power and the lack of networking among women politicians were detrimental to the success of their proposals.

Additionally, the failure to increase the legal minimum marriage age for girls can be attributed to other significant and underlying factors. One key factor was the influence of religious considerations stemming from a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The Islamic Republic combines both a fundamentalist and an egalitarian interpretation of Islam in its legal and policy documents (Moheimany, 2021, p.162). As a result, there is no consensus or uniform set of Islamic principles for policymakers to adhere to in this regard. That is why Majles representatives who supported the reform of this law, formed a group and consulted with the religious authorities in Qom seeking a different religious ruling on this matter. "Apart from two of the jurists, no one was willing to provide a different religious ruling on this matter and support the idea that instead of physical maturity, intellectual maturity should be the criterion for marriage" (Politician 1, 2023). This highlights the resistance encountered when seeking alternative religious perspectives on the issue.

Interviewee 1 also approved this and emphasized the importance of preserving anything in Islam that the government deems significant. Reflecting on the discussions and meetings she had with legislators and policymakers, Interviewee 1 stated, "They would give us various

answers, like saying that girls themselves want to get married at an early age." This highlights the arguments put forth by policymakers in defense of maintaining the current practices. In response, activists in the field dedicated themselves to shedding light on the comprehensive harms of child marriage, aiming to raise awareness among society and policymakers.

Meanwhile, the representatives who proposed this amendment, in their determination to find a middle ground, reduced their expectations and demanded to fix the age at 13, with an absolute prohibition on girls under 13 marrying (Politician 1, 2023). However, even this revised proposal was met with significant resistance.

The underlying issue was that women's matters in Iran have become heavily politicized, transforming into partisan battlegrounds (Politician 1, 2023). The debate has permeated the media to such an extent that individuals supporting an increase in the legal marriage age encountered security risks (Politician 1, 2023). To shield the discussion from further politicization, Politician 1 made concerted efforts to reframe this issue as a matter of children's rights rather than solely women's rights. "My consistent stance was that we should ensure children enjoy a proper childhood until at least the age of 15" (Politician 1, 2023).

The failure to change the law can be attributed to two other factors as well. Firstly, the proposal conflicted with the recently implemented Youth Population Plan whose purpose was to increase the birth rate (Politician 1, 2023). Secondly, religious concerns regarding the ethics of relationships between young boys and girls were raised, introducing a moral dimension to the debate (Interviewee 1, 2023). These factors added complexity and raised doubts about the acceptability of amending the law.

Overall, the information obtained from the interviews highlights the significant role played by NGOs in addressing the issue of child marriage by pressuring those in power. Civil society organizations effectively demonstrated the numerous social harms associated with child

marriage through impactful reports, as acknowledged by the politicians interviewed. However, the unfavorable outcomes despite the efforts of NGOs highlight the areas where the IRI resists change and contradicts the government's overall ideology.

5.3 Preventing Harm to Women and Improving their Safety Against Maltreatment

After the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, there was pressure from civil society organizations, including women's rights NGOs, for Iran to become a member of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Politician 2, 2023). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had also expressed willingness to join the Convention with certain conditions, stipulating that any provisions conflicting with Islamic principles would not be implemented. Although the sixth parliament approved joining the Convention, the process stalled at higher authorities such as the Expediency Discernment Council and the Guardian Council (Politician 2, 2023).

Given the obstacles to joining the Convention, civil society and women's NGOs proposed the "Violence Against Women" bill as a domestic and nationalized solution to this issue (Politician 2, 2023). To ensure the compatibility of the bill with Islamic principles, individuals with expertise in Islamic studies from Qom⁵ were invited to provide justifications from an Islamic perspective. The objective was to identify areas where civil law fell short in safeguarding women's rights and, where possible, propose provisions that could rectify or compensate for these shortcomings (Politician 2, 2023).

However, this bill faced numerous challenges and underwent significant changes in different administrations, including even a change in its name from the "Law on the Prohibition of

⁵ A focal center of the Shi'ah and the traditional Islamic base for clerics of Iran.

Violence against Women" to "Women's Security" and, subsequently, "Protection and Dignity of Women" (Imna, 2020). Certain provisions were removed at each stage of this process, and its scope became narrower, leaving its fate uncertain (Imna, 2020).

