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Civil Society Organizations and Empowerment of Women and Girls in Iran

Milad Pournik

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Institute for Global and International Studies
1957 E Street NW, Suite 501
The Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
Washington, DC 20052
www.gwu.edu/~igis

Abstract

This report is a preliminary attempt at shedding light on the grassroots work done by civil society to advance the standing of women and girls. The report provides a brief history of the women's movement in Iran and a review of the current state of civil society groups working with women and girls. A statistical background provides the context in which the CSOs featured in this report work to empower women and girls. Informed by interviews conducted by the author, the report highlights the activities of featured CSOs, which range from helping female drug addicts to working with Afghan refugee women and children; from promoting women entrepreneurs to educating adolescent girls; and from supporting HIV/AIDS widows to rehabilitating disabled children.

Milad Pournik is a research associate with the Elliott School of International Affairs' Global Gender Program at the George Washington University. He is an Iranian national with an M.A. in economics and international relations from the University of St. Andrews as well as an M.A. in global policy from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. His previous experiences include internships with the Women's National Committee of Yemen and the International Policy Center on Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) in Brazil.

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Introduction

Iran is a country with a rich and diverse heritage. It is also a land of great paradox. More Iranian girls than boys attend university, yet, Iran ranks persistently low on most gender equality indexes.¹ Iran has witnessed a remarkable decrease in the fertility rate from 6.4 in 1979 to 1.7 in 2009 (World Bank: 2013a), yet, women make up only three percent of parliamentarians. Iran is in a group of six countries that have yet to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) but there are committed and tireless individuals working to advance gender equality in Iran. While the world is familiar with prominent Iranian women's right activists such as 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, much less is known about civil society organizations (CSOs)² working within Iran. Sufficient literature focuses on the Iranian women's movement but much less has been written about civil society organizations working on social issues that affect women and girls. It is this gap in the literature that my paper attempts to modestly address.

The research aims to get at the following questions:

- What organizations (civil society and other) are working on advancing gender equality?
- What are these organizations focusing on?
- Where are these organizations active?
- What are some best practices of successful initiatives or projects? Why did they succeed?
- What is the extent of coordination and communication between these organizations?

I carried out field research in Iran for two weeks in December 2012 and January 2013. It involved: four organizational interviews³ and one CSO roundtable meeting. The interviews were all semi-structured and ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. The CSO roundtable was attended by roughly ten CSOs (not all of which were working directly on women's empowerment) and lasted for two hours. The field research was supplemented by a desk review of literature on women in Iranian civil society and gender-disaggregated data as available.

The paper is organized as follows: I first present a literature review covering the women's movement and women's CSOs in Iran; second, statistics are provided to contextualize the field research; third, I present organizational features based on the interviews; and finally, the paper concludes by highlighting common themes and findings across the literature and field research.

¹ 117 out of 128 on the 2012 Women's Economic Opportunity Index, 127 out of 135 on the 2012 Global Gender Gap Index, and 95 out of 102 on the 2009 Social Institutions and Gender Index

² Some draw a distinction between NGO and CSO but for this report I use the terms interchangeably, following the UN Rule of Law Organization, which equates NGOs and CSOs, providing the following definition: "A non-governmental organization (NGO, also often referred to as "civil society organization" or CSO) is a not-for-profit group, principally independent from government, which is organized on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public good. Task-oriented and made up of people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring public concerns to governments, monitor policy and programme implementation, and encourage participation of civil society stakeholders at the community level." Available at: http://www.unrol.org/article.aspx?article_id=23

³ I restricted myself to formally registered CSOs rather than informal grassroots organizations.

The Women's Movement in Iran

This section, based on a review of social science literature, provides an overview of the women's movement in Iran and women's CSOs in Iran. The women's movement is much broader and covers the entirety of sectors of activism including the political and legal realms. Officially recognized women's CSOs tend to focus more on social issues. Several notable legal and politically oriented women's CSOs exist, but those are not featured in this particular paper. For example, the One Million Signatures Campaign, launched in 2006, "aims to collect one million signatures in support of a petition addressed to the Iranian Parliament asking for the revision and reform of current laws which discriminate against women."⁴ The women's movement is much more dynamic and diverse than what my field research could realistically hope to capture. Yet, understanding the evolution of the broader women's movement is still worthwhile to consider before presenting the main findings from the field research. A chronological view provides insights into important changes over time. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that CSOs working with women and girls are not necessarily part of the women's movement.

History of the Women's Movement

Constitutional Revolution (1906)

The origin of the women's movement in Iran is generally traced back to 1906, the time of the Constitutional Revolution.⁵ During the Revolution, women were involved in a variety of activities including organizing street riots, boycotting foreign goods, and raising funds for the establishment of a National Bank (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 428). Nevertheless, when the nationalist movement succeeded in establishing a constitution in 1906 demanding the "equality of all citizens in law", women were not included in the definition of "citizen."

Despite difficulties women used the momentum and opening provided by the revolution to bring women's causes into the open. They "targeted education as their primary battleground for improving women's status" (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 429). During this period, women also established a number of organizations and published many weekly or monthly magazines dealing specifically with issues related to the conditions of women's lives (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 429).

With increasing suppression and setbacks, many associations and societies formed during the revolution dissolved and the women involved in those predominately went back to their homes. The women's "struggle" was left in the hands of a few educated women and their male patrons, whom were predominately intellectuals articulating women's potential to contribute to society (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 429).

⁴ Available at: <http://www.we-change.org/english/spip.php?article226>

⁵ For a more thorough discussion of the history see: Rostami-Povey, Elaheh, *Chapter 2: The Women's Movement in its Historical Context*, pp. 17-33 in Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (eds.) (2012), *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*, Ashgate Publishing Company: USA.

Ali Akbar Mahdi (2004: pg. 429) identifies the following six factors that were most important in contributing to the development of women's organizations in Iran in the early 20th Century:

- The emergence and spread of the Baha'i religion, which emphasized women's freedom,
- The influence of Western liberal thought on Iranian intellectuals,
- The existence of Europeans in, and their increased contact with, Iran both before and after the First World War,
- The Russian Revolution of 1917 and its influence on Iranian intellectuals,
- The emergence of the women's movement in neighboring Turkey and Egypt,
- And finally, the American and British women's victories in achieving the right to vote in the late 1910's.

Modernization (1925-1941)

With the rise of Reza Shah to power in 1925, the women's movement began to feel more constraints from a newly emerging dictatorship. Although Reza Shah was not opposed to a change in women's status, he pressured women's organizations to withdraw their political demands and concentrate on welfare and educational activities (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 430).

In 1936 Reza Shah announced a ban on the *hijab* during a graduation ceremony for female students and instructed his forces to remove the chadors of any women wearing them in the street by force. "A large number of women refused to go out without a *hijab*, and so remained inside their houses until 1941. It was impossible for them to do anything including meeting with other women and with relatives except via the roofs of their houses" (Khaz-Ali: 2009: pg. 3). Mahdi (2004: pg. 430) argues that the ban gave the religious establishment the proof it needed to argue that the women's movement only sought to "make women naked". The decision by women leaders to support the ban as a "progressive" measure further alienated clerics and secular intellectuals from supporting "modernization" efforts.

World War II seriously affected the development of the women's movement in Iran.

The occupation of the country by the Allied Forces and the forceful abdication of Reza Shah from the throne weakened government control over the opposition and created an opportunity for the development of political parties and organizations. Again, several new women's organizations emerged. The most important feature of women's organizations in this period, in addition to their independence from government, was their close and inalienable association with various political parties. (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 431)

During this period, younger women were also increasingly involved in the women's movement, especially through student movements in universities. They took part in repeated demonstrations associated with political events of the period (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 431).

Modified Modernization (1941-1979)

When Muhammad Reza Pahlavi succeeded his father as Shah in 1941, he followed a similar path but used less direct methods. He proclaimed:

“My father was determined to fight the hijab and to make women remove it by force. Today I do not see this as necessary. The cultural conditions are now right for women to remove their hijabs voluntarily and to give them up gradually.” (Khaz-Ali: 2009: pg. 3)

Mahdi (2004) characterizes the post-1953 Mossadegh coup period as one of “co-optation and legitimation”, where the women’s right movement entered into an institutionalized sphere of activity compatible with the government’s position. The women’s movement had several weaknesses during this period, the foremost of which was “its dependency on the larger movements in society” (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 439) as well as the “urban and elitist” (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 437) composition of its proponents.

In the three decades of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, all women’s activities were channeled through government-controlled organizations, which were almost exclusively involved in charity, health, and educational activities. The only political demand these organizations made was that of women’s enfranchisement — a right granted to women by the government in 1962 (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 432). For example, in 1959 14 women’s organizations were brought under the umbrella of the Federation of Women’s Organizations — a federation later transformed into a new and more centralized organization (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 432).

From 1966 to 1977, women’s organizations and associations became increasingly apolitical, charitable, educational, and professional units under the surveillance of the state (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 432). Moreover, the Shah began establishing a small number (roughly 50) of palace-initiated CSOs, which Empress Farah and two of the Shah’s sisters presided over. Farah focused on CSOs working on children and mother issues, while the sisters patronized health-related CSOs. Table 1 shows the women’s CSOs formed before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

“The first signs of the Revolution began to emerge in 1963. Day after day, right up to the final triumph of the Revolution in February 1979, there appeared signs of a return to the self and the reawakening of an identity. The phenomenon of women wearing the *hijab* in public spread and was a shining example of resistance” (Khaz-Ali: 2009: pg. 3). The much feared Iranian secret policy (SAVAK) documented this trend in a 1978 report when they wrote:

In recent times a new trend has emerged among the people of Iran. A number of adolescent girls and young women want to wear the chador and hijab. This phenomenon is noticeable in public places and in the streets. There is no doubt that it signifies a new religious trend. (Khaz-Ali: 2009: pg. 3)

Table 1: Women's NGOs Formed before the Islamic Revolution

| Name of the NGO | President | Founded |
|---|-----------------------|---------|
| Aout Women's Committee | Shamsi Banayian | 1950 |
| Association of Graduates of the American School | Hura Sashkouh | 1889 |
| Association of Women in Education | | 1971 |
| Centre for Child Instructors | Shamsi Zamani | 1970 |
| Charity Association of Armenian Women of Tehran | Bersabeh Houspian | 1961 |
| Hatef Women's Society | Aziseh Baran | 1970 |
| Haygin Association | Armik Neressian | 1939 |
| Iranian Midwifery Society | Mojgan Daghigh | 1944 |
| Jewish Women's Organisation | Shamsi Hekmat | 1947 |
| Narmak Women and Girl's Association | Zahra Tabatabayi | 1962 |
| National Society for Support of Homeless Women | Arfa Dowlatshahi | 1968 |
| Peace Seeking Women's Society | Tahereh Eskandari | 1951 |
| Rah-e-No (New Path) Society | Fatemeh Minooyi | 1955 |
| Society of Women Students | Shahla Sheibani | 1969 |
| Syndicate of Private Institutions for Training in Sewing | Mahdokht Etemad | 1961 |
| Tehran's Women's Association for Public Assistance | Hajar Tarbiat | 1945 |
| Tehranpars Women's Society | Sedigheh Safamanesh | 1962 |
| The Assyrian and Kaldani Women's Society | Malek Diyounan | 1963 |
| The Charity Association of Armenian Women | Asmik Shemshayan | 1923 |
| The National Association for the Support of the Aged and the Needy | Mansoureh Malekouti | 1966 |
| The Society for Iranian Nurses | Hero Abadi | 1952 |
| The Society for the Council of Iranian Women | Safieh Firous | 1943 |
| The Society of Professional Women | Sakineh Kasami | 1941 |
| Women's Bidar (Awaken) Society | Azam Sepehr Khadem | 1959 |
| Women's Centre | Mohtaram Dolatabadi | 1935 |
| Women's Meteorology Society | Jinous Nemat | 1971 |
| Women's Society of Asnaf Bank | Shokouh Zareii | 1968 |
| Women's Society of Planning and Budget Organisation | Monir Asari | 1966 |
| Women's Society of Bank Melli of Iran | | 1971 |
| Women's Society of Iran and England Bank | Amir Manesh | 1971 |
| Women's Society of Mortgage Bank | Mahin Salamat | 1969 |
| Women's Society of Omran (Development) Bank | Gohar Taj Aslani | 1971 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of Health | Narges Mohajer | 1967 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of the Interior | Ehteramossadat Ashraf | 1967 |
| Women's Society of the Agricultural Bank | Behjat Afshar | 1970 |
| Women's Society of the Credit Bank | Tamara Babayan | 1970 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of Agriculture | Mersedeh Azarkhshi | 1967 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of Finance | Zahra Sarshaneh | 1971 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of Higher Education | Mahin Katebi | 1971 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of Information | Tahereh Fakour | 1967 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of Post and Telegraph | Kanoumand | 1967 |
| Women's Society of the Ministry of Water and Electricity | Parvaneh Hakimi | 1970 |
| Women's Society of the Municipality | Bahereh Bahar | 1967 |
| Women's Society of the National Airline | Farkhondeh Adamiyat | 1971 |
| Women's Society of the State Organisation for Administration and Employment Affairs | Homa Mojallal | 1967 |

Source: Namazi (2000), no page numbers provided

Islamic Revolution (1979)

“Our uprising is indebted to women. Men took the example of the women into the streets. Women encouraged the men to revolt, and sometimes even led the way. Woman is a wonderful creature. She possesses fiendish, strong [and] passionate capabilities” - Imam Khomeini, 6/5/1980 (Khaz-Ali: 2009: pg. 4)

To support his pronouncements with action, Imam Khomeini announced a special week to celebrate women, with the birthday of the Prophet’s daughter, Fatima, announced as Mother’s Day. But subsequent development showed minimal success, in the economy or in politics, in harnessing the capabilities that Khomeini referenced.

