

**The Role and Contribution of Feminist Civil Society to  
Women's Empowerment: The Cases of Iranian Feminist  
Cinema, Press, and Publications.**

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## Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSOs	Civil society Organizations
FCS	Feminist civil Society
FBOs	Faith based organizations
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDI	Gender Development Index
GGGI	Global Gender Gap Index
GII	Gender Inequality Index
HDI	Human Development Index
IR	Islamic Republic
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MSCs	Master of Science
NGO	None Governmental Organizations
PIS	Participate Information Sheet
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SIGI	Social Institution and Gender Index
SPN	Selection of Prison Notebook
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UoM	University of Manchester

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UREC	University of Manchester Ethical Committee
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
VPN	Virtual Private Network)
WEF	World Economic Forum
WSIR	Women Society of Islamic Revolution

## Abstract

This thesis explores the potential contribution of Iranian feminist civil society (FCS) to promotion of women's empowerment through a lens, which seeks to critically identify the hegemonic project that is articulated in their discourse. This entails the critical analysis of how various social actors within FCS report the contribution of their work to women's empowerment. Consequently, in order to gain a better understanding of state/civil society relations, the potential implications of the findings of the above analysis are discussed.

Drawing on Gramscian perspectives on state/civil society relations and battle of hegemony, this thesis considers FCS to be a terrain of hegemonic battles whereby counterhegemonic discourses can be articulated through raising collective consciousness, challenging patriarchal hegemony, and creating multiple alternative discourses.

Empirically, this thesis investigates the concepts of battle of hegemony and its contribution to transformation of power relations within the works of Iranian FCS, analyses the discourses produced by social actors within FCS, and explores how these discourses are shaped by and respond to the socio-political environment in which they are articulated.

Theoretically, this thesis seeks to identify how Gramscian concepts can speak to the hegemonic projects articulated in Iranian FCS and how his perspectives can aid in understanding the relations between FCS and state in Iran. In considering such projects in terms of the production of discourses by social actors, the thesis uses Bakhtinina dialogism which can help to illuminate the inter-animation of diverse voices within both the work and perspectives of social actors. Furthermore, by extendending Gramsci's framework to include and adapt Laclau and Mouffe's concept of counterhegemonic interventions, this thesis also unpacks FCS' operational strategies within the Iranian context.

The data collated for this thesis includes analysis of a document written by a religious scholar and published in a feminist journal, and six semi-structured interviews with two feminist journalists and four feminist filmmakers.

The key findings of this thesis are as follows: Social actors within Iranian FCS adopt heterogeneous -and sometimes opposing- approaches in articulating and communicating their discourses.

This diversity can benefit FCS operations in order to limit the possibility of articulating an alternative dominant discourse by feminist intellectuals which excludes marginalized/disadvantaged women's voices within the discourse of FCS. Such diverse discourses also challenge the narrow and highly controlled margin of action for civil society by the state, in which pluralism and criticism is often constrained and limited.

Overall, this thesis a) addresses a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between theocratic states and FCS and the potential contribution(s) of FCS to women's empowerment in the countries with theocratic regimes; b) presents a Gramscian-Bakhtinian analytical framework that can be applied in future studies that investigate state/civil society relations and the cultural hegemonic battle for transformation of power relations, and c) explores cultural realms within FCS and theoretically and methodologically analyse their potential contribution to women's empowerment.

## Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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## Introduction chapter

This chapter will present the topic, significance of this research, and the academic point of view as well as my personal experience that motivated me to carry out this study. It will be followed by outlining both the rationale for presenting this thesis in journal format and the structure of the thesis. Lastly, this chapter will introduce the papers, which constitute the core of this thesis and the journals to which they have or will be submitted.

### 1.1 Research aim and objectives

This study aims to investigate how the social actors in feminist civil society (FCS)<sup>1</sup> are fostering women's empowerment through the discourse of their publications, films, and human rights activism; how these social actors perceive the potential role and contribution of their work in promoting women's empowerment; how their ideologies are communicated through the discourse of the feminist publication/press and feminist cinema; and how these ideologies are mediated by the socio-political context in which they were/are articulated. Finally, this thesis also discusses the implications of these findings for our understanding of the relationship between feminist civil society and state in Iran.

To reach the aims and objectives of this study, collective/multiple cases of social actors operating in different realms of FCS in Iran have been investigated in order to gain a better understanding of the role and contribution of FCS in advancing women's empowerment in Iran. This includes feminist publication/press, the collaboration of religious scholars and feminist press, and feminist cinema.

### 1.2 Significance of the research

The problems that this research intended to address are of two different kinds. The first problem is related to the contradictory social status of women in Iran based on international gender-related indicators as well as national accounts of Iranian women's social status. In this sense, despite noticeably high gender-related-indices regarding health and education (World Economic Forum, WEF, 2014); Iran is ranked in the bottom quantile of indices that measure legal injustice (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2014a) and its representation of women in the political sphere is comparably low in both global statistics and those that relate to the Middle East region (OECD, 2014a, WEF 2014,

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<sup>1</sup> Howell and Mulligan define feminist civil society as "women's organizations/ institutions that aim to promote women and to improve women's status" (2005, p. 205).

p. 210).

Moreover, Iran is one of only six countries, which have not yet ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Bakhshizadeh, 2018; WEF, 2013; UNDP, 2013).<sup>2</sup> CEDAW was blocked by the Guardian Council<sup>3</sup> (Tohidi, 2010) on the ground that it purportedly violates the Islamic laws and the integrity of family. However, the majority of women activists in Iran, including both secular and some Islamic ones, have been generating their demands within the framework of CEDAW (Tohidi, 2003 cited in 2010). This contradiction gives some insight into why locating this study of women's empowerment in Iran is significant. In that, by achieving the above aims, I hope to generate insight into how empowerment might be enacted in such a contradictory context. The following chapter (context chapter) will further this discussion in more detail.

The second problem this research has aimed to address relates to how cultural organizations in civil society such as the feminist press and cinema can be a space where empowerment emerges since there is a notable gap in the literature here. To date, few studies have investigated Iranian press and its role as an element of civil society (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2001, 2004; Jahanshahrad, 2012); furthermore, they have not looked in depth at the contribution of feminist press and cinema to the promotion of women's empowerment.

This research focuses specifically on how social actors working in feminist cinema and press view their work in relation to empowering women in the areas of legal injustice against women and low/non representation of women in public spaces. In so doing, I am required to theorize concepts such as civil society, feminist civil society and women's empowerment in relation to the Iranian context - which is also an area where little research has taken place.

Finally, I will also demonstrate there is little research focused on the strategic navigation of social actors -within feminist civil society in Iran- in relation to socio-political environment and their perceived outcomes. It is these gaps in the literature, which this study intends to address.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see the context chapter for further explanation on the rest of vetoed international convention in relation to women's rights in Iran.

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian Council includes six clerics that are appointed by the unelected supreme leader as well as six jurists that are selected by the head of the judiciary. The Council has power of veto over passed bills by the elected parliament (Tohidi, 2010).

## **Research questions:**

In order to reach the above aims and objectives, this thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. What ideologies are communicated in the discourses of FCS document? How can these ideologies be analysed using Gramscian theory on battle of hegemony?
2. How do the social actors within Iranian FCS view their role, contribution, and positionality of their articulated discourse in promoting women's empowerment?
3. What are the strategies that the social actors in FCS report employing to operate in their given socio-political context?
4. What can these findings tell us about relationship between state and civil society in Iran (gender specific)?

Further information on the rationale and justification for these questions can be found on p.123-124 of this thesis. The following section will outline my personal experience and the academic point of view that motivate me to carry out this study.

### **1.3 Personal experience**

In retrospect, this research mirrors my own empowerment journey both as the beneficiary of different cultural areas within feminist civil society and as an active member in civil society organisations. I started off this journey with my own quest to understand how, as a middle class woman, despite being relatively empowered in my own family, I have been prone to socio-cultural discriminations on a daily basis in Iran.

The insatiable desire to understand how patriarchal social structures are constructed motivated me to begin reading gender-related laws, policies, and Islamic discourse. Furthermore, I have been passionately following feminist publications, films, and press since my early 20s. At the same time, from being a young adult, I have participated in voluntary activities within civil society organizations (CSOs) whose interventions were/are focused on supporting both marginalized women -including drug addicts and sex workers- and disadvantaged children such as street children. I have been active within the above-mentioned CSOs as coordinator, event organizer, translator, and researcher. While working as a practitioner and researcher in these organizations, I have been given access not only to academic and empirical resources but also given the opportunity to attend international

events and (on a couple of occasions) represent these CSOs at conferences and galas.

Through these opportunities, I noticed a gap between theoretical understandings of activities of international CSOs, their planning and implementation of development interventions and initiatives across the globe, and the practice and policies of the Iranian CSOs with which I have been engaged. This learning journey has deepened my understanding of the significance of civil society as a domain wherein subjugated social groups can be emancipated and it has also driven me to better understand how Iranian CSOs can enhance the status of women in Iran.

