



The Cultural and Social Presence of Women in Local Activities and Organizations: Toward a Model of Women's Activism in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

The role and position of women in shaping and guiding Iranian society are among the topics that have received relatively limited scholarly attention and analysis. Scholars and experts in the humanities and social sciences in Iran have largely disregarded the social and cultural activities of women, which, when conducted with a clear goal-setting and in accordance with the Islamic Revolution of Iran, had a profound impact on the collective spirit of Iranians. This research is primarily concerned with the dimensions of this influence and the delineation of its various aspects, with a particular emphasis on women, in the context of an endeavor that can support a substantial portion of Iran's internal social transformations and enable society to flourish, despite an all-out cultural and social onslaught from Western culture, and advance the Islamic Revolution into its second phase. Social science researchers frequently cite the growth and expansion of women's organizations as a positive indicator in this trajectory when considering scattered statistics concerning women's transformation in Iranian society. This reflects the serious transformation and role-playing of women in Iran's social structure. For example, the number of women's and family-related institutions and organizations in Iran surpassed 2,700 in 2017, as reported by the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs (Islamic Republic News Agency [IRNA], 2019). This figure was less than 30 prior to the Islamic Revolution. This figure alone suggests a profound and extensive transformation and advancement that is focused on the agency of women. Nevertheless, other aspects of this transformation, which are expressed in arenas of women's participation through local organizations and are less frequently documented in such statistics, elicit sociological astonishment. One such domain is the expansion and activities of women within local Basij bases throughout the country. Brigadier General Heydar Baba Ahmadi stated in 2022 (1401 SH) that there are approximately 60,000 Basij mosque bases in Iran (Mehr News Agency, 2022). Almost half of these bases operate with a focus on women in urban and rural areas and play a critical role in the process of Iranian community-building. Of course, women's organizations and forms of agency are not restricted to these instances; informal and non-organized activities in the form of unofficial groups also contribute to this transformation and development. Nevertheless, there have been few studies to date that have attempted to elucidate and describe the various forms of women's agency in Iranian society, despite this scope. This explanation has the potential to aid in the reconstruction of this movement and transformation, as well as the development of authentic models at the regional and global levels of Iranian society and Islamic Revolutionary thought, with a particular emphasis on women.

Keywords:

Local Communities,

Social Capital,

Women's Activism,

Women's Non-Governmental

Organizations.

Methodology

This article aims to address the following inquiries: What is the essence of women's cultural and social agency in Iran's local and nationwide activities and organizations following the Islamic Revolution? More importantly, what descriptive and explanatory model of women's agency can be identified, and what components does it encompass, in accordance with the approaches and objectives of the Islamic Revolution? In order to achieve this objective, a qualitative research approach was implemented, and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory was chosen as the most suitable analytical strategy due to the volume of data that necessitated analysis and the objective of creating a model or

theory that could elucidate the agency of women.

Results

In this paradigm, the phenomenon of women's activism is perceived as having inherent characteristics that contribute to its definition within the trajectory of the Islamic Revolution. These attributes encompass a distinctively feminine and methodical approach, an empowering nature, simplicity and local rootedness, acceptance of Velayat (guardianship/leadership), a distinctively feminine and methodical nature, a divinely inspired (Yadollahi) orientation, and a problem-solving capacity (1). The primary focus is on the political, cultural, social, and economic circumstances at the societal level that may affect the agency of women in relation to the contexts and conditions that shape their activism. At times, these contexts may serve as supportive and facilitating factors, while at other times they may serve as restrictive obstacles. However, the primary focus of successful women activists has been on surmounting obstacles and effectively leveraging supportive environments. The most significant contextual conditions, which are consistent with Iranian society and culture, are as follows: experiential capacity (1), family support (2), exposure and engagement with social realities (3), religious transmission and communication (4), individual capacity (5), and experiences of marginalization or humiliation (6), as determined by the derived model. The emergence and sustainability of women's activism may be further reinforced by factors that extend beyond contextual conditions and structural requirements, which contribute to the success of women activists in their encompassing social environments. Distancing from poverty (1), interior transformation (2), being chosen or selected (3), and a sense of concern and commitment (4) are among the contributing factors, as indicated by the resulting model. An exhaustive list of strategies would result from the identification of those employed by women activists; however, numerous strategies are consistently present in the narratives and lived experiences of the majority of activists. These strategies also elucidate the governing principles of women's activism, which are rooted in the Islamic Revolutionary approach. They encompass the following: (1) establish one's immediate social circle, (2) establish and broaden networks, (3) cultivate an understanding of women and girls, (4) observe the boundaries of Islamic (Sharia-based) relations, (5) practice transparency in conduct, (6) mobilize people and society, (7) utilize media as an instrumental resource, (8) maintain a revolutionary orientation, (9) operate through and within the family structure, and (10) place trust in God (tawakkul 'ala Allah). Lastly, the needs for policies and strategies that are designed to strengthen positive outcomes while mitigating negative effects are underscored by the impacts and consequences of women's activism, which encompass both positive and negative dimensions. The establishment of social networks (1), role conflict (2), the creation of value by women (3), and the provision of role models for other women (4) are among the most significant consequences.

Conclusion

One of the most significant concerns that has received limited attention in post-revolutionary Iranian social and human sciences is the development of a model that elucidates and describes women's agency from the perspective of the Islamic Revolution. This article endeavored to directly engage with the lived experiences of successful women activists in revolutionary contexts by employing such an approach. It developed a model of women's agency that is rooted in the actual data and experiences of Iranian women by utilizing interview methods to collect rich data and relying on grounded theory analysis. This study establishes the foundation for future research that will focus on the identification of supplementary models that are derived from specific thematic and specialized domains of women's activism. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the importance of a more precise pathological diagnosis of women's agency and the development of solutions to overcome its obstacles. Lastly, it underscores the necessity of examining a broader range of exemplary women and wider contexts in order to develop an optimal model of women's agency within local organizations and activities. This endeavor remains essential for further exploration by researchers and scholars interested in this field.

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