In response to this issue, A group of judicial lawyers and women's activists conducted extensive research on the laws of 18 countries and analyzed cases and evidence of domestic violence against women in Iran. Based on their findings, they prepared a draft of the "Law on the Prohibition of Domestic Violence against Women" and proposed it to legislators. Additionally, in November 2016, they launched the "Campaign to End Domestic Violence" to document the narratives and lived experiences of women impacted by domestic violence (Zahedi Langeroudi, 2016).

The campaign aimed to achieve its goals through two key actions. Firstly, it focused on collecting data from women who have endured violence, seeking to emphasize the pervasive nature of this issue and the urgent requirement for comprehensive measures to combat it, considering the lack of official statistics. Secondly, the campaign aimed to gather opinions, especially from women who have directly experienced violence, to shape an accurate draft of a law prohibiting domestic violence against women (Zahedi Langeroudi, 2016).

After 12 years of effort and deliberations, the bill was finally passed in 2023. However, many women activists and members of civil society consider it to be an incomplete and diluted version of what they had advocated for over the past decade. Notably, the law's title no longer includes the term "violence," which reflects the legislators' perspective on this social issue. Despite the compromises made, there are those, like Politician 1, who view this as a significant step forward, as it provides an opportunity for future enhancements and amendments to the law.

It is worth noting that this bill was passed six months after the inception of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Consequently, some viewed it as a means to reconstruct the country's international image, while others interpreted it as a positive response from the government to the widespread women's movement.

5.4 Sexual Harassment

According to research conducted in 2018, street harassment in Iran was found to have a prevalence rate of approximately 12%. A study carried out by the Welfare Organization in 2019 revealed that 49% of Iranian women experienced physical and bodily harassment, 26% experienced emotional and psychological harassment, and 22.2% faced social and economic harassment (Khabaronline, 2021).

Due to the widespread prevalence of this issue, specific provisions have been included in the law to address it. Article 619 of the Islamic Penal Code states that: "Anyone who harasses or disturbs children or women in public places or on the streets, or insults their dignity and status through words or actions contrary to decency, shall be sentenced to imprisonment for a period of two to six months and receive 74 lashes."

However, due to the sensitive nature of this issue, sexual harassment is often regarded as a taboo subject, leading many women, particularly those living in traditional cities and adhering to traditional values, to refrain from discussing it openly. In general, shame and silence are deeply ingrained in the experiences surrounding this matter (Chubin, 2014). The prevalence of patriarchal discourses and emotional frameworks further exacerbates the sense of shame experienced by victims, as they may be unfairly blamed for the assault they have endured (Chubin, 2014).

The culmination of these challenges prompted the establishment of a social group dedicated to combating sexual harassment in public spaces and raising awareness about this pressing issue. The primary goal of this group, which its director does not consider an NGO, was to enhance the safety of women in urban environments through urban and social media campaigns. Inspired by campaigns and civil movements happening in other parts of the world, they began designing and printing anti-harassment posters and started their field activities on March 8th, 2018. These posters featured a range of messages addressing various forms of verbal and non-verbal street harassment, such as stalking, groping, grabbing, interference with clothing choices, and facing threats, among others. Through the distribution of posters in public places like cafes, taxis, shops, etc., they engaged in conversations with people and received multiple messages from volunteers, with other voices joining them. The shared pain of harassment in public spaces connected a larger community (Interviewee 3, 2023).

Afterward, they launched a website as a platform to address the issue extensively and initiate public discussions on the harassment and mistreatment of women and other marginalized groups in the city. Their purpose was to break the silence and engage in dialogue to challenge the harmful beliefs and stereotypes that perpetuate inequality among men and women, considering the absence of essential education in schools and the neglect of these issues by the national media (Interviewee 3, 2023).

After gaining significant visibility, the posters caught the attention of people from various municipalities and government organizations, including politicians who expressed interest in collaborating. However, Interviewee 3, the founder of the group and a women's activist, declined all the offers. She did so because she understood that these offers aimed to exert control over their activities rather than genuinely supporting their expansion. She also mentioned that in their initial efforts to address the issue of women's insecurity in public places,

they had attempted to engage in lobbying with members of the city council, but it had no tangible results. She stated, "While the government and municipality proposed ways to legitimize our work, we consciously chose not to seek official recognition, as we knew it would likely entail compromising our core demands. We knew that the women's movement had been engaged in extensive lobbying efforts for years, often facing obstacles. Our approach sought to move beyond that phase by focusing on grassroots activism and working directly within Iranian society" (Interviewee 3, 2023).