The above-mentioned gap has inspired me to focus my research on civil society and more specifically FCS in Iran. Thus, I conducted research for my MSc dissertation (in Managing and Implementing Development Projects) on the contribution of civil society organizations to women's empowerment and gender equality in Iran in 2014. Here, I collected qualitative primary data from various social actors in civil society organizations (CSOs) and their beneficiaries using in-depth interviews. These CSOs were supporting a limited number of marginalized and disadvantaged women due to their limited financial resources and constraints -applied by the state. Moreover, their interventions were focused on providing resources (instrumentalist advocacy mode)<sup>4</sup> in relation to health and education.

The findings of this research demonstrated that these CSOs were striving to foster women's empowerment at an individual level rather than promoting collective and transformational empowerment. In this sense, this research showed that these CSOs achieved their goals in terms of capacity building in health, education, economic, poverty reduction, legal supports, and raising awareness. However, they were not able to address gender inequality in employment at a large scale. Neither could they get women involved in the political sphere or even local government. The experience of conducting this research led me to plan my PhD research on cultural organizations that are operating in FCS since I presume that they have a broader reach i.e. addressing larger audiences/beneficiaries of a diverse range of age, gender, and ethnic and religious minority. Lastly, I viewed that their works focus on collective and structural social transformations supporting women 'status rather individual women' empowerment.

Furthermore, my experience of working in civil society organizations, focused on gender

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<sup>4</sup> Please see Kabeer, 1999.

projects, as well as the above-mentioned research experience (in previous postgraduate programmes) gave me a basis on which to build rapport with social actors operating in feminist civil society. This includes feminist filmmakers and feminist journalists/writers - some of whom have agreed to participate in this current doctoral research.

In this sense, I have shifted the focus of my PhD research towards a more transformational approach, which investigates challenging gender power relations and promoting women's empowerment. In so doing, I have concentrated on cultural areas of civil society including feminist press and cinema due to their large-scale audience, which are composed of different social classes within Iranian society, and their intrinsic and transformational approach to confronting gender power relations and fostering women's empowerment. Thus, I have aimed at exploring how social actors within these cultural elements of civil society strive to challenge social patriarchal structure in Iran and how they view their contribution to women's empowerment.

#### 1.4 Academic pathway

My commitment and experience as a practitioner in CSOs has led me to deepen my understanding of the various socio-political theories that have focused on the concept of civil society. Having researched the related literature, I decided to focus on theories which address the power relationship between state and civil society, and in particular, Gramsci's theory, which I argue is most relevant for unpacking the nature of the state/civil society relationship in Iran.<sup>5</sup> More detail on why this is the case will be provided in Context Chapter. However, as my analysis progressed, so did my understanding of Gramsci's theory and its limitations as a theoretical framework for analyzing the Iranian state/society relationship. This can be explained at three main levels.

Firstly, with regard to critical analysis of the hegemonic project undertaken by FCS, it was noticeable that some social actors within FCS are operating in accordance with Gramscian three steps of hegemonic battle (i.e. Step 1) Collective consciousness raising, 2) Collective confrontation of patriarchal hegemony, 3) articulation of counterhegemony. Having said that, they are articulating counterhegemonic discourses with various dimensions and directions. Considering this, I have expanded the theoretical framework in this thesis to include a more subjective account of counterhegemonic discourse using Laclau and

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<sup>5</sup> Please, see the conceptual chapter for the related justification and the further explanation.

Mouffe's work on counterhegemonic intervention. This has enabled me to deepen my analysis of the perspectives of social actors working within FCS in Iran, which I will demonstrate throughout this thesis.

Secondly, although Gramsci includes family within the realm of civil society, gender power relations are neglected in his theory of the hegemonic battle for transformation of power relations. Thus, in this thesis, I outlined how gender power relations can be embedded within his theoretical framework on the power relations between state and civil society. Consequently, I will illustrate how social actors within FCS are tackling gender power relations and the implications of this investigation to gain a better understanding of the power relations between FCS and state.

Thirdly, in the early stages of this research, I noticed the need to apply (a) conceptual tool(s) capable of analyzing the type of data I had collected - primarily discursive data in the form of interviews with social actors in FCS and document analysis of journal/magazine articles (more detail provided in methodology chapter). In this pursuit, Gramsci's socio-political theory was not sufficient as an analytical tool for the discourse analysis required in this research. Therefore, I have implemented an analytical framework based on a synthesis of Gramsci's theory of power relations with Bakhtin's literary concept of Dialogism<sup>6</sup> (paper#1&#2) as well as the synthesis of the Gramsci's theoretical framework with some borrowed concepts from Laclau and Mouffe to develop thematic analysis utilized in the third paper.

Overall, reflecting on my own positionality as an insider researcher and an active member of CSOs whose interventions focused on supporting women's (and street connected children's) empowerment, I have learned about my privileged research positionality. In this sense, I would argue that being a middle-class woman has earned me the opportunity to pursue and participate within activities of FCS in different areas. This has, subsequently, enabled me to make contacts with participants of this research who are feminist activists, filmmakers, and writers/journalists and would not be accessible to the public (please see the positionality and reflexivity sections in the Methodology and Discussion Chapters).

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<sup>6</sup> 'Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world whereby everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole-there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue. Therefore, the unitariness is relative to the overpowering force of multi-voices and thus dialogism '(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426).

## 1.5 The rationale for presenting this research in journal format

This thesis complies with the guidelines on journal format presentation outlined in the University of Manchester presentation of theses policy. In this, journal format PhD thesis incorporates “sections that are suitable for submission for publication, or have been accepted for publication or already published in a peer-reviewed journal or in another media suitable for dissemination that is appropriate to the discipline covered by the thesis” (Presentation of Theses Policy, 217, p. 4)<sup>7</sup>.

This thesis is presented in journal format for the following reasons:

### 1.5.1 Methodological perspectives

- a) The substantial body of data that have been collected and analysed for each paper in this study is set from varied sources. The data analysed for paper 1 is a journal article from an online Iranian feminist journal written by an Islamic scholar. Paper 2 is based on semi-structured interviews with the feminist journalists/chief editor, whereas, Paper 3 is based on semi-structured interviews with the directors of the films. Given that each paper, therefore, contributes to different fields and literatures -it was difficult to see how the findings could be presented in a single unified monograph.
- b) In each of the above-mentioned papers, I have applied different data analysis approaches based on the nature of the data. This includes in depth discourse analysis of one key journal article -in Paper 1; applying a Bakhtinian linguistic/literary concepts -as conceptual tool for data analysis-in Paper 2; and thematic analysis informed by the conceptual framework in Paper 3. This has allowed me to probe the data from different perspectives to consider how each form of data manifests Gramsci’s theoretical framework of transformation of power relations -within the terrain of civil society- through articulation of hegemonic battle. As above, the diverse nature of these analyses demanded a presentation format that allowed me to develop an argument in relation to each one.
- c) Having noted the above regarding the diverse focus of each paper, it is possible to construct an overall account of the project by considering how each paper relates to Gramsci’s socio-political theories on power dynamics in state and civil society

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<sup>7</sup> Available at: <http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=7420>

relationships and more specifically the role of articulation of counterhegemony in the construction/deconstruction of these dynamics.

### 1.5.2 Personal aspirations

In addition to the academic rationale for a journal format thesis outlined above, I have a number of personal reasons to submit this thesis by journal format:

- a. In order to maximise access and readings of my thesis and thereby have potential influence I have opted for journal format so that readers can access this work through multiple avenues (e.g. through access to journals as well as the UoM thesis repository).
- b. I aim to pursue a career in academia. I therefore need to publish articles, given the competitive process of securing a job in academia.
- c. My first and most important aim for conducting a PhD is to make a contribution to social transformation in favour of women and more specifically Iranian women. Given the higher accessibility and ease of reading journal papers, I see journal format as a more effective channel to be influential. Therefore, to reconcile (how I identify) myself as a social activist determined to make an influence with my research whilst simultaneously building a career in academia, I have opted for a journal format PhD.

### 1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis will be presented in the following structure:

The abstract presents the essence of this research, which includes the brief account of the context, the conceptual framework, methodology, and conclusion of this research.

The Introduction chapter outlines the significance of the research, research objectives and research questions, the motivations to conduct this research, the reasons this research is presented journal format, and the structure of this thesis.

Chapters 2 to 4 review relevant literature on relevant aspects of this research. Chapter 2 is the context chapter, which presents evidence that relates to the social status of Iranian women, the history of the Iranian women's social movement in post-revolutionary Iran, and Iranian feminist cinema and press. This chapter will give a justification of why Iranian feminist civil society in the given area of study for this thesis. Chapter three is an overview



of women's social movements in Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The fourth chapter presents a review of previous research in the way gender is understood in the theories of civil society. These two chapters include sections summarizing and synthesizing previous research in the above-mentioned fields of investigation in order to identify the research gap in the related literature, which is necessary to articulate this study's contribution to knowledge.