As the slogan of the Islamic Republic, “neither west, nor east, only Islamic”, the Women’s Association of the Islamic Revolution claimed that they were neither like the West, which treats its women like “sex objects”, nor the East, which treats them like “working machines”. They rather pledged to treat women as Islam promotes, as “true humans” (Bayat: 2007: pg. 162). Rather than giving women the right to choose whether to veil or not, the Islamic Republic introduced mandatory veiling through Article 139 of the Islamic Criminal Code: “women who appear in the public thoroughfare without the Islamic covering will be subject to 10 days to two months’ imprisonment” (Shilandari: 2010). Although between 1979 and 1980 some women spontaneously demonstrated against the mandatory veil, the non-Islamist and leftist organizations agreed with the Islamic State’s policies, arguing that focusing on women’s rights was individualistic and bourgeois thus playing into the Islamists’ hands (Shilandari: 2010).

Shamsosadat Zahedi (2003) offers an overview of the legislation changes after the Islamic Revolution. In particular, she focuses on the new Constitution of Iran, which reinforced a conservative Islamist paradigm that saw women having more obligations than rights. At the same time, the gender neutrality of the Persian language also offered opportunities for equal rights as laid out in the Constitution (Bayat: 2007). Moreover, the Constitution offers ground on which to frame feminist arguments. Zahedi identifies five clauses of Article XXI concerning women’s rights with the government committing to:

1. Create opportunities for the growth of women and the support of their identities;
2. Support mothers, especially during pregnancy and while children are young;
3. Establish special courts for the support of family life;
4. Protect divorced women and elderly women who lack an extended family support network;
5. Establish and defend mothers’ guardianship of their children.

In terms of CSOs, Article 26 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states that people are free to form parties and associations:

The formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted...

But it continues:

... provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic republic. No one may be prevented from participating in the aforementioned groups, or be compelled to participate in them.

Thus, while CSOs are technically protected by the constitution, their remit is limited by what the authorities deem as appropriate.

Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

The women's movement was stagnant during Iran's eight year war with Iraq, with the government effectively convincing citizens that nothing should distract attention from the war effort. At the same time, the war created an economic situation that necessitated women to become more publicly visible, whether they took up formal jobs or were carrying out more public chores (such as shopping or taking the children to school). So, while the war itself was not a good period for the women's movement, it arguably created the antecedent conditions for subsequent advance by creating the *power of presence* that Asef Bayat (2007) articulates (explained below).

Developments Since 1990

In 1992 the election of nine female parliamentarians compared to only four female representatives in the 1987 parliament signified a political breakthrough. The elected women in 1992 were more educated than their predecessors and their average age was 46 as compared to 55. Additionally, for the first time since the Revolution four women were elected from the provinces. Yet, having more women in parliament does not guarantee substantive representation.

The early 1990s was also a period of increasing solidarity between secular and modern-Islamist women. In the 1980s there was little to no communication and cooperation between the two different groups who espoused seemingly incompatible visions. In a 1994 interview with Azadeh Kian, Mahbubeh Umami (editor of *Farzaneh*) elaborated on strengthened unity among women:

"Although secular women do not share our convictions, we can collaborate because we all work to promote women's status. We [Islamist women] no longer consider ourselves to be the sole heirs of the revolution. We have realized that our sectarian views of the first post-revolutionary years led to the isolation of many competent seculars, which was to the detriment of all women. We now hope to compensate our errors." (Kian: 1997: pg. 91)

The convergence of secular and modern-Islamist women was demonstrated in their joint overwhelming support for Reformist Candidate Mohammad Khatami.

Khatami Government (1997 – 2005)

The political victory of Khatami in 1997 translated into freer public sphere but did not yield many gender equitable legal reforms, mainly because of constitutionally sanctioned impediments. One of Khatami's most tangible efforts to support women was to establish the Presidential Center for the Participation of Women (CPW) focusing on: education, cultural affairs, sports affairs, economic participation, women legal affairs, and expansion of women CSOs. In terms of the latter, Ansia Khaz-Ali (2009: pg. 16) cites an increase in the number of women's NGOs from 55 in 1995 to 480 in 2004.

In 2002 the CPW released a report, "Categorizing Women's Demands", based on 25,000 interviews, identifying the top concerns of women as: employment, safety, forming a family, increase in cultural and welfare centers, and reform in the laws (Sadr: 2012: pg. 205). In a 2003 report, the CPW wrote that they had been working to "pave the way" for Iran to join CEDAW. Iran is still (as of the time of this report) not a signatory of CEDAW but it is instructive that the Khatami Administration seriously pushed for CEDAW adoption. A matrix (pp. 8-31) in the 2003 CPW report details specific examples of successful programs, obstacles, and lessons learned with respect to critical areas of concern for women, but it is beyond the scope of this report to mention those here.

With respect to their effort to expand women's involvement in Iranian civil society, the CPW transferred some duties of the public sector to women's CSOs; "the modality is that these organizations receive support to undertake some roles earlier assigned to the public sector or they are supported to implement specific programs" (CPW: 2003: pg. 5). Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr (2010; pg. 899) identify a shift from service-oriented NGOs under President Rafsanjani to a modest expansion in the scope of CSOs under Khatami's rule. Khatami's motives were not purely altruistic, but also pragmatic, given his recognition that the government could not tackle all of the problems of the country alone (Squire: 2006). Many of the CSOs formed during Khatami's administration were small in scale, focused on awareness raising, not formally registered, and did not have funding to implement projects. To conclude, the Khatami government undoubtedly helped create freer civil society space but was much less successful in facilitating the work of transformational CSOs working with women and girls.

Ahmadinejad Government (2005-present)

One of President Ahmadinejad's first actions was to change the name of the Center for Women's Participation to the Center for Women and Family Affairs. While a change in name may just be semantics, the importance of semantics should not be overlooked. Catherine Squire (2006: pg. 37) quotes a CSO activist from August 2005 who claimed that "it's all about words and vocabulary; "good" words are entrepreneur, job-creation, and social justice, while "bad" words are gender, equity, and civil society." Squire explains that civil society was concerned at the time that Ahmadinejad viewed modern CSOs with suspicion, associating them with Western ideas and interests. But his administration did support charities and foundations.

Under Ahmadinejad's Administration, there has been a noticeable closing of civil society space with a number of CSOs and women's newspapers shutting down. Moreover, it was in 2012 that 36 public

universities banned women from studying in 77 fields of study. The box below provides more insights into the mentality of the Ahmadinejad government toward gender equality.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's Comments at the General Discussion of CSW 57 in New York on March 5, 2013



At the 57th session of the Commission on Status of Women (CSW) the Head of the Center for Women and Family Affairs of Iran, Mrs. Maryam Mojtahedzadeh, argued that family is the basic unit of human community. She elaborated that women promote love through their roles as mothers and wives and should be allowed to play their important roles as safe keepers of the family unit. In her comments, Mojtahedzadeh expressed that:

*We believe that Almighty God has created both man and woman equally from essence and for perfection and growth, **complementary to each other** whereby giving them each a specific role to play.*

Finally, she shared some key achievements for women in Iran:

- There are 560 women judges and 150 women have recently been appointed as judges
- The Center for Women and Family Affairs is drafting a Bill on women's security to strengthen violence against women provisions and to persecute perpetrators
- The Parliament adopted the Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Women, which encompasses a set of comprehensive laws and regulations

Source: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/generaldiscussion/memberstates/iran.pdf>

Understanding the Contemporary Women's Movement

In 2000, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) commissioned a comprehensive review of civil society activity in Iran. The project, led by Baquer Namazi, surveyed over 700 NGOs in Iran, 137 of which were focused on women and development. The project was split into Study Groups for the various clusters. In the acknowledgments, Namazi recognizes that the group working on women's NGOs faced the most challenges. Nonetheless, he concludes that women's NGOs are "obviously the lead sector in Iran's civil society development."

Mahdi (2004) depicts the women's movement as *broad but uncoordinated*, yet, sees a clear pattern with women typically pursuing strategies that are "gradual, incremental, and penetrative... aiming for smaller but substantial changes" (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 442). Women are "fighting hard through NGOs and civil society organizations to build steps necessary for climbing to the height of their strength and demands" (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 444).

Sometimes outside observers – and even those involved in the struggle – may feel that the pace of change is too slow, but such impatience is ignorant of historical perspective. Change takes time and sustained effort. Indeed, what is happening in Iran can be described as "creeping change, much like what happened to women seeking the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the United States" (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 441).

Change may also be borne of an unexpected event or series of events. The box on the next page describes an example of the enormous potential of women to serve a public aim (in this case improving health outcomes and decreasing the fertility rate). It is also a case where the government initiated a process with unintended consequences of increasing women's public involvement and activism.

While not limited to women's CSOs, Squire (2006) produced a review of the organizational capacity of Iranian CSOs writ large that offers many insights into the current situation. While recognizing that the impact of CSOs working on gender equity is not sufficiently documented, she identifies promotion of gender equity as "one of the strongest areas of civil society" (Squire: 2006: pg. 31). At the same time, the 2006 MDG report (pg. 45) for Iran concluded that a key challenge to achieving the goals in MDG3 was the need to expand support to NGOs that are supporting women's rights.

Bayat (2007) advances what is perhaps the most compelling articulation of the evolution and current status of the women's movement in Iran. In difficult contexts a common strategy is to develop a strong united women's movement to advance the gender equality agenda through sheer power of numbers. But, in Iran this has not happened. Instead, women in Iran have defied gender discrimination through their involvement, sometimes unwittingly, in ordinary daily practices of life. Bayat refers to this as "*the power of presence*" (Bayat: 2007: pgs. 161 and 172), concluding that Iran's women activism is defined by "*collective presence not collective protest*" (Bayat: 2007: pg. 172).

A case study of women's public involvement as volunteer health workers

Cultural anthropologist Homa Hoodfar (2009) looks at the remarkable example of volunteer health workers in Iran as a case of “activism under the radar”. After the war with Iraq had ended, the government was concerned about the burgeoning population and introduced one of the most successful family planning programs in the developing world; the fertility rate dropped from 6.4 in 1979 to 1.7 in 2009 (World Bank: 2013a). The mobilization of nearly 100,000 volunteer women health workers had a large part to play in the success of Iran’s family planning program. Each volunteer received basic healthcare training and was assigned to cover 50 to 80 households in her neighborhood. In the early phases of this program, state officials did not consider the possible consequences of this – as one male doctor recalled “who could image a few barely literate women carrying contraceptive pills and appealing for the vaccination of children as political?” Yet, as their numbers grew, the state became increasingly anxious, as evidenced by their rejection of requests from volunteers for them to build volunteer centers to facilitate idea sharing and community building.

Through a series of over 100 interviews in Tehran, Mashad, and Tabriz across two different field studies (1997 and 2007), Hoodfar came to understand that an ethic of civil engagement explains why so many women were willing to serve. The women she interviewed did not know they could be of such use to the community with so little education but the volunteer health service offered them this opportunity. Many of them faced opposition from their husbands but came up with ingenious tactics to convince them. Almost all of the women claimed that their husbands were now very satisfied with them doing what they do and treated them with more respect; one woman claimed that her husband now calls her “madam doctor”. While health is the primary focus, the volunteers tend to engage in activities far beyond their defined mandate. They work in low-income neighborhoods, come to know of other concerns, and try to help raise money or find jobs for people in need. Another of their non-mandated activities is to organize neighborhoods to demand municipal services not available in newly developed, low-income areas of Tehran.

The Ministry of Health did not plan to fund or manage such a large volunteer movement for so long. One of the Ministry’s biggest concerns is the politicization of the volunteers; “taking over a network of 100,000 active women in more than 350 cities and hundreds of villages would be a dream come true for any political organization.” Yet, Hoodfar sees no evidence of attempts to coopt the volunteers, from either political groups or NGOs.

Source: <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer250/activism-under-radar>

Bayat echoes Mahdi (2004) when he elaborates that the women's movement in Iran is "*a movement by implication*" (Bayat: 2007: pg. 171) that operates "through an incremental and structural process of claim making intimately attached to the imperative of women's persistent public presence" (Bayat: 2007: pg. 171). Bayat sees this approach as largely successful, albeit slow, given that "not only did the element of ordinariness make the movement virtually irrepressible, it also allowed women to gain ground incrementally without seeming to constitute a threat" (Bayat: 2007: pg. 172).

Homa Hoodfar and Fatemeh Sadeghi (2009: pg. 215) articulate a related but different conception of the Iranian women's movement. They describe it as:

A movement that is organizationally ephemeral and in a constant state of flux and thus hard to suppress. It is decentralized, and its advocates view it as a movement with a thousand and one thinking heads, with many thousands ready to replace those who have been arrested or who needed to take a break or had grown disillusioned. This movement is not only multi-generational, but also cuts across class and ethnicity.

The broad nature of the "movement" is in stark contrast to the historical women's movement, which was, as mentioned before, largely urban and elitist. Yet, it is also uncoordinated. Hoodfar and Sadeghi find divergent strategies amidst the women's movement; some argue that they need to focus on specific issues and argue for legal reform with the government, while others argue that too much focus on government action will distract from the mission of building a women-friendly culture.

Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani (2010) writes that there are more than 40 women's groups and over 700 women civil and human rights activists in Iran. One such group, the "mourning mothers", formed in response to kidnappings, arrests, and murders during recent demonstrations. They organize weekly sit-ins to protest these violent acts.

Tahmasebi-Birgani references the success of a coalition of women's groups that presented their issues to all four Presidential candidates in April 2009. Each candidate responded to the coalition, and all but Ahmadinejad responded positively (in terms of committing to adopting CEDAW as well as other issues).

Tahmasebi-Birgani also values the multi-faceted nature of the women's movement. For her, seeing religious and secular symbols in demonstrations alongside one another is a sign of the political maturity of the "Green Movement". Acknowledging the broad nature of the movement, she sees recent events as a sign of increased cohesion between groups that had been historically opposed. The following section considers the issue of CSO coordination in more depth.

Coordination

A groundbreaking conference, the Bushehr NGO Consultation Workshop, was held in February 1998 bringing together several Iranian NGOs, Iranian Governmental agencies, and international organizations. Yet, perhaps symptomatic of the challenges of coordination, there have been no such consultations since then.

The rest of this section will consider coordination among NGOs, between NGOs and the government, and between NGOs and the international community.

Among NGOs

Squire (2006) draws a distinction between traditional NGOs (that provide relief to the poor mainly through handouts) and newer NGOs (that serve as catalysts for change). She argues that the lack of coordination between these two types of NGOs weakens Iranian civil society. They have a lot to learn from one another and cooperation could strengthen their effectiveness. Traditional NGOs have a lot of credibility in communities and with the government, whereas newer NGOs have skills and knowledge of dealing with new social problems.

Coordination issues are not limited to this dichotomy. Modern women's NGOs also have difficulty coordinating with one another, despite advanced communication technologies at their disposal and the existence of the Communication Network of Women NGOs. "[NGOs] are still in the process of developing a culture of sharing and mutual support that would strengthen their effectiveness" (Squire: 2006: pg. 2). Thus, the story of coordination among NGOs is one that is still being written.

With Government

This paper does not explore the role of government agencies working on women's issues but many such organs exist. Namazi (2000) provides a brief overview of the vast network of the state apparatus around women's issues. He identifies six key units:

- 1) *The Bureau of Women's Affairs* in the President's Office – established in 1991;
- 2) *The Women's Social and Cultural Council* -established in 1987 as an affiliate of the Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council and responsible for drafting policy guidelines;
- 3) *The Women's Bureau* – attached to the Islamic Consultative Assembly responsible for gender sensitization of parliamentarians and reviewing legislation advancing women's rights;
- 4) *Women's offices* – in all ministries;
- 5) The *Center for Women's Participation*⁶ in the Office of the President – facilitates women's involvement in major international conferences; and
- 6) *The Office for Women's Affairs in the Judiciary*– an independent office in the judiciary actively supporting women in litigation.

⁶ See their official website (in English): <http://women.gov.ir/en/>

Building relations with the government is paramount for CSOs that wish to have broader reach; “a pragmatic approach to getting around obstacles and making things happen is a characteristic of the most successful CSOs in Iran” (Squire: 2006: pg. 29).

Squire mentions that the government treats international funding with suspicion, especially so after President Bush’s allocation of \$3 million for Iranian CSOs, announced in April 2005 specifically for the promotion of democracy and human rights. Such high-profile moves make building trust between the government and CSOs more difficult and reinforce the perception that outside actors may be using Iranian CSOs to influence social change.

With the International Community

Perhaps Squire (2006: pg. 1) paints an overly optimistic analysis when claiming that “Iran has a vibrant and firmly established civil society, which has developed with strong roots in local traditions and communities, virtually entirely funded from local resources”. However, her observation that Iranian civil society is largely organic points to what can be seen as a key strength. Though, the reliance on domestic funding can be a problem during times of economic stress, as is currently the situation.

The limited international funding for civil society is funneled through the United Nations and requires full government consent. The findings from my field research confirm that financing is a key challenge for Iranian CSOs, especially those working on longer-term transformational issues. Therefore, the relatively minimal contact that Iranian civil society has with the outside world can be a point of weakness given current conditions.

On the other side, international humanitarian influence in Iran is restricted. Few International NGOs (INGOs) worked in Iran until the mid-1990s, but even then, their presence was limited. Those that existed before this time, such as CARE and Peace Corps during the 1970s “appear to have had virtually no impact on the Iranian civil society sector” (Squire: 2006: pg. 18). This can be partly explained by the difficult working environment; even under a time of relatively open space for civil society (during Khatami’s Presidency), the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran closed its offices in 2004 (that had only been opened in 1993), citing “difficulties and obstacles in securing permits for continued operations” (Squire: 2006: pg. 19).

Iranian civil society has exposure to the outside world through their presence at international conferences. Squire identifies the Beijing Conference in 1995 as a particularly important catalyst for the subsequent development of civil society in Iran. International recognition can also help. For example, Hoodfar and Sadr (2010: pg. 899) identify Shirin Ebadi’s 2003 receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize as an important event that brought recognition and energy to the Iranian women’s movement. Nevertheless, the engagement of Iranian civil society writ large, and women’s CSOs in particular, with the international community is weak.

Gender Equality in Iran Today: What the Numbers Say

Namazi (2000) mentions that sex-disaggregated data for Iran are weak, inadequate, and unreliable. Data are gathered more consistently and reliably since 2000, but still, sex-disaggregated data for Iran are limited, and almost non-existent in the case of sub-national data. Nonetheless, the data that exist can be useful to contextualize the findings of the fieldwork on Iranian CSOs. This section presents key gender indicators for Iran and compares them against other countries in the region. The data are drawn from a variety of sources including the World Bank, United Nations, and the Iranian Government's Central Statistical Office.

Global Gender Gap Index

The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) produced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) since 2006 covers four key sectors: education, health, politics, and economics. It is unique in measuring gaps rather than absolute levels, helping to provide a fairer comparison across countries, and offering a better indication of gender equality rather than women's well-being. Iran ranks 127 out of 135 countries on the 2012 Global Gender Gap Index, comes last in the group of upper-middle income, and second to last in the Asia and Pacific region (only ahead of Pakistan). However, four Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries (Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen) rank lower than Iran on the 2012 GGGI. Iran's GGGI score has only slightly improved (2.2 percent) from 2006 to 2012.

A closer look at the ranking shows that Iran is a country of contradictions when it comes to gender equality outcomes. Iran has achieved full parity and beyond, with more girls than boys enrolling in primary and tertiary education, yet, ranks 117th on girls' enrolment in secondary education. Iran ranks first on sex ratio at birth (female/male) but it ranks 91st on life expectancy. Breaking it down by the four sectors covered in the GGGI shows that gender inequality in Iran is most acute in the economic participation and opportunity sub-index (130th) and the political participation sub-index (126th). Iran performs best along the health and survival sub-index (87th). The pattern of relatively developed health and education outcomes for women but poor economic and political outcomes is characteristic of the MENA region. The World Bank (2013b; pg. 3) identifies this as the gender equality paradox; investments in human capital through health and education have not yet translated into commensurately higher levels of female economic and political participation and representation.

Key Gender Indicators by Sector

This section summarizes progress toward gender equality since the 1979 Islamic Revolution across four key sectors: education, health, politics, and economics.

Education

Iranian women have made impressive gains in education since the late 1980's. For example, Table 2 shows that the literacy rate among women aged 15-24 caught up to the rate of young men by 2007. Moreover, as mentioned before, more girls than boys enroll in primary and tertiary education.

Table 2: Youth Literacy Rate by Sex (ages 15-24)

| | 1987 | 2007 |
|-------|-------|-------|
| Women | 65.52 | 96.13 |
| Men | 84.85 | 96.13 |

Source: Attaie Ashtiani, Z. (2008). Women Status in Islamic Republic of Iran. The Centre for Women and family Affairs. www.women.org. (p. 22)

Source: Rezai-Rashti, Goli (2012), pg. 5

The latest MDG report for Iran from 2006⁷ stated that:

In relation to the target of bridging the gender gap in primary, secondary and tertiary education by 2015 the statistics delivered as part of the last MDG report reveals that this goal is attainable.

Goli Rezai-Rashti (2012) identifies three distinct phases of education reform in Iran since the Islamic Revolution. First, the 1980s were a period of “Islamisation”. The new government shut down universities from 1980 to 1984 to purge them of faculty. Elementary and secondary schools always had gender segregation, but when the universities reopened, women were restricted to 91 academic fields out of 169 majors [Shaditalab: 2005]. This period witnessed a decrease in the percentage of women in higher education, in contrast to increases in the percentage of female students in primary and secondary education.

Around 1990, under the Presidency of Rafsanjani, the country began liberalization of education and managed to lift all restrictions on women entering any field of study by 1993. This period up until 2005 witnessed a remarkable increase in women’s higher education enrollment, which reached 46.5% of total higher education enrollment in 2003. More specifically, women’s share of Bachelor’s degrees in 2003 was nearly 50%, of Master’s degrees was 27%, and of PhD degrees was 24% (Goli Rezai-Rashti: 2012: pg. 5).

The resurgence of Conservatives since 2005 has led to some backsliding in the freedom to choose majors. In 2012, 36 public universities banned women from studying in 77 fields of study. Moreover, in fields that have not been made single-gendered, some universities are enforcing single sex classes and are requiring professors to teach the same course twice. These fields tend to be the most prestigious and have a higher probability of access to job markets and higher paying jobs (Goli Rezai-Rashti: 2012: pg. 7). Still, Table 3 shows that women makeup almost half, and at the pre-primary level more than half, of different academic levels.

⁷ President’s Deputy for Strategic Planning & Control and the UN (2006), The Second Millennium Development Goals Report of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Available at: <http://www.undp.org.ir/doccenter/mdgs/Iran%20MDGs%20Report%2006-English.pdf>

Table 3: Female Students' Participation at Different Academic Levels (1995-2010)

| Year | | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Pre-primary | Total number | 67782 | 125856 | 256820 | 234365 |
| | Percentage | 48% | 50% | 52% | 51% |
| Primary | Total number | 4594053 | 3938766 | 2991211 | 2930152 |
| | Percentage | 47% | 47% | 48% | 49% |
| Total secondary All programmes | Total number | 3402131 | 4703729 | 4357512 | 3648542 |
| | Percentage | 45% | 47% | 48% | 45% |
| Total tertiary | Total number | 384461 | 635973 | 1083664 | 1874966 |
| | Percentage | 37% (1996) | 45% | 51% | 49.5% |

Source: UNESCO. (2012). Data center. Retrieved September 27, 2012, from stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx

Source: Rezai-Rashti, Goli (2012), pg. 6

Tables 4 and 5 show the only sub-national data available on education, provided by Iran's Statistical Office based on 2006 data.

Table 4 shows that Tehran is the most literate province with a total female (aged six and above) literacy rate of close to 90 percent. Iran's female literacy rate in 2006 was 80.3 percent with a relatively sizeable gap between the nationwide urban rate of 85.5 percent and the rural rate of 69 percent. Sistan and Baluchestan (an area in south-east Iran which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan) is the poorest performing province with a female literacy rate of 61.4 percent.

Table 5 shows the gender gap by province and urban-rural in order to get a better sense of gender equality rather than women's empowerment. The data show that Tehran is the province with the smallest gap, with a male literacy rate that is 4.7 percent higher than the female literacy rate. The nationwide gap is 8.4 percent, 6.7 percent in urban areas and 12.2 percent in rural areas.

While the data above showed that the youth literacy rate of girls and boys is now even, the data presented here shows that women are less literate than men when including adults as well. West Azarbayegan has the biggest gender gap in terms of literacy, with the female literacy rate being 15.2 percent less than the male literacy rate.