Further elaborated on the control that government organizations sought to exert, stating, "We consistently rejected offers of resources and financial support from the government, as they came with the condition that we avoid discussing the issue of compulsory hijab. We firmly believed that hijab warnings constituted a form of sexual harassment, and we were resolute in our refusal to compromise our principles by engaging with the government through the media" (Interviewee 3, 2023). Interestingly, despite operating unofficially, some government officials reposted their posters on popular social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, publicly demonstrating their support for the movement.

Overall, the activities of this group served as a catalyst for individuals from various cities, not just the capital, to come together and organize smaller gatherings for printing and distributing posters while discussing the issue at hand. These efforts were especially embraced by young women who were eager to make a difference within society. However, when it came to exerting direct pressure on lawmakers to address the problem on a larger scale, such actions were not deemed acceptable. The taboo nature of sexual harassment and the encouragement for women to openly discuss it directly contradicted the Regime's patriarchal nature.

Chapter 6 - Discussion of Results and Conclusion

This thesis delved into the challenges and opportunities surrounding women's rights and civil society organizations in Iran. the analysis of four facets of women's rights policies illustrated in which areas and by using each approach NGOs can be an effective advocate for gender equality in Iran.

The data collected from politicians and NGO directors shed light on the complex relationship between law, cultural norms, and the interpretation of Islamic principles in Iran, highlighting the challenges faced in formulating women-related policies. The findings indicate that the authoritarian nature of the government poses substantial obstacles, leading to resistance and restrictions on the activities of NGOs. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the presence of structural and internal barriers that hinder the effectiveness of civil society organizations, NGOs can still have an impact in areas where Islamic rules and social norms are comparatively more flexible.

Through engaging in dialogue with NGO directors and politicians, it became evident that exploring contemporary interpretations of religion is a crucial strategy for civil society organizations to overcome Islamic obstacles regarding women's rights. This strategy played a pivotal role in the acceptance of initiatives such as the citizenship law and preventing harm to women by politicians.

In the same vein, the revealed information from interviews shows that civil society actors and NGOs can bring about change in areas where there is potential by reframing issues from alternative perspectives, moving beyond the sole focus on women's rights. The successful amendment of the citizenship law serves as an example, as framing the issue as migrants' rights instead of solely women's rights garnered support from conservative legislators. This highlights

the importance of strategic framing and coalition-building to make progress in challenging environments.

Furthermore, emphasizing the international reputation of the country emerged as another crucial strategy employed in both the bills of the citizenship law and preventing harm to women. Civil society actors underscored the detrimental consequences of Iran's absence from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women on the country's international standing. By highlighting these side effects, they aimed to emphasize the urgency of addressing the issue with a national and domestic solution. In the context of the citizenship law, NGOs effectively utilized the consecutive warnings received in three cycles of the United Nations Human Rights reports regarding the adverse impact of this law on women's rights. Since this had a significant influence on Iran's reputation, it added weight to the calls for change.

In addition, NGOs successfully employed social media campaigns as a parallel strategy, enabling them to exert influence on policymakers. Even in the case of addressing sexual harassment, the widespread and impactful Twitter and Instagram campaigns conducted by the concerned group prompted some politicians to contact them for collaboration. The effectiveness of these online campaigns demonstrated the power of social media in shaping public discourse and influencing policy discussions.

In the case of failures by NGOs in addressing issues in two areas - child marriage and sexual harassment - several reasons can be identified. Concerning sexual harassment, the condition imposed by governmental bodies that collaboration can only happen if discussions about the compulsory hijab are avoided hindered any potential collaboration. Similarly, in the case of child marriage, the confrontation with conservative interpretations of Islam was a significant obstacle. By actively collaborating with religious scholars and exerting pressure on

policymakers, these organizations have the potential to shape alternative interpretations of critical issues, such as child marriage. They can also advocate for legal reforms that prioritize mental maturity over physical maturity for girls' marriages. Since this strategy proved successful in amending the citizenship law, with policymakers being assured that there is no contradiction in granting citizenship from a mother to a child, it could also be employed in the case of child marriage.

In conclusion, this study acknowledges the complexities and limitations faced by civil society organizations in Iran, but it also underscores the potential for transformative change through innovative approaches and inclusive strategies. By engaging diverse stakeholders and addressing issues in a broader societal context, civil society can play an important role in advancing human rights and social justice for women in Iran.

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