The fifth chapter presents the theoretical framework for this thesis. It outlines the main contemporary approaches to understanding the concept of civil society, its definition, and its role as the key constituent in the social development agenda, and various theoretical framings including justification of my decision to draw on Gramsci's theories on civil society/state relations. It, then, will proceed by presenting the justification of the conceptual framework used in this thesis by integrating Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on counterhegemonic intervention (2001) with that of Gramsci's hegemonic battle (1971). In so doing, I will demonstrate why Gramsci's perspectives have been employed and how expanding his work, through integrating Laclau and Mouffe's, is relevant to understanding the contribution of FCS to promoting women's empowerment.

The sixth chapter presents the methodology and methods of data collection, which have been employed across this thesis and in each of the three individual papers as well as detailing the structure and the selection of the case studies. This chapter shows how the different methods, adopted in each paper, link together as a coherent whole under the conceptual framework on civil society/state relations and power relation transformation detailed in the second chapter. Lastly, this chapter presents a detailed account of the ethical concerns raised while conducting this research and the mitigating strategies that I have applied to address them.

**Paper #1: The role and contribution of feminist publication in promoting women empowerment in Iran: the case of “*Rejaal*”<sup>8</sup> and the expediency of women to stand for the presidential election.** In Paper 1 explores the role and contribution of feminist publications in promoting women empowerment in Iran through the case of “*Rejaal*” and the expediency of women to stand for the presidential election. This paper present an analytical framework that is employed to capture the hegemonic project undertaken by the

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<sup>8</sup> *Rejaal*, is a Quranic term that is referenced in IR constitutional (Article 115) with regard to “whether or not women can stand for presidential position. While the literal meaning of this- formal and classic- term refers to men, Islamic scholars interpreted it as religious and political person.

Iranian feminist publications as an emergent element of feminist civil society (FCS).<sup>9</sup> This framework draws on Gramsci's perspective on civil society as a potential empowering realm wherein subordinated social groups -including women- can transform the relations of power through raising collective critical consciousness, confronting the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group, and articulating counterhegemony (Gramsci, 1971, 1980). It also adopts Bakhtinian "Dialogism" to investigate how document(s) -produced by a feminist publication- communicate their ideological positions in order to foster empowerment and whether/how, their hegemonic intervention is in alignment with the Gramscian perspective on hegemonic battle as a means of transforming power relations. Given that Gramsci's theories/concepts on empowerment of subaltern social groups were not reflected in his writing on language and grammar, I have integrated his related theories with Bakhtinian's perspectives to explore the politics of language and generation of meaning (discourse), within the document produced by feminist publication. Doing so involves using Bakhtin's literary analytical concepts (including heteroglossia, dialogism, and othering) as conceptual tools- in order to analyse the discourses of the document. Indeed, I illustrate the usefulness of this framework via an analysis of one key publication, which discusses the using the term *Rejaal* in political decision making around "if women can stand for presidential election". In so doing, I will investigate how strategies and uses of language that manifest these concepts might help author(s) to dehegemonize the dominant patriarchal hegemony and create an alternative hegemony based on the will of subordinated group (women).

**Paper # 2: The role and contribution of feminist's press in promoting women's empowerment in Iran: the analysis of the interviews with two journalists in Iranian feminist press.** In Paper 2 investigates the role and contribution of feminist press in supporting women's empowerment in Iran through the analysis of the interviews with two journalists in Iranian feminist press. This article investigates how these journalists, who are social actors within Iranian feminist civil society (FCS), view their contribution in fostering women's empowerment. In this pursuit, it employs a Gramscian perspective on civil society as a potential empowering sphere in which subordinated social groups- including women- can transform power relations through three steps: raising collective critical consciousness, confronting the hegemony of the dominant group, and articulating

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<sup>9</sup> Hegemony means the supremacy of one group over the other groups; it is established and substantiated through meaning-making system (discourse) and consent rather than reliance on coercion.

counterhegemony. This paper also employs Bakhtinian’s dialogism as an analytical framework (developed in paper 1) to investigate how both journalists linguistically articulate the hegemonic battle in Iranian feminist press.

**Paper # 3: Iranian feminsit filmmakers’ perceived contribution to women’s empowerment.** Paper 3 investigates how Iranian feminist filmmakers report their contribution to women’s empowerment through the analysis of the semi-structured interviews involving four feminist filmmakers in Iran. It investigates the opportunities and obstacles that these filmmakers have experienced and the coping/thriving strategies they adopt in order to operate/navigate within Iranian feminist cinema. Drawing on Gramsci’s concept of battle of hegemony (1971), along with Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) perspectives on counterhegemonic interventions as a conceptual/analytical framework, this paper explores whether and how the filmmakers’ reported operation aligns with the emancipatory potential of Gramsci’s hegemonic battle within the civil society arena.

The final chapter is the Discussion and Conclusion that draws together the various findings of each paper into a coherent synthesis indicating implications for future work. This chapter also includes a section titled Contribution to Knowledge which captures the contribution made by each paper in the thesis and also the contribution made by the thesis as a whole (with the three papers combined). This chapter is then wrapped up by presenting my critical reflection on the PhD journey.

### 1.7 Publication status of papers

The following table outlines the journals that I have submitted/will be submitting, the justification for this choice, and their current publication status.

Table 1: The Publication Status of Papers

Title of the Paper	Potential Journal	Rationale for this journal	The publication status

<p>Pape 1</p> <p>The role and contribution of the feminist publication in promoting women’s empowerment in Iran: the case of “<i>Rejaal</i>” and the expediency of women to stand for the presidential election.</p>	<p>Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy</p>	<p>This journal publishes articles related to the topics covered in this paper.</p>	<p>Yet to submit</p>
<p>Paper 2</p> <p>Two: The role and contribution of the feminist press in promoting women’s empowerment in Iran: an analysis of interviews with two influential journalists</p>	<p>International journal of gender and women studies</p>	<p>The cited/studied articles in this paper have been published in this journal.</p>	<p>Yet to submit</p>
<p>Paper 3</p> <p>Iranian feminist filmmakers’ perceived contributions to women’s empowerment</p>	<p>Women's Studies International Forum</p>	<p>This journal publishes articles related to the topics covered in this paper.</p> <p>The cited/studied articles in this paper have been published in this journal.</p>	<p>Yet to submit</p>

## Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the topic of this thesis, the significance of this research and the academic and personal motivations for carrying out this PhD programme. In doing so I have highlighted the key aims for this research in terms of understanding how women’s empowerment might be enacted in a context that is contradictory such as Iran. This argument will be developed further throughout Chapters 2 and 3. This chapter has also presented the rationale for the presentation of this thesis in journal format, the structure of this thesis, and the publication status of the papers constitutes the core of this thesis. This offers the reader an account of what is to come and how the thesis is designed in order to address both the academic aims and my personal reasons for doing this research.

In the following chapter, I provide an overview of the Iranian context in which this research is situated.

## Chapter 2: Context chapter

### The context: social status of Iranian women and their post-revolutionary women's movement

To gain a better understanding of the research problem, this chapter will briefly present the social status of Iranian women, their subjugated status in legal and political related areas (which are the main focus of this study), the history of the post-revolutionary Iranian women's social movement, and an account of Iranian feminist cinema and Iranian feminist press/publications. In this pursuit, this chapter demonstrates that, despite noticeably high gender-related-indicators regarding health and education, Iranian women are ranked in the bottom quantile of indices that measure legal injustice and low/non-representation of women in the political sphere at both a global level as well as in comparison with their Middle Eastern neighbours. This gives some insight into why locating this study of women's empowerment in Iran is significant since it suggests there are contradictions between Iran's rankings in terms of different gender-related indices. Nevertheless, whilst there may be contradictions at work, the gender indices do indicate particular areas of oppression and empowerment that demand attention in this context.

Next, having outlined Iran as an interesting context for this research, this chapter will proceed to present a review of literature on the Iranian post-revolutionary women's social movement and how, despite the suppressive socio-political environment, the social actors in such movement have championed gender equality and women's empowerment. This will not only situate my research in the context, but also it will show how my study addresses a gap in the research literature regarding how the feminist press and cinema can be considered to be an emergent part of civil society.

Lastly, I will demonstrate there is little research focused on the strategic navigation of social actors within feminist civil society in Iran, in relation to their given socio-political environment and their perceived outcomes.