Table 4: Female (aged six and over) Literacy Rate by Province: Total, Urban and Rural (2006)

| | Total | Urban | Rural |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| Tehran | 88.8 | 89.8 | 78.5 |
| Semnan | 85.9 | 89.4 | 73.5 |
| Yazd | 85 | 87.3 | 74.5 |
| Esfahan | 84.2 | 86.3 | 74.1 |
| Fars | 83.3 | 87.5 | 77.1 |
| Khorasan-e-Razavi | 82.6 | 87.5 | 72.1 |
| Bushehr | 82.1 | 85.6 | 75.9 |
| Qom | 81.9 | 83 | 63.8 |
| Qazvin | 81.5 | 86 | 72 |
| Mazandaran | 81 | 87 | 74.2 |
| Total country | 80.3 | 85.5 | 69 |
| Kerman | 79.9 | 86.4 | 70.9 |
| Markazi | 79.2 | 85.2 | 66.1 |
| Khuzestan | 79 | 84.8 | 67.1 |
| Gilan | 78.7 | 87.2 | 68.9 |
| Hormozgan | 78.2 | 87.2 | 70.6 |
| Hamedan | 77.6 | 82.9 | 70.6 |
| Ilam | 77.4 | 82.5 | 69.3 |
| Chaharmahal & Bakhtiyari | 77.1 | 83.1 | 70.6 |
| Kermanshah | 76.8 | 81.5 | 67.4 |
| Golestan | 76.6 | 83.9 | 69.8 |
| Zanjan | 76.4 | 82.8 | 67.9 |
| South Khorasan | 76.2 | 86.3 | 66 |
| Lorestan | 76 | 81.8 | 67.8 |
| Kohgiluyeh & Boyerahmad | 75.8 | 85.2 | 67.3 |
| East Azarbayejan | 75.6 | 80.4 | 65.8 |
| North Khorasan | 73.7 | 83.6 | 64.7 |
| Ardebil | 73.6 | 79.3 | 65.2 |
| West Azarbayejan | 70.1 | 77.4 | 58.7 |
| Kordestan | 70.1 | 76.2 | 61.1 |
| Sistan & Baluchestan | 61.4 | 71.1 | 52.3 |

Source: Iran Statistical Office (2006)

Table 5: Gender Gap in Literacy Rate by Province: Total, Urban and Rural (2006)

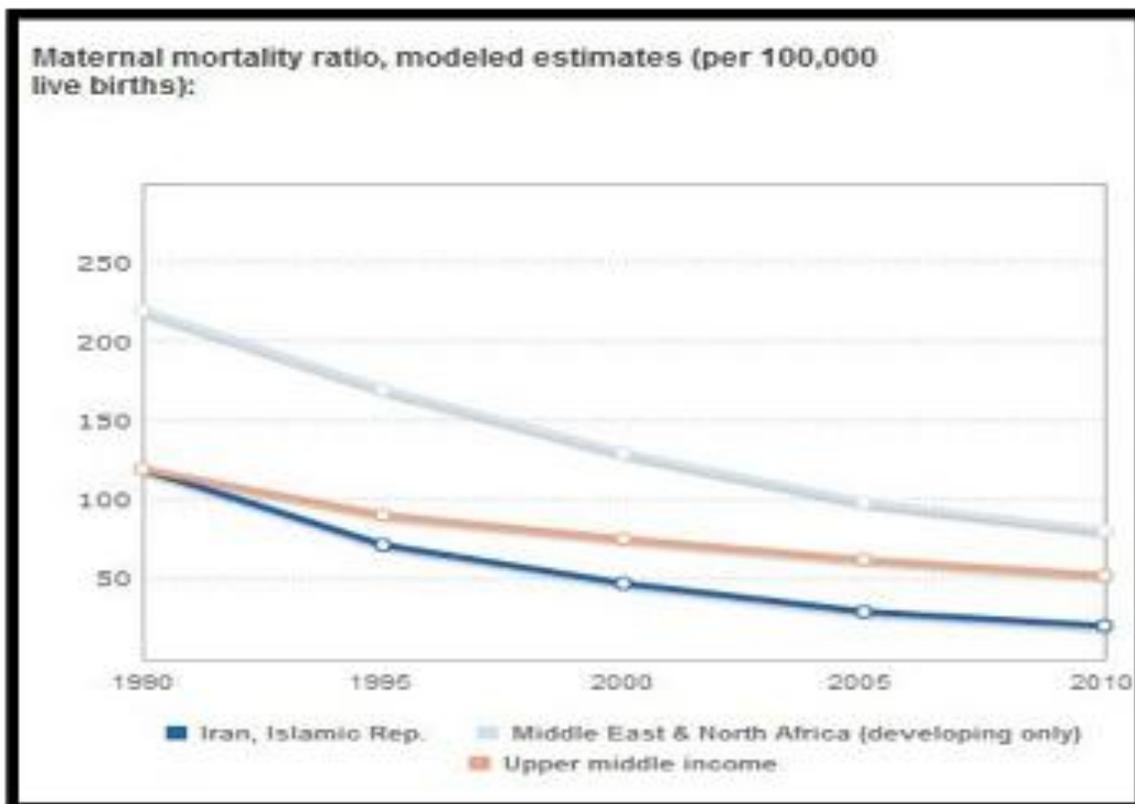
| | Total | Urban | Rural |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Tehran | 4.7 | 4.5 | 6.9 |
| Kerman | 5.7 | 4.4 | 7.3 |
| Semnan | 5.8 | 4.8 | 10.2 |
| Yazd | 6 | 5.6 | 9.1 |
| Esfahan | 6.5 | 5.8 | 9.7 |
| Fars | 6.6 | 5.1 | 8.8 |
| Khorasan-e-Razavi | 7.1 | 5.7 | 10 |
| Hormozgan | 7.9 | 4.8 | 9.9 |
| Mazandaran | 8 | 6 | 10.2 |
| Qazvin | 8.1 | 7 | 10.8 |
| Bushehr | 8.2 | 6.3 | 12 |
| Qom | 8.3 | 7.9 | 13.3 |
| Total country | 8.4 | 6.7 | 12.2 |
| Gilan | 9 | 6.3 | 11.8 |
| Khuzestan | 9.1 | 6.9 | 13.7 |
| Ilam | 9.2 | 7.8 | 11.9 |
| Markazi | 9.4 | 7.3 | 13.1 |
| South Khorasan | 9.5 | 6.6 | 12.6 |
| Lorestan | 9.9 | 7.9 | 12.8 |
| Hamedan | 9.9 | 8.4 | 11.9 |
| Kermanshah | 10.4 | 8.5 | 14.7 |
| Zanjan | 10.6 | 8.8 | 12.9 |
| Chaharmahal & Bakhtiyari | 10.8 | 8.9 | 13 |
| Golestan | 10.9 | 8.5 | 13.2 |
| North Khorasan | 11.3 | 7.7 | 13.9 |
| East Azarbayejan | 11.6 | 10 | 15.1 |
| Kohgiluyeh & Boyerahmad | 11.6 | 8.2 | 14 |
| Sistan & Baluchestan | 12.9 | 10.4 | 15.1 |
| Ardebil | 13 | 11.5 | 15.6 |
| Kordestan | 14.5 | 12.6 | 17.3 |
| West Azarbayejan | 15.2 | 12.3 | 19.9 |

Source: Calculated by author from data provided by Iran Statistical Office (2006)

Health

Health is the sector in which Iranian women have made the most progress since the 1979 Revolution. This can best be seen in the steep drop in maternal mortality, from 120 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 21 per 100,000 live births in 2010. Figure 1 illustrates this trend, showing that Iran has performed remarkably well compared to other countries in the region, and even compared to other upper middle income countries.

Figure 1: Maternal Mortality Ratio (1990-2010)



Source: World Bank (2013), available at: <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/iran,-islamic-rep>

The UNDP (2006) explains that with respect to MDG 5 (improve maternal health):

Iran is on track in reducing maternal mortality ratio by 75% between 1990 and 2015. This can be done as a result of the ever increasing number of births assisted by skilled attendants and an overall improvement in maternal and reproductive health.

Table 6 shows Iran's considerable progress on selected maternal health indicators between 2000 and 2005. Iran was well on its way to meeting the 2015 MDG targets with postnatal care coverage being the area of greatest progress since 2000. Postnatal care was also the indicator that required the most further progress if the country was to meet its 2015 target. Prenatal coverage was already up to 94.3 by 2005. As of 2005 Iran was closest to reaching the 2015 target on the safe delivery coverage indicator.

Table 6: Selected Indicators and Targets for the National Maternal Health Program (2000-2005)

| Indicator | Indicator Status | | National Target to 2015 |
|---|------------------|-------|-------------------------|
| | Year | Level | |
| Prenatal care coverage (at least 6 times) | 2000 | 80 | 98 |
| | 2005 | 94.3 | |
| Safe delivery coverage (in maternity centres and hospitals) | 2000 | 87.6 | 98 |
| | 2005 | 96.3 | |
| Postnatal care coverage (at least twice) | 2000 | 31 | 98 |
| | 2005 | 87 | |
| Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel | 2000 | 89.6 | 100 |
| | 2005 | 97.3 | |

Source: Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 2000; Reproductive Age Mortality Survey (RAMOS), 1996; Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (IMES) and National Maternal Health Programme, 2005.

Source: 2006 MDG Report for Iran, pg. 58

As mentioned above, sub-national data on gender indices in Iran are nearly non-existent. The 2006 MDG report for Iran provides only one table, Table 7, which breaks down maternal mortality at the provincial level. The data show that, as was the case with female literacy rate, Sistan and Baluchestan has the highest maternal mortality rates, accounting for only six percent of the total births in Iran but 13 percent of total maternal death. Tehran has the lowest maternal mortality rates, accounting for 15 percent of total births but only six percent of total maternal death.

Table 7: Maternal Mortality by Province (2006)

| Province | Share of the Province in Total Women Ages 15-49 | Share of Province in | |
|---------------------------|---|----------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Total Births | Total Maternal Deaths |
| East Azarbaijan | 5.30 | 5 | 4 |
| West Azarbaijan | 4.09 | 5 | 5 |
| Esfahan | 1.82 | 5 | 4 |
| Ilam | 6.57 | 1 | 1 |
| Ardebil | 0.80 | 2 | 2 |
| Bushehr | 1.21 | 1 | 2 |
| Tehran | 17.79 | 15 | 6 |
| Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari | 1.24 | 1 | 1 |
| Khorasan | 9.68 | 11 | 11 |
| Khuzestan | 6.18 | 7 | 7 |
| Zanjan | 1.42 | 1 | 1 |
| Semnan | 0.83 | 1 | 1 |
| Sistan va Baluchestan | 2.94 | 6 | 13 |
| Fars | 6.48 | 6 | 5 |
| Qazvin | 1.62 | 2 | 1 |
| Qom | 1.50 | 1 | 2 |
| Kurdistan | 2.83 | 2 | 2 |
| Kerman | 3.42 | 4 | 6 |
| Kermanshah | 2.20 | 3 | 4 |
| Kohgiluyeh va Buyer Ahmad | 2.42 | 1 | 2 |
| Golestan | 3.65 | 3 | 3 |
| Gilan | 0.95 | 3 | 3 |
| Lorestan | 2.59 | 3 | 3 |
| Mazandaran | 4.35 | 4 | 2 |
| Markazi | 2.01 | 2 | 2 |
| Hormozgan | 2.60 | 2 | 3 |
| Hamadan | 1.75 | 2 | 3 |
| Yazd | 1.35 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Family Health and Population Office, 2006.

Source: 2006 MDG Report for Iran, pg. 55

Political leadership

We know that the presence of one or two women in the government is not going to resolve women's problems but we believed that the appointment of women as ministers would have positive consequences for society and culture.... In this country, we produce a lot of propaganda about the participation of women but we make little use of their abilities. - Jamileh Kadivar⁸ (Kian: 2010: pg. 16)

⁸ The second woman elected to represent Tehran in the Sixth Parliament

Table 8 shows the percentage of women in Iranian parliament from 1963 to 2008 and includes a breakdown of women elected from Tehran and women elected from other provinces.

Table 8: Percentage of Women in Iranian Parliament (1963-2008)

| Parliament | Elected from Tehran | Elected from other provinces | As percentage of all MPs |
|--|---------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1963: women gain electoral rights | | | |
| 1963–67 | 3 | 4 | 3.5 |
| 1963–71 | 3 | 7 | 3.5 |
| 1971–76 | 3 | 14 | 6.5 |
| 1976–79 | 3 | 15 | 7.0 |
| 1979: establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran | | | |
| 1979–83 | 4 | 0 | 1.5 |
| 1983–87 | 4 | 0 | 1.5 |
| 1987–92 | 4 | 0 | 1.5 |
| 1992–96 | 5 | 4 | 3.3 |
| 1996–2000 | 6 | 4 | 3.7 |
| 2000–04 | 6 | 7 | 4.4 |
| 2004–07 | 5 | 7 | 4.1 |
| 2008 | 5 | 3 | 2.7 |

*Source: H Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran: Women at the Crossroad of Secularisation and Islamisation*, France: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 1999; and HE Chehabi & A Keshavarzian, 'Politics in Iran', in G Almond, G Bingham Powell, Jr., K Strom & RJ Dalton (eds), *Comparative Politics Today: A World View*, London: Pearson Longman, 2003.*

Source: Hoodfar and Sadr (2010), pg. 894

The data show that women are poorly represented in the parliament. The highest historic level of women in Iranian parliament (7 percent) was in the period leading up to the Islamic Revolution in 1976-1979.⁹ Women made up only 2.7 percent of the 2008 parliament and gained one extra seat in the most recent 2012 parliamentary elections, thereby making up nine of the 290 seats (3.1 percent).¹⁰ Although this number is very low it is important to consider that the political realm is the area in which women have globally made the least progress. According to the 2012 GGGI report (pg. 17), only 20 percent of the political outcomes gap has been closed worldwide. Nevertheless, as the following section illustrates, even compared to other MENA countries, Iranian women are very poorly represented in the national parliament.

In reference to the indicators of MDG 3, UNDP (2006) conclude that “Iran’s progress in engaging women in top management and decision-making positions, including representation of women in the national parliament, has been slow.”

⁹ For a more thorough analysis of women’s involvement in politics see: Koolaei, Elaheh, *Chapter 9: Women in the Parliament*, pp. 137-151 in Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (eds.) (2012), *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*, Ashgate Publishing Company: USA.

¹⁰ http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2149_E.htm

The political realm is certainly one that Iranian women are trying to make further inroads in. Perhaps no one is as persistent in this pursuit as Azam Taleqani, daughter of influential Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani. She has put herself forward for Presidential candidate in the 2001 and 2009 elections, but on both occasions was not cleared by the Council of Guardians. In her own words:

*“I have the right to put myself forward as a candidate. In addition, I would like the word *rajol* used in the Constitution to be clarified. If the Council of Guardians respects Islam it will give me its support”* (Kian: 2010: pg. 16).

