



Behind the Council Doors: A Qualitative Analysis of Women's Post-Election Experiences in Islamic City Councils

Reza Hemmati¹  | Mahsa Shoeibi² 

1. Corresponding Author, Associate Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, University of Isfahan, Isfahan. E-mail: r.hemmati@ltr.ui.ac.ir

2. PhD Student of Sociology, Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran. E-mail: shoeibimahsa@ltr.ui.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received: 28 November 2025

Received in revised form: 11

January 2026

Accepted: 20 January 2026

Published online: 21 January 2026

ABSTRACT

Introduction

Global norms, such as the Beijing Platform and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, unequivocally affirm women's equal right to political engagement at all levels of governance. Nevertheless, a substantial gap remains between this recognition and its practical implementation. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, despite significant advancements in women's education, a combination of structural, normative, and institutional constraints has severely limited women's political participation. Women hold only about 4% of parliamentary seats and a mere 1% of seats in the Islamic City and Village Councils. These councils represent one of the few arenas with relatively broader access; however, even here, women's participation remains numerically marginal and qualitatively challenged. For instance, in Isfahan Province, women held only 9-14% of council seats in recent electoral cycles. This study asserts that the barriers for women are not confined to gaining entry but extend critically into the post-entry phase. The central notion is that after securing a seat, women council members encounter an intricated array of challenges that directly impact their efficacy, the quality of their representation, and their political longevity. While international scholarship on gender and local government is robust, Iranian research has primarily focused on the general efficiency or institutional challenges of the councils themselves, leaving a significant gap in comprehending the lived experiences of women within these political spaces. This research addresses that gap by asking what specific challenges women encounter after entering Islamic City Councils, how they react to them, and what strategies they employ to navigate and survive.

Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in a naturalistic approach to investigate the phenomenon within its authentic context. Data were gathered through 17 in-person, semi-structured interviews with female members of Isfahan Province's Islamic City Councils who each had at least one term of experience. Purposive sampling was employed and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews, which lasted from 54 to 102 minutes, were recorded, transcribed verbatim (resulting in 163 pages of text), and analyzed via an inductive thematic analysis approach following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. This procedure involved immersion in the data, systematic coding using MAXQDA software, and collaborative theme development among the researchers. Trustworthiness was ensured by applying Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria, such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Strict ethical protocols were rigorously followed.

Findings

The analysis identified four core themes that capture the post-entry experiences of women councilors. Initially, the Council as a challenging field describes the challenging, male-dominated environment where women encounter systematic marginalization, symbolic aggression, and deliberate attempts to undermine their legitimacy. Navigating this terrain involves intricated interactions with both supportive and obstructive male colleagues, as well as with other female members. Secondly, confronting institutional pressures and reliance on support networks underscores the "double duty" challenge of balancing domestic responsibilities with intense council work, the persistent need to demonstrate competence

Keywords:

Female Councilors, Gendered Organizations, Iran, Islamic City Council, Qualitative

Description.

against higher standards, and the paradoxical yet vital support from immediate family, which often acts as a critical buffer against societal pressures. Thirdly, strategic navigation through adaptation and resistance reveals a spectrum of coping strategies. These range from passive adaptation, such as consciously avoiding certain roles or adopting masculine traits, to active resistance, including direct confrontation, strategic networking with external power brokers, and continuous self-empowerment through learning. Ultimately, bringing women from the margins to the center details their substantive efforts to advocate for women-friendly policies, break down gender stereotypes through symbolic actions, and soften the masculine political culture, despite facing internalized challenges among other women.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that Islamic City Councils in Iran function as deeply gendered organizations, where the interplay of formal rules and powerful informal patriarchal norms creates a significant “after-entry” barrier for women. The findings strongly align with feminist institutionalist theory, demonstrating how entities historically shaped by male participation are not neutral but actively perpetuate gender inequality through their daily routines, cultural codes, and patterns of interaction. The experiences of female councilors—from having their authority routinely questioned to being burdened with a double duty—are not isolated incidents but are systematic outcomes of an institutional logic that is profoundly incompatible with women’s lives and leadership styles.

The strategic navigation employed by women reveals a central conflict inherent in their political agency. The most frequently adopted strategies, such as using “soft power,” building consensus, and focusing on practical gender requirements, are rational and often effective for securing small wins, building necessary alliances, and ensuring political survival. Soft power enables them to maneuver within the existing structure without provoking overt backlash, while addressing practical needs (e.g., creating women’s parks or maternal health services) delivers tangible benefits and builds their credibility as effective representatives. However, this study concludes that these necessary strategies carry a significant long-term cost: they risk legitimizing and reinforcing the very structures of exclusion they are trying to navigate. By adapting to the masculine environment rather than fundamentally challenging it, and by focusing on policies that manage the symptoms of inequality rather than its root causes, the transformative potential of women’s political presence is ultimately constrained.

As a result, the central conclusion of this research is that increasing the descriptive representation of women, while a necessary first step, is insufficient for achieving substantive political change. The Iranian context demonstrates that a critical mass of women in office does not automatically result in a critical shift in power dynamics. For women’s participation to be truly transformative, it must be coupled with a deliberate and simultaneous effort to dismantle the institutional pillars of male dominance. This requires more than just training women to be more resilient; but it demands concrete institutional reforms. Key recommendations include the formalization of gender quotas for leadership positions within the councils, the establishment of units within municipal structures to conduct gender-impact analyses of all policies and budgets, and the reform of informal recruitment and networking practices that systematically exclude women. Without such targeted interventions that directly confront the institutional status quo, women in local governance will remain trapped in a cycle of navigating a rocky path, their energy depleted by adaptation, and their potential for driving genuine, feminist change will remain largely untapped. The path forward must involve not only preparing women for politics but, more importantly, reforming politics for women.

Cite this article: Hemmati, R. & Shoeibi, M. (2026). Behind the Council Doors: A Qualitative Analysis of Women’s Post-Election Experiences in Islamic City Councils. *Women in Development and Politics*, 23(4), 739-769.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jwdp.2026.407181.1008588>



© The Author(s).
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jwdp.2026.407181.1008588>

Publisher: The University of Tehran Press.