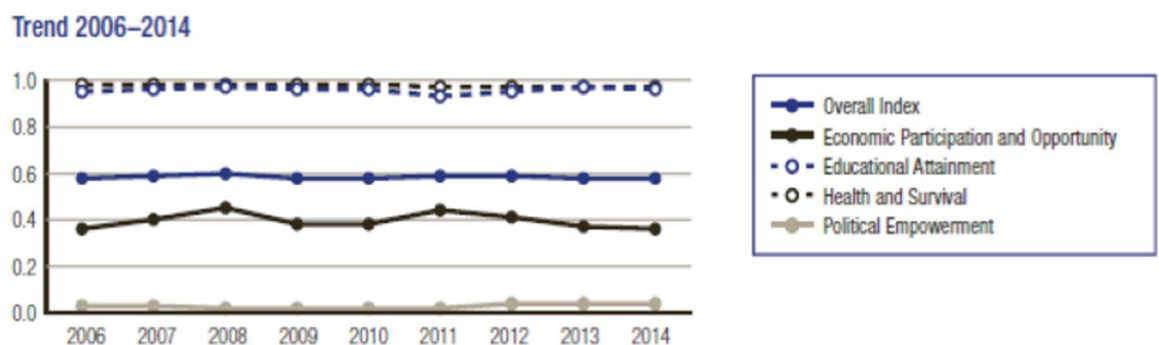
#### 2.1 The status of women in Iran according to international indicators

This section provides a brief overview of the international gender-related indicators on Iran in order to illustrate some of the contradictions between these indices. The Gender Inequality Index (GII), which measures gender inequality in three significant areas of human development i.e. economic status, empowerment, and reproductive health, ranks Iran 97<sup>th</sup> among 187 countries (UNDP, 2014c). The Gender Development Index (GDI), which

addresses gender gaps in education, incomes, and life expectancy, ranks Iran 128<sup>th</sup> among 187 (UNDP 2014b). The Human Development Index (HDI) (2019) ranks Iran 65<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries. Within the category of countries with high human development index, however, Gender Inequality Index GII i.e. one of HDI sub-indices ranks Iran 118<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries (2018) with relatively low rate of maternal mortality and close ratio of female and male population with at least secondary education. Among sub-indices of GII, Labour Force Participation Rate indicates a ratio of % 16.8 female to %71.2 male labour force. Share of Seats in Parliament -i.e. one of the sub-indices also indicates that women occupy only 5.9% of seats in Parliament in Iran (UNDP, 2019).

In relation to the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), Iran is ranked 137<sup>th</sup> among 142 countries in 2014 (WEF, 2014) and 148<sup>th</sup> out of 153 countries in 2019 (WEF, 2020). This index measures the relative gender gap in Education, Economics, Health, and Politics. However, this index also indicates that Iran obtained full gender parity in educational achievement at tertiary level and made a remarkable advance in reaching gender equality with regard to health-related indices (WEF, 2014). Nevertheless, in relation to the political participation sub-index, it ranks 135<sup>th</sup> among 142 countries (WEF, 2014, p. 210).The diagram below displays Iran’s trend of performance in relation to the Global Gender Gap Index from 2006 to 2014.

Figure 1: Iran's Gender Gap Index Trend 2006-2014



WEF (2014, p. 211), Available: <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2014>

As the WEF figure (Figure 1) illustrates, although there is no noticeable upward or downward shift in any of the indexes, the indices related to health and survival along with

educational attainment indicate the highest value, whereas, political empowerment indices show the lowest value in the bottom of the figure.

The above trend remains rather similar to Iran's Gender Gap Index Trend in 2020 as the following figure reflects.

Figure 2: Iran's Gender Gap Index Trend 2020



WEF, Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR, 2020, p. 189), Available: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>

The above figure also illustrates a gender gap concerning four areas of education attainment, health and survival, economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment of women. As Figure 2 indicates, Iran has the lowest gender gap in terms of education attainment and the largest gender gap reading political empowerment of women.

Moreover, according to the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) (2020), Iran has -6 ranking value in comparison with its GGGI ranking in 2014 as it was noted above (WEF, 2020). Moreover, the GGGI ranks Iran 16<sup>th</sup> out of 19 states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (WEF, 2020). Considering the sub-indices, Iran is ranked 147<sup>th</sup> out of 153 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunity, 118<sup>th</sup> out of 153 in terms of educational attainment, 130<sup>th</sup> out of 153 in terms of health and survival, and 145<sup>th</sup> out of 153 in terms of political empowerment of women. Therefore, there was a decline in all the above-mentioned four sub-indices in comparison with similar indices in the 2014 GGGI ranking (WEF, 2014). Additionally, Iran is ranked in the bottom quintile regarding the economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment of women. GGGR (2020) also ranks Iran 144<sup>th</sup> out of 153 countries in terms of the number of women in parliament with the ratio of 5.9% women to 94.1% men MPS, and 132<sup>nd</sup> out of 153 countries with regard to number of women

ministers with the ratio of 6.5% women to 93.5% men ministers.

The Social Institution and Gender Index (SIGI) is another useful index for depicting the situation and status of Iranian women. It is composed of five sub-indices including discriminatory family code, son bias, restricted integrity, restricted resources and assets, and restricted civil liberty (OECD, 2014a). In relation to these sub-indices, Iran has a very high level of discrimination regarding the family code and civil liberties (OECD, 2014a) with the value of 89.9% regarding Discrimination in Family and 75.1% regarding Restricted Civil Liberty (OECD, 2019). Yet, SIGI indicates Iran has relatively low level of Restricted Physical Integrity 29.1 and low rate of Restricted Access to Productive and Financial Resources (22.5).

Moreover, Iran has been ranked among the lowest counties in respect of the indices which measure the political participation and legal status of women not only in the world but also within countries that comprise MENA.

Table 2: comparative vision of social status of Iranian women and that of women in the MENA region (2010).

Indicator	Iran	MEN A	Differences
Fertility rate (birth per person)	1.67	2.69	-1.02
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 births)	21.00	73.73	-52.73
Labour force, female (% of total labour force)	17.95	21.25	-3.3
Seats held by women in national parliaments	2.80	10.43	-7.63

Compiled by the author from: <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/iran>

The data presented in the table above illustrates that Iran has a noticeably lower fertility rate than the MENA average and also a lower rate of maternal mortality. Yet, despite performing well in relation to health, and despite high levels of participation in Higher Education, Iran



does not perform well regarding the social, economic and political status of women in society with very few Iranian women engaging in the labor force or occupying seats in the parliament. Please see Appendix 2 for political representation of women within Muslim-majority countries.

In the same sense, Iran has the fifth lowest ratio with regard to the political participation of Iranian women in the MENA region (World Bank, 2013); it is also ranked strikingly lower than the World average.<sup>10</sup> There are only 3.1% female MPs in the national parliament and 16% of legislator positions are held by women (UNDP, 2014c) (please see, Appendix 1 on the percentage of women in Iranian parliament).

Lastly, it should be mentioned that Iran is among six countries that did not ratify CEDAW (Charter of Rights and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) (Bakhshizadeh, 2018). In this, despite reformists' attempts (in sixth Parliament/Majlis) to ratify CEDAW, the conservative Guardian Council vetoed its proposal (Tohidi, 2010) on the ground that (in certain parts) CEDAW is incompatible with Islamic values (Bakhshizadeh, 2018).

In addition, Iran has signed the least number of international conventions related to gender (in) equality compared to the other MENA countries (please, see Appendix 3). The above indices and diagrams illustrate the contradictory indicators of gender in/equality in Iran that makes the context highly noticeable in this respect. This has led to many researchers conducting research on gender issues in Iran and specifically within the post-revolutionary era (Tohidi, 2010, Moghadam, 2003, 2013; Hoodfar, 1998, Kian, 2010). Given the contradictions among the gender-related indices, I argue that this may be a particularly interesting context to look at women's empowerment. With a highly educated and healthy female population, yet limited participation in the labour market or politics and with limitations on women's legal rights, I argue there is potential for tensions, which arguably, surface as a demand for change (manifest in the women's social movement in Iran).

## 2.2 Feminist civil society in Iran

The focus of this research is on the contribution of FCS to enact social change with a particular focus on legal and political women's empowerment. FCS in Iran, which

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<sup>10</sup> (World bank 2013, p. 10) available at:

[http://databank.worldbank.org/Data/Views/VariableSelection/SelectVariables.aspx?source=283#c\\_i](http://databank.worldbank.org/Data/Views/VariableSelection/SelectVariables.aspx?source=283#c_i)

champions the rights of women, have made considerable advances in promoting greater equality for women (Hoodfar, 1998; Najmabadi, 1998; Mir-Hosseini, 2001; Hoodfar and Sadeqhi, 2009). Among the worthy examples are: The reform in family law with regard to custody of children (1985), passing a bill for wages for women's housework (1991), the establishment of the Women's Affairs Centre (1991), obtaining state support for participation in international conferences (including Berlin and Beijing conferences, 1995), and the collection of One Million Signatures in a petition against inequality in the civil code. Yet, given the apparent suppressed status of Iranian women according to the international gender-related indicators outlined above, there is a need for further exploration of the complex situation in which the struggle for empowerment is located. The following section will outline the particular issues relating to the legal injustice against women and political underrepresentation of Iranian women, which can explain the rationale behind this study along with the above-mentioned low ranked indices in relation to these two areas.