Taleqani is not alone though;

*In the presidential election of 2001, 47 women, of whom the boldest was only 19 years old (since the law said that candidates should be between 30 and 75), defied the conservative membership of the Council of Guardians once more by putting themselves forward as candidates. In 2005, this figure reached 89 and, in 2009, it was still 42. Nonetheless, the word “*rajol*” was not clarified and none of the candidates was approved, a decision for which the Council of Guardians offered no explanation.* (Kian: 2010: pg. 16)

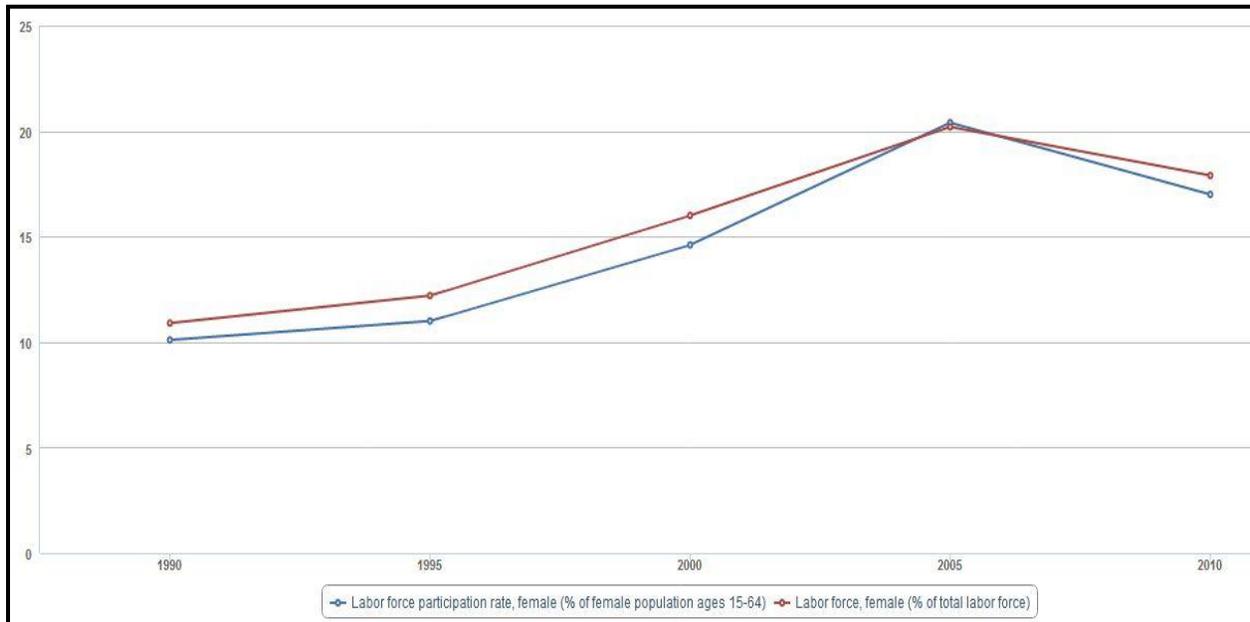
But women are clearly not a monolithic group, as evidenced by the composition of the Seventh Parliament (2004-2008). With a conservative majority, this Parliament included twelve women, of whom only one was drawn from the reform movement. As soon as they were elected, two of them lent their support to polygamy, argued for punishment for women deemed insufficiently veiled, and expressed their opposition to the adoption of CEDAW (Kian: 2010: pg. 17).

Differences of opinion also exist among women with a more “conservative” leaning. Maryam Behrouzi, a former deputy, member of the Islamic Coalition Party (the main conservative party), and Chairwoman of the conservative Zeynab Association, discussed obstacles to the presence of women in Parliament and identified no legal barrier but instead recognized the “dominant patriarchal system” as the problem (Kian: 2010: pg. 19).

Economic status

According to official statistics, Iranian women have not made substantial progress in economic measures since 1990. Labor force participation doubled from 10 percent in 1990 to 20 percent in 2010 but has been on a downward trajectory since 2005. Figure 2 shows this evolution as well as that of labor force composition, which largely mirrors participation. Interestingly, 20 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 64 were actively participating in the labor market in 2005, when 20 percent of the total labor force was female. Both these percentages have since declined.

Figure 2: Female Labor Force Participation and Composition (1990-2010)



Source: World Bank (2013), available at: <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/iran,-islamic-rep>

However, numbers do not tell the whole story. Mahdi (2004) identifies a dramatic shift in the female occupational profile, with many more women now taking up jobs in a host of sectors (such as commercial, industrial, educational, agricultural, cultural, political, and entertainment) and in higher-paid positions than before.

Bayat (2007) supports Mahdi's assertion by referencing the impressive gains women have made in the arts, partly evidenced by the fact that women won more awards than men at the 1995 Iranian Film Festival. Thus, while their labor force participation remains limited, women appear to be increasingly found in a wide array of sectors and positions.

Table 9 shows more detailed and recent statistics of labor force by sex and by urban-rural distinction. The data show that less than four million women aged 10 and over are economically active compared to almost 20 million men. The unemployment rate of women aged 10 and over is almost double that of men, at 20.9 percent compared to 10.5 percent. With respect to women aged 15-29, their unemployment rate is 40.3 percent while the unemployment rate of men in the same age range stands at 20.1 percent. More than half of the women that are economically active work in the services sector. Yet, proportionally, women make up the largest share of the agriculture sector, 21.7 percent of the total workers in that sector.

Table 9: Labor Force Indicators by Sex, Urban and Rural Areas (2011)

| Labor force indicator | | Total country | Male | Female | Urban areas | Rural areas |
|--|--------|---------------|----------|---------|-------------|-------------|
| Economic activity of population aged 10 and over | Rate | 36.9 | 60.7 | 12.6 | 35.8 | 39.8 |
| | Number | 23387633 | 19418717 | 3968915 | 16642728 | 6744904 |
| Unemployment rate of population aged 10 and over | Rate | 12.3 | 10.5 | 20.9 | 13.7 | 8.9 |
| | Number | 2877608 | 2046612 | 830996 | 2274695 | 602913 |
| Unemployment rate of population aged 15-24 | Rate | 26.5 | 22.9 | 42.7 | 30 | 19.8 |
| | Number | 1071852 | 758125 | 313727 | 796744 | 275107 |
| Unemployment rate of population aged 15-29 | Rate | 24.0 | 20.1 | 40.3 | 26.5 | 17.7 |
| | Number | 1910072 | 1292016 | 618055 | 1499925 | 410147 |
| Employment share in agriculture sector | Share | 18.6 | 17.2 | 26.3 | 5 | 50.4 |
| | Number | 3809933 | 2984799 | 825134 | 713730 | 3096203 |
| Employment share in manufacturing sector | Share | 33.4 | 35.2 | 23.3 | 35.7 | 28 |
| | Number | 6846846 | 6115433 | 731413 | 5124822 | 1722024 |
| Employment share in services sector | Share | 48 | 47.6 | 50.4 | 59.4 | 21.6 |
| | Number | 9853167 | 8271795 | 1581372 | 8529403 | 1323763 |

Source: Iran Statistical Office (2011)

Comparing Iran to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

Finally, it is helpful to situate the condition of women in Iran as it relates to the situation of women in other countries throughout the MENA region.

The data presented in Table 10 are taken from the World Bank (2013a) and come from 2010, except for the last indicator, which is from 2011. Iran has a significantly lower fertility rate as well as an impressively low maternal mortality rate. On the other hand, fewer Iranian women participate in the labor force or hold seats in the national parliament.

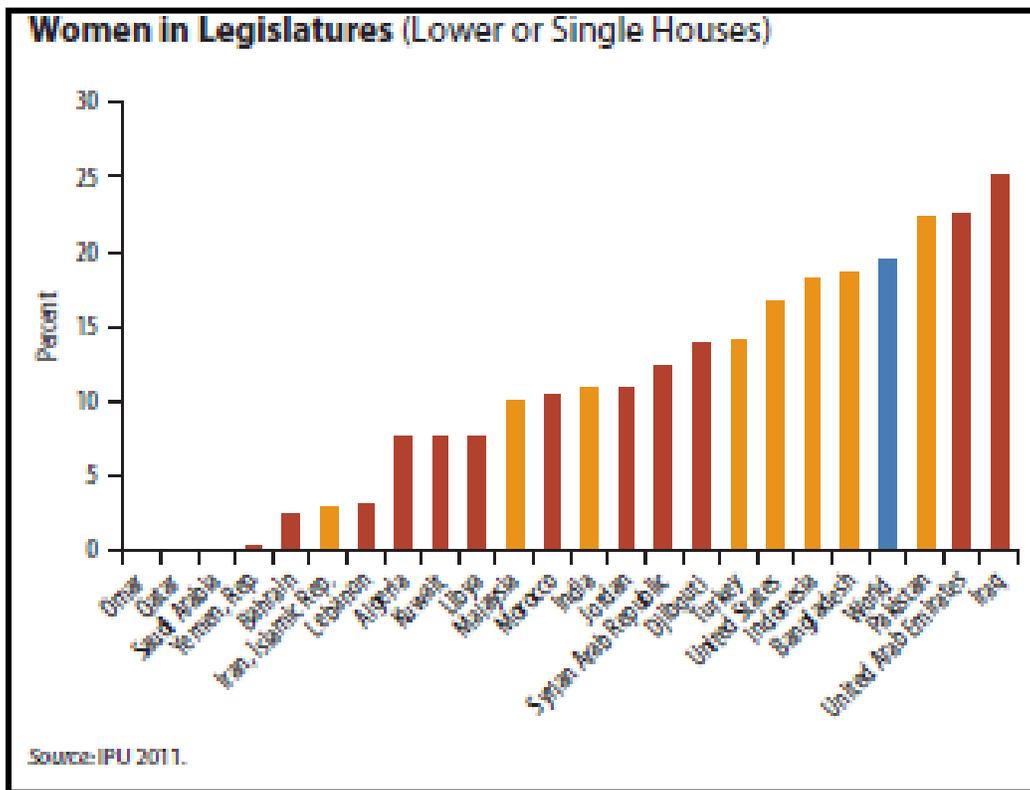
Table 10: Comparisons of Women’s Status on Selected Indicators, Iran and MENA (2010)

| Indicator | Iran | MENA | Difference |
|--|-------|-------|------------|
| Fertility rate, total (births per woman) | 1.67 | 2.69 | -1.02 |
| Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births) | 21.00 | 73.73 | -52.73 |
| Labor force, female (% of total labor force) | 17.95 | 21.25 | -3.3 |
| Seats held by women in national parliaments (%) | 2.80 | 10.43 | -7.63 |

Source: Compiled by author from <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/iran,-islamic-rep>

Figure 3 offers a more detailed comparative picture of women’s political representation across the MENA region. Iran’s 2.8 percent is the fifth lowest proportion of seats held by women in national parliament in the MENA region and is well below the World average.

Figure 3: Percentage of Women in Legislatures across the MENA Region (2011)



Source: World Bank (2013b), pg. 10

Organizational Features

This section presents features of seven Iranian NGOs. Finding organizations and getting them to agree to an interview was not always easy, but I used my established networks to gain the trust of the interviewees. A series of friends and acquaintances introduced me to the organizations but in some cases, such as *Omid-e-Mehr*, I found their details online and called them to arrange an interview.

The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes. I conducted the interviews at the office of each organization, and even got to see and interact with *Omid-e-Mehr* staff and students, as well as disabled children that *Tanvanyab* serves. All the interviews took place in Tehran.

I actually conducted four organizational interviews – the details from *Khaneh-ye-Khorshid* come from a presentation by the founder at a NGO roundtable meeting; the details from the *Association of Women Entrepreneurs* come from the founder of *The Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth*; *SPASDI* and *Tavanyab* share an office as they were both founded by the same person.

The fieldwork was focused on organizations and not individuals and follows all social science ethical guidelines for institutional research. All individuals interviewed about the organizations for which they work were fully informed of the research goals and the uses to which the research would be put.

The interviews were all based on a semi-structured methodology and the framing questions, mentioned in the introduction section, were as follows:

- What is your organization focusing on?
- Where are you active?
- What are some best practices of successful initiatives or projects? Why did they succeed?
- What is the extent of coordination and communication between you and other similar organizations? With the government? With international organizations?

The features, described below in the order they were interviewed, offer introductions to the work, best practices, and obstacles faced by civil society organizations working to empower women and girls in Iran. They are mostly informed by the interviews I conducted but also include background information on the problem the particular CSO addresses.

Table 11 offers a quick comparison chart of seven Iranian CSOs. All the organizations are relatively new with *Hami* being the oldest, dating back to 1992, although it only started working in Iran since the late 1990s.

Table 11: Overview of Seven Iranian NGOs

| Organization | Founded | # served | Website | Mission |
|---|---------|----------------|---|--|
| Association of Women Entrepreneurs | 2004 | 80 women | http://www.ea.wenet.ir/en/ | Disseminate entrepreneurial culture among Iranian women by drawing upon women entrepreneurs' wealth of experience in the field of entrepreneurship and creation of new businesses. |
| Tanvanyab | 2000 | 150 children | | Work with disabled children to increase their self-confidence and help them better integrate into public life. |
| SPASDI – Society for the Protection of Socially Disadvantaged Individuals | 2000 | | | Help widows and orphans of HIV/AIDS related deaths to live fulfilling and meaningful lives, as well as to raise public awareness on HIV/AIDS. |
| Hami – Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children | 1992 | 1,500 children | http://hami.org/en/ | Strive for peace, calm, prevention of traumas caused by migration and refuge; protection and empowerment of migrant and refugee communities, particularly women and children. |
| Omid-e-Mehr | 2004 | 150 girls | http://www.omid-e-mehr.org/ | Use a holistic approach to provide young women with the opportunities to realize their dreams. Offer them tools, structure and support to help them succeed and, above all, offer them a chance to be heard. |
| Khaneh-ye-Khorshid | 2006 | 100 women | | Work with female drug addicts to offer them a chance for rehabilitation and building their capacity to become psychologically stable and economically independent. |
| The Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth | 2005 | | www.founded.net | Encourage innovative thinking and productive activity among Iranian women and youth to boost their self-confidence regarding their role in the society as effective economic forces. |

Serving Refugee Women and Children

As of December 2011, according to the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs (BAFIA), the total number of refugees registered with the authorities stood at some 882,700. More than 95% (840,200) of the refugees in Iran come from Afghanistan (UNHCR 2013).

