



The Fragility of Gender Policies in Second Pahlavi Iran: An Analysis of Women's Suffrage and Family Protection Law Based on PDIA Theory

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

The Second Pahlavi era in Iran (1941–1979) was marked by substantial reforms, including the extension of women's suffrage in 1963 and the enactment of the Two-Family Protection Laws (FPL) in 1967 and 1974, all of which served as essential elements of the regime's comprehensive modernization project. These policy interventions, however, ultimately did not succeed in fulfilling their stated goals of fostering substantive political participation (political development) and assuring the sustainable progress of women's legal rights. While symbolically important—with six women entering the National Consultative Assembly in 1963—the actual rate of women's participation in decision-making positions remained consistently low, at less than 3%. Furthermore, essential provisions of the Family Protection Laws, including the requirement of a court decree for divorce (Article 8), the condition that a man's second marriage must be approved by the first wife (Article 14), and the recognition of women's right to divorce in cases of abuse (Article 11), frequently encountered strong opposition from local and institutional entities, and struggled to extend beyond urban areas. The swift and extensive reversal of these reforms after the 1979 Revolution—such as the exclusion of women from the judiciary and the modification of fundamental FPL provisions—underscored a profound disconnect between the proclaimed objectives of modernization and the actual results observed. This study is primarily motivated by the question: why did these gender reforms, despite emphasizing development and political rights, fail to achieve the enduring empowerment of women and the institutionalization of essential capacity? To address this, the research extends beyond simple historiography to examine the characteristics of policymaking through the theoretical framework of Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA). This study asserts that the failure was chiefly attributable to a top-down, problem-agnostic approach and the phenomenon of isomorphic mimicry of Western models, which fundamentally violated the PDIA framework's core principles.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-comparative and historical-analytical approach to elucidate the origins and development of gender reforms during the Second Pahlavi era, with a specific emphasis on the experiences related to women's suffrage and the Family Protection Laws. Data was systematically gathered from a range of documentary and written sources, including the texts of the laws of 1963, 1967, and 1974, official records of the deliberations of the National Consultative Assembly, contemporary press coverage, and a comprehensive body of scholarly works recognized in social history and gender studies. The primary method of data analysis utilized qualitative content analysis, whereby the complete historical narrative and legal documents were scrutinized within the framework of Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA). The PDIA framework's four foundational principles—problem-driven design, local adaptation, iterative adaptation/learning, and sustained capacity building—served as the evaluative criteria to classify and assess the reforms. The data analysis procedure encompassed a systematic approach involving open, axial, and selective coding stages. Furthermore, the study employed triangulation of sources—comparing and contrasting legal mandates, official parliamentary records, and various historical and academic accounts—to ensure the validity and consistency of the analytical results. This

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method allowed for a multi-dimensional interpretation of the reforms, illuminating the link between the Pahlavi regime's modernizing intentions and the socio-cultural realities of Iranian society. The comparative analysis involved evaluating the social and political standing of women prior to and following the reforms to ascertain the stability and potential reversibility of the changes.

Findings

The comprehensive examination of both women's suffrage and the Family Protection Laws through the PDIA framework uncovers a consistent and common pattern of policy failure stemming from the systematic breach of the PDIA's fundamental principles. The reforms were predominantly a state-driven initiative (State Feminism) and a top-down approach to modernization, lacking foundation in a robust social movement or internal societal demand.

A. Violation of the Problem-Driven Principle (Isomorphic Mimicry)

PDIA requires that effective reforms originate from addressing a genuine, concrete, and locally-identified issue within a society, rather than simply replicating solutions from external environments. The Pahlavi reforms severely disregarded this principle. The granting of women's suffrage was primarily a symbolic tool and a "showcase" for the Pahlavi regime's modernization project, aimed at presenting a progressive image internationally and domestically. It was not the result of a profound, pervasive social movement or a response to prioritized public demand. This pattern of "isomorphic mimicry"—where seemingly modern structures are adopted without authentic functionality or adaptation to the local socio-cultural context—was equally apparent in the Family Protection Laws. By adopting legal materials that closely resemble Western statutes (e.g., restricting polygamy and unrestricted male divorce), the regime framed these reforms as an external cultural imposition, thereby substantially undermining their social legitimacy. This failure to engage with locally identified issues meant the reforms remained disconnected from the real needs of the wider Iranian female population, especially in rural and traditional areas.

B. Violation of the Iterative Adaptation and Learning Principle

The PDIA framework highlights a systematic, incremental methodology grounded in successive cycles of design, implementation, assessment, and refinement—an inherently iterative process. Conversely, both Pahlavi reforms were marked by hasty, top-down execution. Women's suffrage was abruptly incorporated as one of the six pillars of the White Revolution, bypassing essential cultural preparation and social discourse. Similarly, the FPL introduced fundamental, sensitive changes—such as limiting polygamy and altering custody rules—without necessary cultural groundwork, educational programs, or a phased implementation strategy. This absence of a phased, feedback-informed approach—one that would have enabled policymakers to adapt based on social resistance—led to the reforms being perceived as an authoritarian edict from the outset, thereby escalating social and religious opposition. The severe backlash from the clergy and conservative social sectors against changes that contradicted established Sharia interpretations (e.g., Article 14 on conditional polygamy) further solidified the reforms' character as a project of the state versus society.

C. Violation of the Sustainable Capacity Building Principle

Effective policy implementation depends on strong institutional and administrative capacity. The Pahlavi regime, characterized by its Rentier State framework (dependent on oil revenues rather than domestic taxation), lacked both the motivation and necessity to establish a truly efficient and accountable administrative apparatus. Consequently, the government exhibited limited institutional capacity to implement complex social transformations. Specifically, the successful implementation of the FPL—such as the strict judicial supervision of divorce (Article 8)—necessitated an extensive and highly skilled judicial system, along with specialized personnel that were not available. The government's minimal financial contribution to institutional support for women's rights—evidenced by the allocation of only 0.5% of the national cultural budget to education on women's rights—further underscores the superficial nature of its commitment to sustainable capacity building. The outcome was that the legal reforms, though progressive on paper, failed to translate into substantive change on the local and rural levels, leading to a significant implementation gap. The reforms were consequently tenuous and readily reversible due to the absence of robust institutions and widespread social backing.

Conclusion

This research, utilizing the Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) analytical framework, demonstrates that the relative failure of gender policies during the Second Pahlavi era—specifically women's suffrage and the Family Protection Laws—was attributable to deficiencies in the policymaking process itself, resulting from a significant deviation from the principles of sustainable, capacity-oriented development. The reforms, being imitative, non-participatory, and disconnected from local capacities, were inherently fragile and symbolic, resulting in institutional instability and social illegitimacy. The historical lessons derived from this analysis are crucial for contemporary policymaking in the sphere of women and development. To attain tangible and enduring outcomes, policy must shift from symbolic, top-down mandates to strategies that are problem- oriented (addressing genuine issues such as economic obstacles and legal insecurity), highly context-specific (fostering consensus and localization through structured dialogue with civil society and critics), and executed in an iterative and incremental fashion to facilitate learning and reduce the risks associated with large-scale failure. The path to women's empowerment and sustainable development must be paved not by authoritarian commands, but by intelligent, context-sensitive, participatory, and capacity-building policies.

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