However, before proceeding to the following section, some key concepts regarding Iranian jurisprudence should be introduced in order to give the reader some background context. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran was adopted by referendum in 1979 and went into force replacing the Constitution of 1906. It was amended in 1989. The constitution has been called a hybrid of theocratic and democratic elements. While Articles One and Two vest sovereignty in God, Article Six mandates popular elections for the presidency and the *Majlis*, or parliament. However, the main democratic procedures and rights are subordinate to the non-democratically appointed Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader, whose powers are spelled out in Chapter Eight (Articles 107-112).<sup>11</sup> The Islamic Penal Code deals with the types of offences and punishments and the security and correctional measures that shall be applied to the offender.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, the civil code refers to a series of regulations controlling all civic and social relations between individuals in the various circumstances of their lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Please see: <https://en.parliran.ir/eng/en/Constitution> , <https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Iran.html>, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203946904574300374086282670>, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203946904574300374086282670>.

<sup>12</sup>Please see: <https://iranhrdc.org/wp->

[content/uploads/pdf\\_en/Iranian\\_Codes/Islamic\\_Penal\\_Code\\_of\\_the\\_Islamic\\_Republic\\_of\\_Iran\\_212133839.p](https://iranhrdc.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf_en/Iranian_Codes/Islamic_Penal_Code_of_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Iran_212133839.pdf)  
df

### 2.2.1 Legal injustice against women in public and family law

Article 20 in the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran states that under Iranian law, citizens of the country are all equally supported by law and have all cultural, economic, and social rights aligned with the Islamic rules (Janghorban et al. 2014). The legal status of Iranian women, however, is reported as unequal to that of men in terms of the legal frameworks in operation in Iran and the implementation of the law, which restrains women's agency and access to resources (Maranlou, 2014).

In short, according to Tohidi (2010), the law has become a major basis of discrimination against women in Iran in areas such as inheritance; witness in the court; penal code, that is, the law of retribution or qisaas (e.g., *diyah*, that is, the blood money of a woman is half that of a man's); divorce; child custody; dowry (bride price, or *mahriyeh*); alimony; employment; and citizenship.

Therefore, arguably, advancing women's status entails addressing gender legal injustices and more specifically laws about women's right to attain decision-making positions, the family code, and more particularly divorce and children's custody and guardianship (Razavi, 2006; Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010).

The following themes have been identified as prominent in the literature on gendered legal injustice as well as the non/low political representation of women in Iran and I will now map these out in order to frame the research problem that this thesis addresses.

#### Divorce

According to article 1133 -in the civil code<sup>13</sup> a husband is entitled to divorce his wife without her consent or her presence and without going through any judicial procedure. The amended version of this article -in 2002- allows a man to divorce his wife by applying to the court and in alignment with conditions of the current law. According to the amended article, a woman can also request a divorce from the court (Nayyeri, 2013). Moreover, the marriage contract provides women with twelve grounds for divorcing their husbands as well as for dividing the property acquired during marriage in to half provided that husband divorces his wife without fault. Despite this marriage contract - being available for couples, its application is not obligatory (Javaherian, 2000). Additionally, women can use their *mehrieh*<sup>14</sup> to pressure

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<sup>13</sup> Please, see : <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/49997adb27.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> *Mahr*, in Islam, is a mandatory payment, in the form of money or possessions paid by the groom, to the bride at the time of marriage, that legally becomes her property (Spies, 2012, p.78-79).

their husbands to consent to divorce (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). In contrast, a wife's claim for *mehrieh* can dissuade her husband to initiate the divorce (Halper, 2005). Overall, it should be stressed that men can still divorce their wives easily; however, it is very difficult for wives to get a divorce (Nayyeri, 2013).

### Custody and guardianship of children

Since guardianship of children is mostly related to financial and legal issues, it primarily belongs to the father or/and the paternal grandfather. The Civil Code (1928) states that mothers have the right to the custody of her daughter till the age seven and the custody of her son until the age of two. After minor correction of the civil code in 2002, the age of priority of the mother for attaining the custody of her son was raised to seven. Nonetheless, even during the age of priority, custody will be transferred to the father if the mother remarries but there is no such constraint for a father. Additionally, in the case of the husband's death, a wife naturally obtains custody of her children, however, she loses the custody if she remarries. It is worth mentioning that even in the case of the father's death; the mother cannot become the natural guardian of her child (Nayyeri, 2013). According to (OECD, 2014 b), the family code of Iran is viewed as one of the discriminatory codes against women. Arguably, the family code constrains women's agency/freedom to make choices and exercise them, moreover, it is considered to render any legal gains women have obtained in other areas in vain (Hoodfar, 2000).

### Nemesis/*Qisaas*

Among the different laws of Islamic countries, the Iranian Penal Code is the only one which still specifies that a woman's *diyah* (blood money)<sup>15</sup> is not equal to the a man's blood money (Peters, 2006). Article 544 in the new Penal Code provides that "The blood money for murdering a woman is half that of a man". Additionally, according to Shari'a law, retaliation for homicide or bodily harm is only permitted if the victim's blood money is the same as or higher than the offender's. In case the blood money of the offender is higher than that of the victim, the victim or their next of kin would have to pay the difference to the perpetrator for retaliation (*Qisaas*/ Nemesis)<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, if a woman is murdered by a man, the murderer

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<sup>15</sup> In Islam Law, *Diyah* is the financial compensation paid to the victim or heirs of a victim in the cases of murder, bodily harm or property damage.

<sup>16</sup> "Nemesis" or retributive justice is a synonym to *Qisaas* that is an Islamic term meaning "retaliation in kind" or "revenge", "eye for an eye".

may be sentenced to death penalty if the woman's next of kin demands it, however, they must pay one half of the blood money of a man to the murderer since the blood money of a woman is half that of a man (Article 379 cited in Nayyeri, 2013).

Interestingly, the new Penal Code has provided a new solution to alleviate the inequality of blood money between men and women. The note to Article 545 states that 'In all cases of homicide where the victim is not a man, the difference between the *diyah* and the *diyah* of a man shall be paid from the Fund for Compensation of Bodily Harms. This is one of the few occasions that parliament has expanded the original Bill articulated by the Judiciary. However, in the case of bodily injury, which does not lead to death, the blood money for men and women is only equal until it reaches to one-third of the full blood money.

Additionally, according to the Penal Code -that is based Shi'a jurisprudence- a father and any male paternal ascendant (e.g. father's father), cannot be sentenced to death for killing his child/descendant. This law does not apply to the mother and the female ascendant (e.g. mother's mother) since fathers hold authority over women, children and property (Article 299 of the new Penal Code).

In light of the above, I argue that there is evidence to suggest the civil code and legal system in Iran are discriminatory against women and this acts as one of the most significant obstacles to obtaining gender equality and women's empowerment in Iran. The next section will investigate Iranian women's political underrepresentation and the related legal obstacles to achieve parity in this respect.

### 2.2.2 Political underrepresentation of women in Iran

In relation to the Iranian political sphere, it is widely understood that women are denied equal rights to work in specific political roles under the law. These areas include the Supreme Leader (Article 109), the Head of the Judiciary (Article 157), the six members of the Guardian Council (Article 91), the General Attorney, and the Head of the Supreme Court (Article 162).

Additionally, being a judge is seen to be an exclusive right for men, although, women can be appointed to certain judicial positions including counsellors and investigators. There is no written legal impediment to women being elected as members of parliament or ministers in the cabinet in Iran (Nayyeri 2013), yet, women have never succeeded to occupy more than five percent of the seats in the parliament since 1990 (UN data 2014). The same percentage

of women (five percent of the seats) have managed to hold ministerial positions (UNICEF, 2011).

The appointment of women in the cabinet has always been a controversial debate in Iran. In 1995, sixteen years after the Revolution, the reformist President Khatami appointed Ebtekar as the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) first female Vice-President and the Chairperson of the Organization of Environmental Protection. In 1997, Khatami also established the Centre for Women's Participation and appointed Shojaei as its Chairperson and the President's Advisor (Nayyeri, 2013). In spite of these relatively progressive moves, Khatami was still reluctant to appoint the first female Minister in the IRI (Bani-Yaqub, 2012 cited in Nayyeri, 20013). Later, his advisor, Zahra Shojaei revealed that some hardliner clerics threatened Khatami that if he appointed a female minister they would issue a *fatwa* (religious decree) declaring his government as anti-Islamic and create a public call for non-cooperation with the government (ibid).