Hami was founded in 1992 as a volunteer and independent organization during the Balkan crisis to provide help for vulnerable women and children suffering from persecution and abuse in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It soon grew to develop a regional presence and establish an office in Iran, primarily to help serve Afghan refugees. Hami has since further evolved to focus its work on refugee women and children.

The most substantial part of Hami's current work in Iran is its school program, which started in 2008 and has grown to roughly 1,500 students across five schools (three in Tehran and two in Mashad). Roughly 57 percent of Hami students were born in Iran (Hami, Farsi Booklet, pg. 11). Hami works in Mashad because of the strong Afghan community there given its close proximity to Afghanistan. In fact, Hami officials find it much easier to raise funds for the schools in Mashad than the school in Tehran for this very reason.

While Afghan children are allowed to attend public schools even if they do not have an ID card, they must pay a fee that corresponds to roughly \$100/year. This progress was only made after persistent advocacy by Hami. And now they are trying to convince the government to remove the tuition fee altogether.

Securing the physical space for Hami classes is expensive and difficult. Hami rents space in public schools, paying the Ministry of Education to use the classrooms in the afternoon. But given pervasive discrimination, they faced resistance from Iranian parents who did not want Afghan children occupying the same premises that their children were learning in. Eventually, they managed to secure four different schools to rent, and the fifth school is in a separate building belonging to Hami.

In addition to covering the state curriculum, the schools offer extra benefits such as a weekly visit from a volunteer medical worker. Hami also recognizes the importance of integrating Afghan children into Iranian society and helps to find sponsors to pay for the cost of sending an Afghan child to public school.

All Hami school teachers are Afghans that have gone through extensive training provided by the organization. Very few have previous experience as teachers; the experience they have is often from their work as home teachers during the period when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. Of note, included in the teacher training is a course on "prevention of domestic violence". Hami's institutional structure reflects the organization's efforts to promote sustainability and self-sufficiency. While Hami employs non-Afghans, it focuses most of its efforts on ToTs (training of trainers) for Afghans, who will then train other Afghans.

Many of the older children attending Hami schools work as well. To facilitate this work, Hami created a workshop that has quickly expanded to the point where, as of this year, the children have made all of their own school clothing. Hami also provides vocational training, especially with girls, and helps to sell some of their handicrafts. Nevertheless, convincing Afghan families to send their children, specifically girls, to school is still challenging.

Despite Hami's best efforts to have an equal gender balance in their student composition, initially 45 percent of their students were girls (Hami, Farsi Booklet, pg. 10) but now that is down to 33 percent (based on figure given to me during my interview with a Hami employee). Without the free bus service they offer, this ratio would be even less. Hami officials credit the provision of a bus service for helping parents to make the decision to allow their girls to attend the school. The bus service is very expensive because Afghan families are often spread out in remote areas but has proven effective in alleviating pervasive fears over the security of girls. Interestingly, sometimes the mothers of the children come to the school with them to attend special classes. In addition to basic literacy, the women are taught about health and hygiene. The Hami employee I interviewed cited the bus service and incentives provided for mothers to join their children in school as key best practices.

As the school program has evolved, there is much more interest in attending. Hami has gone from needing to knock on doors to a situation where they receive more applicants than they have capacity for. In order to make admissions decisions, they prioritize students who are behind, such as a nine year old that has never attended school before. Hami also works with Afghan community leaders to identify the neediest families.

Apart from the school program, Hami works on various initiatives. They organized a series of seminars in Iran including a 2003 regional seminar on "The Role of Women in Reconstructing Afghanistan". They trained Afghan female journalists and facilitated exchanges with Afghanistan, including bringing Afghan professionals to Iran for trainings on CEDAW and other international agreements on women's rights. Additionally, Hami officials occasionally travel to Afghanistan to support women's empowerment initiatives. Hami holds an annual celebration for World Refugee Day on June 20th. At these events, Hami attempts to showcase the work of Afghans in Iran, including their literary and artistic work, to help change the prevailing perception in Iran that Afghans are only menial laborers.

In terms of partnerships, Hami works closely with UNICEF for the schools program in addition to collaborating with various international partners such as the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Danish Refugee Council.

The Director of Hami has written a book on "Women and Islam" and is a keen proponent of engaging with religious debates to advance the role of women and girls. Many of the Afghans in Iran are Muslims and engaging their Islamic sensibilities has been proven to be a very successful way of gaining their buy-in. For example, in one case, an Afghan teacher went out to a predominately Afghan village in Iran and managed to convince the Imam to devote ten minutes of his weekly sermon to the issue of preventing violence against women.

Hami's trainings and initiatives have also helped Afghan women to return to Afghanistan and take up important government positions, with the majority of them working in the Ministry of Health. This is increasingly important as more refugees return to Afghanistan; between January 2002 and July 2012, UNHCR assisted 902,000 Afghan refugees to return home voluntarily (UNHCR 2013).

Empowering Disadvantaged Young Women in Iran

Youth in Iran face severe constraints on their ability to pursue public relations and “due to continuing policing by the state, a great deal of socializing and relationships with the opposite sex has moved indoors, into private homes, *leaving girls vulnerable to sexual violence*, since most of these private spaces belong to and are controlled by boys [C. Moruzzi, N. and Sadeghi, F. 2006]” (Yousefzadeh and Shekarloo: 2010: pg. 15). Data show that 28 percent of adolescents between 15 to 18 years in Tehran have had sexual relations at least once, yet, their sexual education is extremely limited with less than half of this group knowing what a condom was, and even fewer knowing that condoms prevent sexually transmitted diseases [Shirazi 2008] (Yousefzadeh and Shekarloo: 2010: pg. 16). Finally, “the role of CSOs is crucial to improving the situation of adolescent girls in Iran. Currently, CSOs working with children are located mostly in Tehran and mainly focus on providing services for at-risk adolescents and children” (Yousefzadeh and Shekarloo: 2010: pg. 25). One prominent CSO working with adolescent girls in Iran is **Omid-e-Mehr (OeM)**.

Marjaneh Halati founded OeM in 2004 because she saw it as her social responsibility to contribute to Iranian society. After two years of research, Marjaneh came to the realization that girls between 15 and 25 are among the most neglected segment of the population. Given her background in clinical psychology, she decided that the girls would benefit most from receiving psychosocial services delivered as part of a larger educational package.

OeM has three keystones: self-empowerment, education, and training. The organization runs two¹¹ schools in Tehran. While the schools teach the public school curriculum, they aim to go beyond education by providing students with life experience through field trips and extracurricular activities. Their website¹² clearly articulates the program:

During the first 2.5 years, the girls attend training and educational classes and during the last 6 months, they will attend classes outside of the centers to pursue more specialized and vocational training for which they will be officially certified by the relevant institutions.

Two criteria exist for OeM students: first, they must be between the ages of 15 and 25; second, they must be needy (this is verified through a visit from a social worker to see their living conditions). Once admitted the girls undergo psychiatric and health tests and are assigned a psychiatrist and a social worker. Two volunteer doctors also visit each center at least twice a week. Every girl takes a field trip to the Imam Khomeini hospital to attend a one day workshop on HIV/AIDS and to get tested there.

The school is open from 8am to 4pm and provides the students with lunch as well as snacks. The Foundation also helps the students with transportation costs and helps the few girls who do not have any family to secure housing.

Most of the girls at OeM come lacking self-confidence and have troubled pasts, with many of them having been subject to physical and/or emotional abuse. Some of the girls come to OeM with their family, others are referred to OeM by police, still others find out about OeM through personal networks and word of mouth. Regardless, the families are always encouraged to come visit the center and learn

¹¹ The second school was officially opened on September 22, 2012

¹² See their English website at: <http://www.omid-e-mehr.org/our-programme.php>

about the OeM program and ethos. Parents often consent to send their daughter to OeM, not because they agree with the transformational agenda of OeM, but because of the non-educational services (food and medical support) that OeM provides at no cost.

OeM currently has 100 students with 40 of them undertaking advanced vocational or professional training. Roughly one-third of the students are Afghans. This percentage would be much higher if the organization was truly able to prioritize need. Yet, in an effort to uphold their mission, they need to retain a majority of Persian students.

Nevertheless, the school promotes cross-ethnic harmony and this was tested during a field trip to Yazd. When the students arrived at the railway station, the Afghan girls were told they did not have the right to ride the train. The Persian girls and OeM staff argued with the railway management but when there was no resolution in sight, they decided to join the Afghan girls in making the journey by bus. The whole experience was documented in an occasional magazine written and edited by Omid-e-Mehr students.¹³ In addition to raising public awareness, allowing the girls to write about their experiences and feelings can be empowering in itself.

When asked about the possibility of opening similar centers in other cities in Iran, the management explained that they are not willing to sacrifice quality for quantity. Currently, they have employees and volunteers that are highly skilled and undergo constant performance evaluations. Finding and maintaining high quality employees may be more difficult in other cities. The difficult process of securing another permit to operate outside Tehran is a further consideration. Although OeM offers high quality services, it is constantly striving to improve its program. In this pursuit it has partnered with the Harvard School of Education to develop a better curriculum for OeM students.

While most of the teachers and staff are women, the Foundation also employs men as support staff, management staff, and as psychiatrists. Many of the girls at OeM have not had good experiences with men in their lives, and for this very reason Marjaneh actively sought out men to work at OeM to serve as positive male role models. She also wanted to make students aware that men and women can work together and interact without having intimate relationships. A senior male manager explained to me how at first the girls were hesitant to engage with him. But now his relationship with the girls has grown such that many of them call him “baba” (dad).

OeM offers yoga and hip-hop dancing classes for the students. Even though women teach such classes, some of the girls are hesitant to attend. Given their past experiences, the girls are cautious to engage in activities that put them in possibly awkward physical positions.

Finally, OeM has problems in ensuring a smooth transition for the girls into society. A major challenge is to get employers to give the girls jobs - or even internships. Therefore, the Foundation tries to employ the girls to serve as support staff for the two centers. Currently, ten OeM employees are former graduates. OeM also helps to find sponsors to support girls who want to pursue higher education. Nevertheless, graduating the girls from OEM remains a challenge.

¹³ Read the magazine in Farsi here:

http://www.gwu.edu/~ggi/assets/docs/igis_ggp_igis06_ggp04_resources/oem_farsi_studentmagazine2.pdf

Promoting Youth and Female Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship has now become the vogue in Iran. Given the testing economic times, the need for creative and innovative entrepreneurs who will create jobs is heightened. The World Bank (2013b: pg. 24) writes that:

Making it easier for women to create and grow their own businesses is another important avenue to boost innovation, growth, and employment in the [MENA] Region. Given the challenges that they face in obtaining formal private sector wage employment, facilitation of self-owned businesses is especially important for women.

Moreover, the youth account for roughly 70 percent of the unemployed population in Iran and the situation is particularly bad for young women; between 1984 and 2007 unemployment rates among young women more than doubled, from 16.6 percent to 37.9 percent [Salehi-Isfahani 2011] (World Bank: 2013b: pg. 47).

Firoozeh Saber was a leading pioneer of the movement to support women and youth entrepreneurship in Iran. While the government has its own programs to support aspiring entrepreneurs, Saber helped create the **Association of Women Entrepreneurs** in 2004. The Association has now grown to include a network of 80 women who run businesses and actively support other aspiring women entrepreneurs.

My interview with Saber, however, focused on the activities of the second organization that she founded - the **Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth**. Saber was inspired after studying an MBA, with a thesis that studied women entrepreneurs in Iran. For it she followed 20 successful women entrepreneurs and documented their success and path to success in what turned into a book.¹⁴

The Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth began with an effort to engage the private sector to promote creativity and innovation among their staff. This project was ultimately unsuccessful because they worked with a private bank whose leadership changed during the project stage and abandoned the Foundation's plan to foster entrepreneurship within their staff. This experience highlighted the difficulties of institutionalizing work within Iran and convinced Saber of the need to work directly with civil society. In this pursuit, the Foundation embarked on a project of creating free online courses on entrepreneurial fundamentals¹⁵.

The principal part of the Foundation's current work is its school outreach program. It took over a year to convince the Ministry of Education to allow this because they worried that such extracurricular activities would take away precious time from studying the extensive curriculum. Actually, the Foundation tried to first approach private schools in Tehran but they refused access for the same reason.

In 2008 the Foundation began working in two schools in Gaem, an underdeveloped area that boasts some of the smartest students in Iran, based on the countrywide university entrance exam. The Foundation held training workshops in two schools in Gaem and followed this up with a competition

¹⁴ The book is only available in Farsi. The cover is available at:

http://www.gwu.edu/~ggi/assets/docs/igis_ggp_igis06_ggp04_resources/saber_book_titlepage.pdf

¹⁵ Available at: <http://www.karafariny.ir/>

that culminated in an entrepreneurship festival. At the festival the students showcased their business ideas and some even took the opportunity to sell their product.