Surprisingly, in 2009, the conservative President, Ahmadinejad ignored the opposition of the clergy and appointed the first female Minister in the IRI. However, this appointment was considered by many to be a political gesture. In fact, the number of women in lower levels of managerial and key positions, such as local government positions has dramatically decreased during Ahmadinejad's tenure. Furthermore, the IRI government proposed plans that appear to be designed to keep women at home (thus applying gender segregation), whilst the budget of the Centre for Women's Participation has been decreased by two-thirds, and renamed as the Centre for Women and Family Affairs. These moves are seen to be in contrast with the claimed commitment to advance the social participation of women (Nayyeri, 2013).

Similarly, the appointment of a woman as the president has always been a controversial issue. According to the Article 115 of the IRI constitution, 'the president must be selected from political and religious *Rejaal*. The term *Rejaal* has raised substantial legal debates. While some (majority) interpret *Rejaal* as 'men' (Nayyeri 2013), women's right activists among whom many are from devout Muslim backgrounds, contend that the term does not essentially refer exclusively to men rather it means 'a person' (Bahramitash, 2007). However, the Guardian Council has never approved a woman as a candidate for presidential election since the Revolution in 1979 (Nayyeri 2013).

In light of the above situation, it can be concluded that FCS in Iran is located in a context that involves gender discriminatory laws and limited political representation in a range of

various positions. Arguably, this situation is significant in shaping calls for social change. Thus, in this study, I will investigate how FCS activities are located in this context by specifically reflecting on their work in the areas of political and legal empowerment of women. These are significant areas since, as the above account shows, discrimination and oppression are not merely culturally practiced, but are also explicit at the institutional level - making it visible to those experiencing being women in this context.

The following section will further consider the tensions that surface in this context, by looking at the post-revolutionary history of Iranian women's social movement and how this has responded to the institutional discrimination I have outlined above. The aim here is to explain how social actors operating within FCS are navigating the promotion of women's empowerment within the given socio-political environments. It is also worth noting that the context of gender discrimination in Iran has changed historically over time in response to different political climates. Therefore, I consider how FCS has navigated this through strategic operations/choices.

### 2.3 The Iranian women social movement in post-revolutionary Iran

Over the past three decades, the Iranian women's movement has often been perceived by the regime as an exogenous idea, inspired and manipulated by western powers. It is associated with sexual license exported to penetrate the traditional family and thereby destroy the internal moral fabric of the entire society and accused of jeopardizing the security of the regime. Consequently, the literature reports that many leaders of the women's movement have been harassed and arrested (Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009; Moghadan and Gheytonchi, 2010; Tohidi, 2010, 2008).

However, despite these apparent impediments to challenge for gender justice and equality, the women's social movement in Iran has exercised a multi-pronged strategy and depicted a "new vision of women's social movement in the MENA", which arguably, has turned out to be one of the most dynamic women's movements in the MENA region (Hoodfar, 1998; Najmabadi, 1998; Mir-Hosseini, 2001; Hoodfar and Sadeqhi, 2009). Hoodfar and Sadeghi (2009) contend that the Iranian women's movement is conceived 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. This movement is not only multigenerational, but also cuts across class and ethnicity (Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009).

### 2.3.1 The Iranian women's movement in the Post-Revolution Era

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, despite the massive contribution of women to the revolution (Tohidi, 2010), it is widely perceived that a series of discriminatory laws annulled the rights that women had gained in the previous 75 years (Hoodfar, 2008). The Islamic government began to terminate some significant parts of women's personal and civic rights: 'mandating the veil, increasing gender segregation, repealing reforms within family law (the Family Protection Law of 1975), promoting polygamy, promoting male unilateral rights to divorce and child custody, promoting *sigheh* (temporary marriage), excluding women judges from their practice, lowering the age of consent for marriage from eighteen to nine for girls and thirteen for boys, and establishing the sexist and violence-prone "Law of Retribution" (*qisaas*)' (Tohidi, 2010, p. 386-7).

Najmabadi (1998) and Mir-Hosseini (2001) note that Iranian women of various ideological backgrounds challenged the state's vision as well as its legal manifestations, adopted a multi-pronged strategy, and set an agenda based on the recognition of rights. According to Hoodfar (1999), a trend emerged to incorporate Islamic feminist and secular groups in new movements, among which the most internationally known was the Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution (WSIR), that aimed to create a society that would end women's oppression. These secular and Islamic activists arranged sit-ins in the Ministry of Justice and rallies (Yeganeh, 1982).

Islamic feminists also established branches in towns and strove to promote their Islamic visions on gender and consciousness raising (ibid). In this sense, the post-war era (1989–1997) is perceived to have offered an opportunity for the emergence of civil society organizations (CSOs), specifically women's CSOs, as it was a period of reconstruction. Women's media activities are reported as having a constructive influence on reclaiming gender equality in this era (Hoodfar, 2008).

In contrast to the above account, Tohidi (2010) has an opposite argument about the effects of the war and states that during the war, as wars usually do, the general atmosphere turned into a masculinist militarism of which only the Islamist and nationalist hard-liners could and did benefit. From this perspective, it is felt that as the Islamist hard liners gained the upper hand in the state power organs, the Islamic moderates were marginalized. This resulted in the repression and banning of all secular groups, including women's organizations. Tohidi (2010) adds that despite socioeconomic hardship, a repressive atmosphere, and intensive



Islamization, many secular women activists engaged in small group studies, became involved in feminist literary production, translation, research, and humanitarian work concerning those affected by war. Many Islamic women, too, began questioning and criticizing the oppressive policies, the male-biased and “unjust” laws that seemed to contradict the state promise of an “Islamic just society” (ibid).

### 2.3.2 The Reformist Era (1997-2005)

According to Tohidi (2010), a growing disillusionment with Islamist extremism and totalitarian policies has helped the marginalized moderates and secular forces gain gradual strength. During the 1990s a widespread (beyond FCS and women in general) reform movement began to take shape among many former Islamists and some ruling clerics as well as intellectuals and students. This ideological shift from Islamism to moderation and democracy manifested itself most visibly by the surprise victory of a moderate cleric, Mohammad Khatami, in the presidential elections of 1996.

This era has previously been mentioned as a turning point in post-revolution history since the emergence of the open political space is viewed as the prerequisite for the establishment of CSOs (Jahanshahrad, 2012). Moreover, it is generally understood that the discourse of civil society became more widely presented in public and political arenas (ibid). In the same vein, it is also understood that the emergence of a discourse of reform, democratic political and social relations, and the political shift toward moderation and pluralism facilitated the formation of NGOs and political parties, the growth of women’s activism and the rising feminist movements and reformist publications all manifested the development of CSOs (Tohidi, 2010).

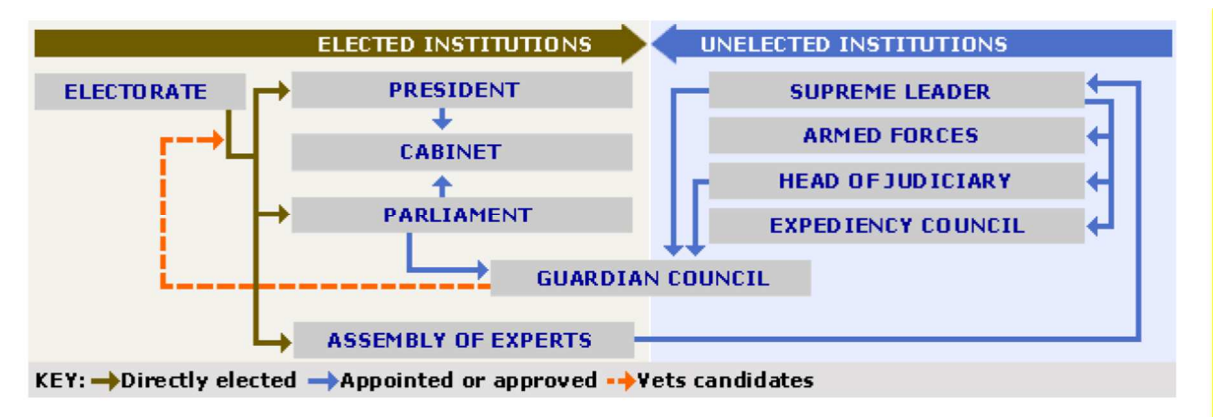
Women’s expanding roles in cultural and artistic production have contributed to the rise of a new wave of feminist movement. Filmmakers such as Manijeh Hekmat, Rakhshan Banietemad, Tahmineh Milani, and Poursan Derakhshandeh have produced internationally acclaimed and award-winning films, many with feminist messages (Tohidi, 2010). In addition, this context, described by Kar (2005) as the “Iranian Media Spring”, provided space for women’s publications/press to present their demands, creating a forum for debate and dialogue on rights (Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009). The reformists also re-established dialogue with global women’s movements, which provided women activists with insight and experience (Tohidi, 2002).

Nevertheless, a contradiction between the regime’s stated ideology and its imposition of

purportedly Islamic laws on women became apparent (Mir-Hosseini, 2001, p. 16). The contradiction springs from discrepancy between the elected reformist president and the conservative ‘Guardian Council’, which is directly appointed by the ‘Supreme Leader’.

This manifested itself as the performance of president and parliament in compliance with the perspectives of the ‘Supreme Leader’, ‘Guardian Council’, and Armed forces. The figure below illustrates how the structure of state in Iran is generally represented.

Figure 3: The Structure of State in Iran



(BBC One Minute World News, 2008, cited in Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010)<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, due to the contradictions, which arose between the reformist President and the unelected political bodies, and the apparent power relations between these two bodies - arguably, the State did not trust and mobilize independent social movements, including the women’s movement and student movement (Razavi, 2006) as fully as it might have. Hence, as the result of the lack of legal and political clout, the press became the only channel through which women could gain public support (Hoodfar, 2008).

In the standard account of Iran’s recent political history, the reformists were seen to eventually lose out to fundamentalists due to their failure to provide space for women’s participation in reform, in addition to their failure to take account of traditional class divisions in society (Jahanshahrad, 2012). This change in position of democratic forces,

<sup>17</sup> The Assembly of Experts for the Leadership is an 88-member body of Islamic jurists, elected by direct popular vote every eight years. According to the Constitution, the Assembly’s mandate is to appoint, monitor, and dismiss (if appropriate) the supreme leader.

The Expediency Council is an advisory body for the Leader with an ultimate adjudicating power in disputes over legislation between the parliament and the Guardian Council. The Supreme Leader appoints its members, who are prominent religious, social and political figures.

according to Moghadam and Gheytauchi (2010), led to the weakening of civil society organizations and neglect of women's demands.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.3.3 Fundamentalist Era (2005-2013)

At the beginning of this period, the most conservative candidate, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, was elected to the presidency, who is widely seen as adopting the most conservative and oppressive position on gender roles (Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009). Consequently, many feel that CSOs experienced their worst period in post-revolution history. In the same vein, some ultra-conservative representatives in the 7th parliament supported polygamy, ratified a quota to hinder women's access to higher education, took other repressive measures against women, and also opposed the adoption of CEDAW (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Jahanshahrad, 2012). This unsatisfactory legal framework is perceived to have motivated and politicized many women, both Islamic and secular, to join the movement; thus, on 25th of August 2006, a campaign for one million signatures for reforming the constitution and opposing discriminatory laws was launched (Ahmadi-Khorasani, 2007), resulting in women presenting this mass petition to parliament (Hoodfar, 2008).

#### 2.3.3.1 *New wave of the women's rights movement (post-2008 presidential election)*

As noted above, women's NGOs and press organized several demonstrations campaigns between 2004 and 2006. Among these campaigns were the Stop Stoning Forever; the Mothers for Peace; the Women's Access to Public Stadiums; and One Million Signatures Campaign in order to change gender discriminatory laws (Bakhshizadeh, 2018). The 'One Million Signatures' campaign gained international recognition as the most influential campaign against the gender discriminatory policies of IR (Tohidi, 2009).

The One Million Signatures' campaign intended to end gender discriminative laws, which was ultimately submitted to the Parliament. Additionally, the campaign tended to become a nonviolent, nonideological, and dynamic movement to advance social awareness and public sensitivity to women's issues through virtual space, new media, and face to face interactions

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<sup>18</sup> 'The 1997 election to the presidency of Mohammad Khatami greatly extended cultural and social liberalization; allowed new freedoms to the press, the artistic community, and civil society groups; and permitted the formation of women's nongovernmental organizations and a lively feminist press. During his two terms, various groups within civil society -notably students and intellectuals -called for political and cultural reforms. Many of the women who formed publishing houses and NGOs were supportive of the reform movement, though they were critical of reformist politicians for ignoring women's issues.' (Moghadam and Gheytauchi, 2010, 277-278).

(Ahmadi Khorasani, 2007). Although the campaign was peaceful in nature, many activists faced state repression, were arrested and convicted for ‘disruption of public opinion’, ‘propagating against the regime’, and ‘endangering of national security’.

In the same manner, under Ahmadinejad’s presidency, the regime intensified filtering websites, shutting down independent magazines, newspapers and journals, closing NGOs (including women’s organizations), and imprisoned some civil and women’s activists (Sadeghi 2012). For instance, Zanan, which is a magazine that functioned as a platform for secular women, Islamic feminists, reformist clerics, jurists, and intellectuals supporting women’s rights since 1992, was ordered to stop publishing in January 2008 (Bakhshizadeh, 2018).

Throughout Ahmadinejad’s presidential term, women generally progressed poorly on several fronts. The strength for transformation developed over the previous 16 years practically vanished. In the parliamentary elections of 2008, the only two reformist women members of parliament were voted out; Ahmadinejad’s government also encouraged women to have more children; and there was a harsh crack down on women by the police for violations of the dress code. Furthermore, the government terminated the budget for family planning, thus, put an end to one of the most successful programmes of its kind in the world (Esfandiari, 2015).

The government implemented several measures, which limited women’s access to education (Vakil, 2011). This includes a new quota system proposed and implemented by seventh parliament for the universities to exclude women from seventy-seven university majors in 2012; this added up to 91 majors in 2013. In the same vein, the government implemented a ‘region-based university application system’ that entailed women gaining permission from their fathers or husbands in order to study at a university in another city (Koolae, 2012). Ahmadinejad’s government also eliminated all research on women and terminated Women’s Studies programmes at universities (Tahmasebi, 2018).

The schemes were justified as protection of opportunities for men in education and the labour market, so that to reduce the pressure of high rate of unemployment during the economic crisis. Women’s activists widely criticized these policies as deliberate policy mechanisms to curtail women’s access to higher education.

Similarly, in 2007, the seventh parliament proposed the ‘Family Bill’ that included articles which restricted women’s status. These included Article 23 that enabled a man to remarry

without his first wife's permission and reduced the conditions of polygamy solely to the financial ability of the man. Moreover, Article 25 offered a tax to be imposed on (*mahr*) women's dowries. Article 46 "criminalizes the marriage of a foreigner to an Iranian woman without proper authorization".

However, several women activists lobbied religious authorities and representatives and protested, which led to the eighth parliament's ratification of the Family Bill without Articles 23 and 25 in 2013. Article 46, though, remained with little changes (Koolae 2012).

Another legislative plan, introduced in parliament was the 'Comprehensive Population and Family Excellence Plan'<sup>19</sup>, which proposed articles about the new restrictions on women's use of contraceptives. Women's activists widely opposed these measures and issued a statement that stated The Plan would only intend to widen labour gender divide in Iran, to place additional restrictions on women's employment, especially on unmarried women. (Amani and Anzia 2014). This legislative plan was under discussion and has not been ratified.

Due to all these discriminatory measures in the first term of Ahmadinejad's presidency, women activists used the presidential election of 2009 to establish a coalition through which they intended to make their demands heard.

#### *2.3.3.2 The tenth presidential elections in 2009 and women's activists' coalition*

Various groups of women's right activists formed a coalition to tackle the conservative gender policies. The coalition commenced a series of debates related to the tenth presidential election campaign with two specific demands a) to make Iran a state party to the (CEDAW) and b) to eliminate the gender discriminatory laws, specifically through the revision of articles 19, 20, 21, and 115 of the Constitution (Bakhshizadeh, 2018)<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> The 'Comprehensive Population and Family Excellence Plan,' is a proposed legislation in 50 articles aiming to encourage population growth in a departure from the current population control policies, which have been in effect for the past two decades. The plan's main goal is to 'increase the pregnancy rate to 2.5% of the quantitative population growth until the year 2025, simultaneous with qualitative improvement of the population and its stabilization by the year 2051' (650 Activists Say New Population and Family Plan Would Stifle Women, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran)(Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2014). Available at: <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/01/women-population/>

<sup>20</sup> Article 19: The people of Iran enjoy equal rights, regardless of the tribe or ethnic group to which they belong. Color, race, language, and other such considerations shall not be grounds for special privileges. Article 20: Members of the nation, whether man or woman, are equally protected by the law. They enjoy all the human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that are in compliance with the Islamic criteria. Article 21: The government must secure the rights of women in all respects, according to the Islamic criteria. The government must do the following: 1. create an apt environment for the growth of woman's personality

This coalition also intended to raise public awareness and to sensitize the public about the discriminatory nature of the laws in the IR Constitution, the principles of the CEDAW, and the significance of the state accepting this convention. The coalition, as a part of civil society, further aimed to utilize the presidential election as an instrument to confront every candidate with his agenda for gender equality, to make an impact on the future government, and to make demands and exercise pressure for realization of their demands (Bakhshizadeh, 2009).

All candidates except Ahmadinejad attended the debates and responded to the demands made by women's coalition, and offered gender friendly policies (Sadeghi, 2012). The re-election of Ahmadinejad, commonly known as an electoral coup, followed by serious crackdowns on social movements including the women's rights movement that resulted in many women's rights activists left Iran either voluntarily or forcefully after post-election protests in 2009 often known as the Green Movement.