Given the success of the program, the Foundation is now operating its school program in seven schools in Gaem, one in Karaj, and one in Yazd. In order to ensure sustainability and efficacy the Foundation is employing 16 university students from Gaem to run seminars in Gaem schools.

The Foundation has documented and publicized, on its website, some success stories of youth who now run thriving businesses. But it is also hoping to spread the publicity by working with various media outlets. By spreading awareness of the potential of women to start and run businesses, the Foundation hopes to challenge the perception that women are not suited to work in the private sector.

Another project of the Foundation has been to support women entrepreneurs in deprived areas by focusing on women making traditional local handicrafts from different areas across Iran. The support has been mainly in the form of holding two galleries to sell these handicrafts.

The Foundation carried out trainings in three cities in Kerman Province with 140 youth, and given its success, it has spread to four other cities in the province. The Iranian government's Business Affairs department helped the Foundation identify cities that would benefit greatly from their work, but that also had sufficient prerequisites (such as a well-educated population) to make the Foundation's work worthwhile. While the extent of the relationship between the Foundation and the government is limited to this, Saber still recognized the relationship as a valuable and helpful one.

Importantly, the Foundation trains boys and girls separately and although some of the material is the same, the training does differ, taking into consideration the social and legal context. According to Saber, between 75-80% of the Foundation's clients are female. This is important for Saber because of her experience conducting research for her Master's research. She recognizes that the Iranian government has some established mechanisms to support young entrepreneurs (through supporting startup incubators for example) but women entrepreneurs are relatively neglected.

In addition to all the work the Foundation does, it supports research and coordination. Foundation staff is currently working on an analysis of 15 NGOs to determine the challenges that volunteers face and what the best practices for retaining them are. This brings up an important issue raised in almost all the interviews I conducted – volunteers are used extensively to staff NGOs in Iran. They are sometimes highly skilled individuals such as doctors that offer their services for free or they serve as support staff for NGO managers and directors. But given financial constraints NGOs in Iran face, using volunteers effectively is of utmost importance.

Since 2012 the Foundation has begun organizing and hosting NGO roundtables, which feature the work of two NGOs each time. Saber initiated the roundtables with the hope of both raising awareness about the work of Iranian NGOs domestically but also to facilitate cooperation between NGOs working on related issues. The roundtables typically include discussions of possible collaborations and other NGOs provide advice on how the featured NGOs may increase the effectiveness of their work. I was invited to and attended one of the NGO roundtables and that is what informs the following organizational feature.

Addicted to the House of the Sun

Data on drug use is hard to come by but according to a PBS Frontline 2006 report, Iran had between 1.5 to 6 million drug users at the time. In addition to the increase in numbers of drug users since then, the profile has changed from older men who smoked opium to urban employed and married men in their mid-30s as well as a growing number of women, youth, and homeless drug addicts (Blauvelt: 2011: pg.10). According to the State Welfare Organization (SWO), seven to nine percent of drug addicts in Iran are women¹⁶.

Even before the Islamic Revolution Iran was socially opposed to drugs but still provided rehabilitation services. After the 1979 Revolution the state launched a campaign against all forms of substance abuse as part of its *jihad* against sin [Rosenberg 2010]. Drug treatment programs were suspended and drug users were forced into compulsory rehabilitation camps (Blauvelt: 2011: pp. 8-9). Substance abuse is still considered a crime but there is an increasing acceptance of drug addiction as a medical condition [Nissaramanesh 2005].

“Although the Islamic Republic of Iran is often applauded for its progressive approach to addressing drug use, the government’s support of harm reduction programs is volatile, and there are no laws guaranteeing the rights of drug users to sustained medical care or to freedom from discrimination” (Blauvelt: 2011: pg. 15). The SWO’s main challenge regarding prevention and treatment of addicted women is lack of funds; since March 2012 no money was allocated to newly established centers.¹⁷ This highlights the importance of civil society efforts to support female drug addicts.

Leila Arshad, inspired by her experience working with prostitutes in Iranian brothels before the 1979 Revolution, co-founded the first drop-in-clinic (DIC) for female drug addicts in Iran, **Khaneh-ye-Khorshid (The House of the Sun)**, in 2006.

While men had access to DICs, women did not. Drug addicts, and especially female drug addicts, were, and in the eyes of many continue to be, seen as criminals rather than sick individuals, thus making them unworthy of assistance. The creation of Khaneh-ye-Khorshid (KK) arguably created a shift in this attitude, and as of September 2012, there were 14 women specific camps, seven women’s shelter, and seven women’s drop-in-clinics throughout the country.¹⁸

The work of KK primarily focuses on addressing the effects of addiction rather than on withdrawal. Separate withdrawal centers throughout Iran serve this purpose. KK’s work can be separated into three parts:

- 1) *Treatment* – roughly 100 women/day get medicine (mainly Methadone) and medical help
- 2) *Outreach* – two previous users go out and inform users about KK, as well as to spread messages to promote getting clean
- 3) *Drop-in-clinic* – satisfy basic needs (shower and food) as well as offering psychosocial support

¹⁶ Available in Farsi at: <http://www.behzisti.ir/News/Show.aspx?id=21745>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Arshad wanted to keep KK small, around 30 users, but the center is now serving more than 100 users. She thought that big social problems need to be addressed in a small setting that treats the problem comprehensively and did not want to sacrifice the quality of service delivery in the interest of serving a larger pool of drug addicts. Nevertheless, the expansion of KK was aided by the help of the Chief of the 12th District of Tehran. Arshad invited him to see KK's work and asked him for help with securing a bigger building. The Chief was so impressed with Arshad's work that a year after his visit he provided KK with a bigger house, thus allowing them to serve the needs of their growing number of patients.

The majority of KK patients are originally from outside Tehran, have low education, have been in prison, and have started using because of the influence of a man in their life. Most of KK's patients are referred to them by the Ministry of Health or the prison system. Before admitting a patient the KK staff conducts a comprehensive interview with the individual as well as tries to engage their family to help create an environment to support their rehabilitation.

Importantly, KK works under the supervision of the Ministry of Health, which periodically sends inspectors to the drop-in-clinic. Arshad recalled a story of how women grow in confidence after spending some time at KK. Many of the women who are first admitted to the center are very shy when the government inspector comes in and try to remain hidden. But, after coming to the center for several months, the women approach the inspector and engage him or her in conversation – often demanding that they listen, and respond to, their concerns.

Arshad identifies building self-confidence as the most important ingredient to success. In order to build self-confidence, KK offers laughing yoga, drawing, music, and life skills classes for its patients. KK also tries to encourage the women to express themselves through writing. Moreover, they work to get the women's stories published in newspapers to help the public to understand that women often resort to drugs because of circumstances out of their control.

Many KK patients already have knitting or other handicraft skills but cannot get jobs in local workshops due to harassment, abuse, and/or discrimination. KK decided to circumvent this problem by offering employment through the establishment of a workshop, despite physical space and financial constraints. They even buy the products the women make and later try to sell these goods, but that is a big challenge for them and is putting stress on their finances. The increasing costs of medicine and medical services in the past year have also put a major strain on KK finances.

Finally, there is the risk that patients become "addicted to KK" as some of them have admitted to. Trying to alleviate suffering without creating dependence is never easy. Organizations such as KK tend to err on the side of too much, rather than too little, help. How can they be faulted for this? The women who attend KK feel a sense of belonging and self-worth when at the center. They are often scared of permanently "graduating" from KK and interacting with the general public, who are often not sympathetic to their situation. The organizations featured in the next section also work with populations that are heavily stigmatized.

Working with Socially Disadvantaged Individuals

The eight year war with Iraq accounted for the death of nearly one million Iranians and left many others physically disabled. Recent figures show over 650,000 people with disabilities that have registered for, and are receiving, rehabilitation services from the State Welfare Organization. Other government-affiliated bodies also provide rehabilitation services in addition to NGOs.

Soheil Moeini (2011) identifies the most important and direct influences of NGOs, such as *tavanyab* (featured below), working for the disabled as: increasing self-esteem and confidence, enabling the public and social presence of the disabled, and filling voids in the government service system.

The founder was inspired to create **Tavanyab** after working with the handicapped from the Iran-Iraq War. He focused on helping them to find work but encountered many difficulties and realized that it was better to focus on handicapped youth. Thus, he established *tavanyab* to work with children with disabilities. The center in Tehran offers these children medical care as well as speech therapy and physical activity classes.

Shahla Habibi, Iran's Presidential Advisor on Women's Affairs from 1995 to 1999, refers to "family as the heart of the society, and women the heart of the family." Tavanyab's founder embraced this approach when explaining that family is like a tree and helping one part benefits all the others. He argued that the services *tavanyab* offer are especially important for mothers who often bear the biggest burden of caring for disabled children.

But to benefit women more directly, the founder of *tavanyab* established another organization called the **Society for the Protection and Assistance of the Socially Disadvantaged Individuals (SPASDI)**. The name of SPASDI comes from the fact that aside from the significant challenges these individuals face, there is widespread stigma and discrimination against the handicapped in Iran as well as HIV/AIDS individuals.

SPASDI focuses its work on women whose husbands have died from AIDS but also works with victims of large-scale natural disasters. After the 2003 Bam earthquake SPASDI established an office there to work with widows. SPASDI is active in Tabriz after the most recent earthquake there in August 2012. Moreover, SPASDI works with orphaned children whose parents both died of AIDS.

In a 2012 Progress Report on AIDS in Iran, the National AIDS Committee Secretariat of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education concluded that the prevalence of HIV among the general population remains low but it stands at 15 percent among injecting drug users (pg. 6). Injecting drug use remains the most important factor fuelling the epidemic in Iran. The number of women and men living with HIV in 2011 was about 32,720 and 60,530, respectively (totaling 93,250). But, they forecast a 35 percent increase over the following five years, with a higher rate of increase of people living with HIV (PLWH) among women than men (National AIDS Committee Secretariat of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education: 2012: pg. 16).

"Given the importance of paying special heed to HIV-vulnerable women as one of the most important most-at-risk populations, the Center for Communicable Disease Management launched a network of Vulnerable Women's Counseling Centers in 2008, for whose operations unique, standardized executive guidelines were compiled in 2010. The goal has been to improve access of vulnerable women to HIV/AIDS counseling and harm reduction services. The centers' target population includes wives of drug-

users, wives of inmates, women injecting and non-injecting drug-users as well as women of high-risk sexual behavior. Currently, 21 such centers are delivering services to this high-risk population. The services are provided through the non-government sector with an all-female staff” (National AIDS Committee Secretariat - Ministry of Health and Medical Education: 2012: pp.63-64). SPASDI is an NGO that is focused on delivering similar services.

The organization has experienced significant growth in recent years. SPASDI also managed to spread similar organizations, albeit under different names, throughout Iran, namely, in Karaj, Tabriz, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Kerman. I didn’t manage to fully understand what explains the success of SPASDI in spreading their work model. My interview with SPASDI’s founder suggested that his activism in travelling around the country and using his established networks to approach like-minded individuals was critical to expanding SPASDI’s model.

SPASDI officials identified the partnership between medical and social experts as crucial to the organization’s success. SPASDI works more on the social side but still acknowledges the importance of offering clients medical service. Social services, though, are much more cost effective and have greater value in achieving their aims of awareness raising and livelihood building.

One day a week they hold capacity building classes, which women have to attend to get a stipend of roughly \$50. This includes holding workshops to teach women different skills. Moreover, the organization takes the mothers and their children on field trips. The field trips help the families to confront the fears of stigmatization they have.

One of the more successful initiatives of SPASDI has been their awareness raising about HIV/AIDS. Their strategy is to teach the widows about the disease and organize for them to go to universities (and other locations) to explain the disease to others. Hearing about HIV/AIDS from those who have been so personally affected by it helps to gain the attention of the audience to take the issue of prevention and treatment more seriously. The experience allow helps HIV/AIDS widows to confront their fears of stigmatization and embrace their role in promoting more awareness about the disease.

Funding is a constant struggle but SPASDI and *tavanyab* have been able to employ successful fundraising techniques such as soliciting artists to contribute their work and hold a gallery, with the proceeds going to the two organizations. The organizations also partner with international organizations such as UNICEF, and to a lesser extent UNAIDS. SPASDI also has special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Finally, SPASDI runs a hotline service during normal work hours. The data (see appendix 1) show that the most common problems are AIDS and family related. Additionally, roughly 66 percent of the callers are women. The 2012 Progress Report on AIDS for Iran also identifies counseling hotlines as low cost services that have acted as bridged that connect individuals at high risk to existing services in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. These hotlines were first initiated in Iran in 2006 as part of Global Fund activities.

Conclusion

“It is also important to consider the realities of Iranian society and to strive to change perceptions of women’s roles at the grassroots level. We have to be patient and resolve our issues in our own way and step by step. The experience of Iraq and Afghanistan has shown that we need to change our society according to our own culture. We cannot copy from the West; we have to do it according to the needs of our own society.”¹⁹ - Elaheh Koolaee, MP in the 6th Parliament (2000-2004)

In the quote above, Koolaee stresses themes that came across throughout the literature review and field research presented here. First, the women’s movement broadly, and women’s CSO specifically, tend to focus on changing perceptions on the role of women and girls at the grassroots level. Second, they are working on an incremental basis with patience as a vital virtue in the process. Third, Iranian civil society is essentially working organically, according to the needs and realities of the situation they find themselves in.

The most important message that ran throughout *all* the organizations interviewed was that when it comes to women and girls, building self-confidence is key. Some of the organizations worked on building self-confidence by promoting self-expression through various mediums – dance, art, writing, and so on. Most of the organizations encouraged the girls and women they work with to produce goods that could be sold. Aside from feeling self-worth from the act of producing something, the girls and women gained self-confidence from income generation.

A common theme running through the organizations interviewed was their concerted effort to prioritize quality over quantity. Most of them sought to stay relatively small-scale, this may also be partially be influenced by resource constraints. These findings corroborate Mahdi’s insight that civil society is working through NGOs on an incremental basis, “aiming for smaller but substantive changes” (Mahdi: 2004: pg. 442).

An interesting observation was that only a few of the organizations work outside Tehran. Exceptionally, Hami has schools in Mashad but that can be explained because of the strong and sizeable Afghan community there. The Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth works mainly outside Tehran. However, the most interesting case is that of SPASDI, which has spread its model to many different cities, albeit under different organizational umbrellas.

The other organizations, such as KK and OeM have also grown remarkably – going from a time when they needed to find the target population to a situation where they need to make difficult decisions of who to admit and who to turn away – but still do not work outside of Tehran. Namazi (2000) includes the concentration of women’s NGOs in Tehran as a weakness of the Iranian women’s movement. A possible reason to remain small-scale, that was not explicitly mentioned, is that the organizations may be seeking to remain low-key as to not provoke societal backlash. This may partially explain why SPASDI did not want the similar organizations set up in other cities to be under their organizational umbrella.

¹⁹ Koolaee, Elaheh, *Chapter 9: Women in the Parliament*, pp. 137-151 in Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (eds.) (2012), *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*, Ashgate Publishing Company: USA. pp. 149-150

Many of the interviewees claimed that fundraising was a particularly difficult challenge given that it is much easier to raise money for charities working with children than for an NGO working to effect transformational change. This finding substantiates Squire's (2006; pg. 24) comment that:

CSOs have no difficulty in mobilizing significant funds for charity, to relieve poverty and help orphans, widows and others whose needs are highlighted in religious teachings. Even quite radical projects tackling issues such as drug addiction and HIV/AIDS have been successful at raising funds when they have the backing of trusted community leaders with religious credentials, although newer NGOs mainly addressing social issues such as drug abuse find getting public support and funding more difficult.

Another common theme that came out across all the interviews was the passion and energy possessed by those working in the NGOs. The founder of Tavanyab and SPASDI was actually in work clothes during our meeting and spoke about how he basically "lived" at the center. As I was leaving the center I saw him coming down the elevator in a suit ready for a formal meeting. Marjaneh lives in the UK but visits her organization regularly and makes sure that operations are running smoothly. In addition to quality control, she jokes with staff and makes sure the work environment is cheerful. This is especially important given the demanding nature of the work the staff and volunteers are tasked with.

The provision of helplines is a further important service that some NGOs provide. Data from the SPASDI hotline (included in the appendix) suggests that the most common problems are AIDS and family related, roughly 66% of the callers are women, and, more specifically, 48% are housewives. Therefore, it seems that the hotline is especially useful for female users. The Yara Hotline for children, run by Shirin Ebadi's Society for Protecting the Rights of the Child, is another example in the same mold, although I do not have data for it.

The lack of coordination among NGOs working on women and girls was striking but validates the literature reviewed in this paper, which stresses weak coordination. Many of the NGOs interviewed had heard of the others but did not mention any collaboration with them. At the NGO roundtable someone mentioned the need for more unity among the different organizations represented at the meeting. They suggested establishing a more regular meeting between senior management of these various organizations. Moreover, some of the interviewees mentioned the existence of the Communication Network of Women NGOs but I was unable to find any information about this body.

The NGOs I interviewed seemed to have minimal partnerships with the government. The relationships seemed to be one where the government refers women and girls to the relevant NGO. Finally, several of the organizations mentioned some collaboration with international partners such as UNAIDS for SPASDI, and UNICEF and UNHCR for Hami.

Most of the organizations interviewed brought up the environment in which they operate as a serious challenge. This can be broken down into three main obstacles:

- (1) *securing funding*: it is much easier to raise money for charities working with children with cancer than for a girls' school;
- (2) *fulfilling government criteria*: the need to renew their NGO permit yearly made it hard for them to pursue a truly transformative agenda; and

(3) *societal attitudes*: trying to get jobs for qualified women and girls, discrimination against Afghans and disabled children, and other issues demonstrate that the social environment is not fully conducive to accepting the populations that the organizations featured here predominately work with.

The challenges mentioned above largely coincide with those identified by Namazi and his team (2000). They identify the main constraints to NGO activity writ large as: “legal barriers, too much government control exercised through multiple and uncoordinated decision-making centers, the concentration of NGOs in Tehran, and a focus on newly created quasi-governmental NGOs in the capital” (Namazi: 2000: pg. 1 of Part I). In the course of several meetings with women’s NGOs in particular, dating back to October 1997, several constraints were identified: weak cooperation despite the presence of a Communication Network of Women NGOs, concentration in Tehran, financial difficulties, and demanding regulation.

The research presented here only scratches the surface of what is a vast and complex topic that merits further investigation. If I was to do further research on the topic I would probably start by interviewing more NGOs that work with women and girls. I am sure that they exist but would need more time and connections to find them and conduct interviews with them. More importantly, conducting interviews with beneficiaries of work of the NGOs could add richness to the qualitative findings. Understanding the impact that the work of NGOs make on the individuals they serve is a crucial component that is missing from this particular paper. Some impacts are assumed and the individuals in charge of running NGOs can present anecdotes but that cannot replace first-hand accounts from intended NGO beneficiaries.

Additionally, I would attempt to interview NGOs located outside of Tehran. The NGOs I interviewed did not, for the most part, have offices outside of Tehran but numerous contacts told me that NGOs are active in other cities and provinces. I attempted to find NGOs in my hometown of Yazd but to no avail. Nonetheless, more time and more contacts could help to facilitate future research that would include NGOs working outside of Tehran.

A possible avenue for further research could be to study the relationship of NGOs working with women and girls with the women’s movement. My research did not explore the links between the NSOs and the women’s movement writ large. In the literature review I presented mainly the evolution and current state of the women’s movement but that is not to be confused with civil society organization’s working with women and girls. Perhaps surprisingly I could not find any literature that explored the interplay between NGOs and the women’s movement.

An in depth study into government efforts to support women and girls specifically could also prove invaluable. The government apparatus to address gender issues was outlined above but understanding the different strategies, activities, and impact of different state agencies can provide a better understanding of public sector efforts to support women and girls.

I recognize that my study is not exhaustive. Data collection is an ongoing challenge; “information gathering in Iran is very problematic in general, but in the case of NGOs is close to disastrous” (Namazi, 2000). I was told by several people that the sad truth is that there are very few formal NGOs in Iran working with women and girls exclusively. Many charities assist victims of the 2003 Bam earthquake, children with cancer, and other such groups, but, when it comes to organizations that are providing

services, as well as promoting a transformative agenda, these are few and far between. During the course of conducting my fieldwork in Iran, a leading expert on women's issues in Iran told me that I had come to do this research *eight years too late*. It seems that many NGOs have not been able to renew their licenses as the new government introduced more stringent criteria. Changing the name of the Center for Women's Participation to the Center for Women and Family Affairs in 2005 was perhaps an ominous harbinger of the new administration's approach. The NGOs featured in this report only represent a small fraction of individuals and organizations working to empower women and girls in Iran.

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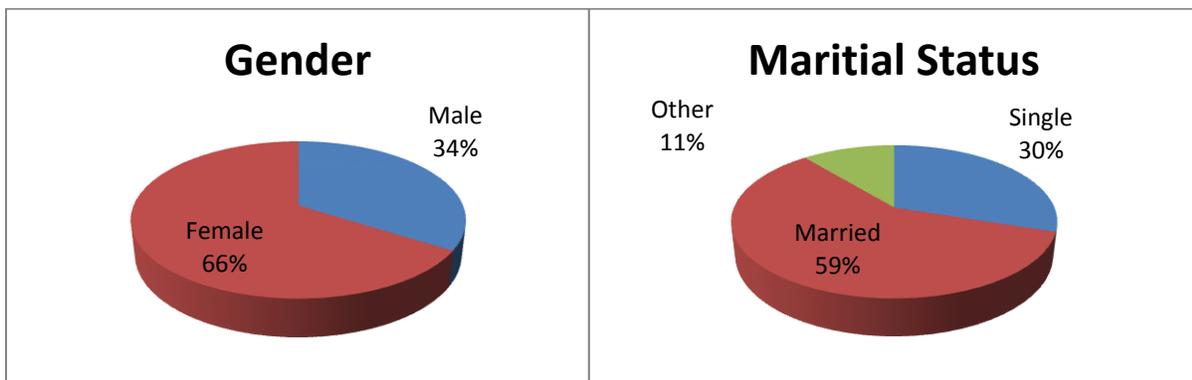
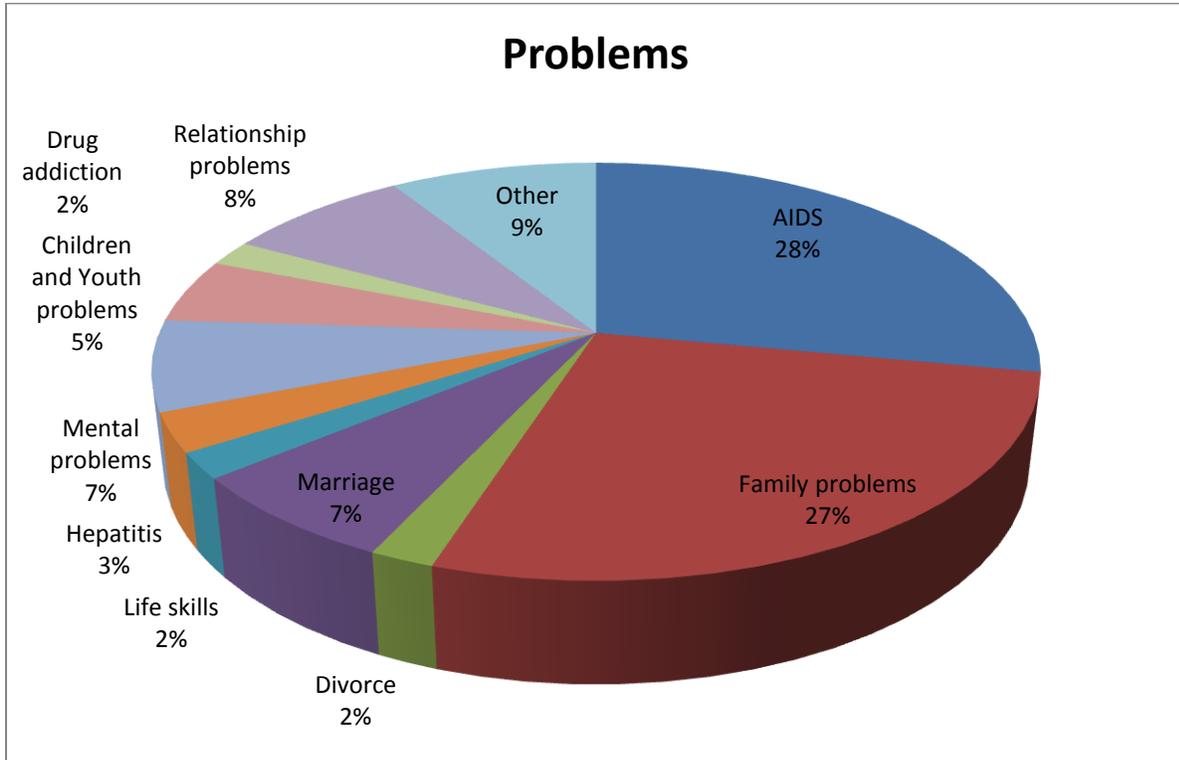
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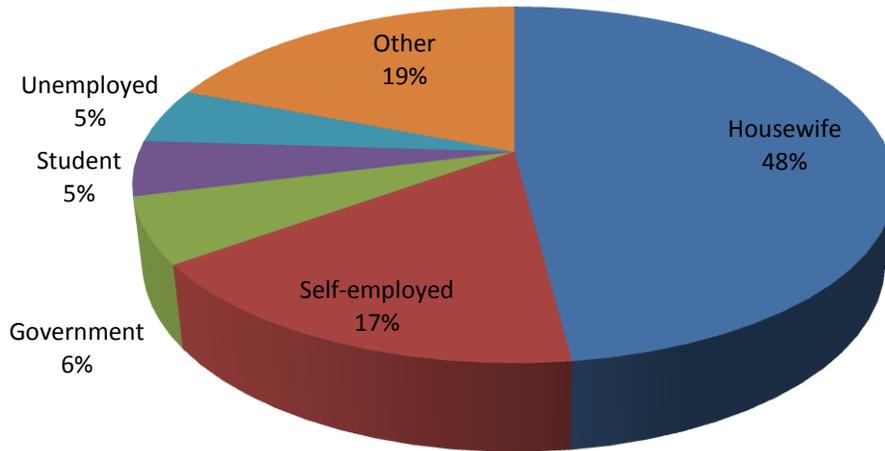
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Appendix

Data from SPASDI Hotline 1390 (Iranian Year)



Occupation



Education level