Having said that, in the beginning of his second presidential term, Ahmadnejad proposed three women to serve as ministers in his cabinet. Nonetheless, parliament only approved one of these women, Vahid Dastjerdi, as the Minister of Health and Medical Education.

Some considered this appointment as Ahmadinejad's response to the debates on the discriminatory gender policies of IR government during the presidential election, despite the fact that he ignored the demands of the women's coalition. Furthermore, some viewed this choice as a deceptive political show rather than a "genuine concern for the hardships of Iranian women" (Sadeghi, 2012, Tohidi, 2009).

After re-election of Ahmadinejad, the government maintained violent and systematic political repression through harsh crackdowns of peaceful protests, show trials, mass arrests, torture, and sexual abuse of political prisoners (Tohidi, 2016; Bakhshizadeh, 2018). In addition, few organizations that survived Ahmadinejad's first presidential term such as the Centre for the Defence of Human Rights were shut down. Similarly, the 'One Million Signatures' campaign had to become much less active since many of its members fled Iran. Consequently, the operations of civil society considerably declined during Ahmadinejad's second term (Sadeghi, 2012; Tohidi, 2009).

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and restore her material and spiritual rights; 2. protect the mothers, especially during the child-bearing and child-rearing periods, and protect children without guardians; 3. create competent courts to protect the integrity and subsistence of the family; 11 4. Establish a special insurance for widows, elderly women, and women who are without guardians; 5. Bestow the custody of children to qualified mothers, whenever in the interests of the children, and in the absence of a legal guardian.

During the eleventh presidential elections in 2013, women's activists and groups established a coalition of various groups and individual women in order to do "Brain-Storm about Women's Demands". This women's coalition represented three "forces for change". These include certain members who were connected to the state and advocated women's rights; women activists who work collectively within the civil society organisations or semi organised networks; and individual women who tackle sexism and resist continually in support of change for gender equality. They strove to demonstrate the common concerns of these three spectrums of forces through using the election time as a tool to publicise and push forward women's demands without supporting any particular candidate. Among the presidential candidates, Rouhani was the only one who had sent some representatives to attend the first seminar organized by this coalition with focus on their demands (Tohidi, 2016).

Respect for civil and human rights, protection of women from domestic and state violence, provision of security for establishing women's NGOs were among their main demands. Moreover, they also expected the presidential candidates to promise the appointment of egalitarian and qualified ministers, including female ministers in their cabinet. In the last meeting before election, a statement issued by this coalition which was about the "Required Criteria for the State Ministries" that was supported and signed by over 600 individuals (Tohidi, 2016, p. 83).

#### 2.3.4 The Presidency of Rouhani (August 2013–2017)

The era of "moderation" in Rouhani's presidential tenure has been associated with considerable shift in foreign policy, progression in resolution of the nuclear crisis due to the diplomatic approach and the negotiations with the world powers. However, the ruling hard-liners who yet have the upper hand over the (commonly known) moderate president have obstructed the efforts toward some improvements in human rights and advancement of women's status (Tohidi, 2016).

In this sense, despite Rouhani's promises on gender-friendly agenda and policies, there was not any legislation change in the discriminatory laws against women neither there was a significant progress in opening the political climate for operation of civil society (Casagrande, 2014, Esfandiari, 2015). Moreover, women's activists were arrested and convicted based on the laws passed in Ahmadinejad's tenure. However, the exoneration of the twenty-one activists demonstrated that part of the security apparatus were not intending

to crack down on the women's movement and their peaceful activities would be tolerated to some extent (Tahmasebi, 2018).

Having said that, Tohidi (2016) reports that there was a reactivation of some NGOs and the feminist press, including *Zanan Emrooz*; however, they have remained under continual threats and in a hazardous situation. Moreover, since Rouhani realized that he could not gain approval from the conservative majority in parliament, he did not introduce any women minister. Yet, women activists have welcomed Rouhani's appointment of four women to the cabinet as spokesperson or deputies, and a few women mayors in underdeveloped provinces including Baluchistan (Esfandiari, 2015).

The most promising appointment –according to Tohidi (2016) - was that of Molaverdi, as Vice-President in “Women and Family Affairs”. Her background as an active member of women's CSOs and women's rights coalitions, her courageous resistance against harsh critique and attacks by the hardliners have made her a popular ally of feminist groups in Iran. In addition, her progressive views and her determination to operate within the political system of the regime, made her highly diplomatic.

However, Molaverdi's successes in office and her aim of supporting women's political participation fuelled the anxiety of conservative establishment (Mir-Hosseini, 2016).

In this sense, a coalition of women's activists with Molaverdi, introduced at a press meeting as the “Campaign to Change the Masculine Face of Parliament” through inviting more women to nominate themselves for election. Iranian reformists had their own agenda and demands, among other things; they set a 30 percent quota for women.

Following this revival of civil society, moderate candidates affiliated with Rouhani took all 30 of its parliamentary seats in Tehran and, among these new legislators, eight were women. The number of women candidates standing for the latest Parliament election, across from the country, raised fourfold that resulted in doubling the number of women deputies.

That election, and Molaverdi's contribution to it, rankled the hard-liners in Iran, as they viewed the agenda of women's activists as “gendering” politics in Iran. Therefore, they have responded by projecting their anger on *Zanan* -i.e. a magazine run by one of Molaverdi's allies- by ordering the magazine to stop publishing (ibid).

Moreover, the hard-liners angrily cited his administration's efforts to suspend the gender policies of Ahmadinejad-era including the ban on women's studying certain subjects in



universities, the reduction in their permissible working hours, and the stricter dress code. They states that Molaverdi and their centre with a conspiratorial network nurtured and led these efforts (Mir-Hosseini, 2016).

In a number of articles on conservative websites that are affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, Molaverdi's perilous intentions and actions were enumerated. They added that her aim to enable women to participate pervasively in the economy, her sustainable employment interventions, "are in line with feminists who want to push women out of the family, into society, straying from the right path." By "making a model of political women as successful," (Mir-Hosseini, 2016, p. 5).

Although in the face of these constant attacks on every egalitarian project, she continued to pursue her aims, yet, she believed that women's status cannot be changed simply by a woman minister who is being "being crucified"(Tohidi, 2016, p. 83) i.e. being blocked from doing anything effective. In the same vein, on November 2018, she was forced to tender her resignation following the implementation of a law that could ban the government from employing retirees (Shahrabi, 2018).

#### *2.3.4.1 Election 2013*

Iranian women's rights activists, both secular and religious, used the space offered by President Rouhani's 2013 election and emerged from the underground and engaged again in public life. The clerical establishment and the Revolutionary Guards responded by charging a prominent international "feminist conspiracy" to threaten the Islamic Republic, sponsored by wealthy Western donors, intellectually created by feminist academics in diaspora, and implemented by foot soldiers not only inside Iran but also inside the presidential cabinet (Mir-Hosseini, 2016).

There were several non-ideological, non-violent, and individually inspired movements in Rouhani's second term, among which, 'the girls of Enghelab Street' is worth mentioning.

#### *2.3.4.2 The girls of Enghelab Street*

In December 2017 and January 2018, several women across the country, while standing on electric utility boxes, took off their headscarves in order to protest compulsory hijab law in Iran. Courts convicted several of these women to imprisonment (ranged from a few months to twenty years (Mir-Hosseini, 2016).

These events in Iran can be described as a defiant activism in order to gain the right to dress just like their predecessors who had striven to gain the right to vote.

The women's movement under Rouhani's tenure, although relatively progressive so far, has continually faced numerous impediments that will be outlined in the following section:

#### *2.3.4.3 Barriers*

The women's movement under Rouhani's presidency has made little headway so far with progressive gender policies. Rouhani's government has remained silent about the harassment of women's activists, yet, despite the modesty of his government's agenda regarding promotion of gender equality, hard-liners appeared to squelch their agenda and actions (Tohidi, 2016). This can explain Molaverdi's warning, "the [Rouhani] government is not the only entity in charge of these sectors," referring to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Judiciary, who she viewed as responsible for much of the crackdowns and repressions over the years. (Tahmasebi, 2018, p.2).

Moreover, due to increased suppression and lack of access to the national mainstream media, the strong potential impact of the women's movement has not been realized (Tohidi, 2016). In addition, similar to typical women's movements, the urban middle class in major cities, predominantly, constitutes the women's movement in Iran. Therefore, it takes a long time for the movement to reach diverse social classes, ethnic and religious minorities, and populations in small towns and rural areas (ibid).

In addition, hardliners have accused women's rights activists of adopting Western values, which disparage the Islamic values of IR. Consequently, these women's right advocates have tried to ensure their demands are rooted locally, while also addressing universal rights principles (Tahmasebi, 2018).

However, hardliners aren't the only obstacles to social movements. Since the threat of war between the US and Iran has been almost realized and the re-imposition of economic sanctions led to Iranian government take a harsher security measures toward civil society. This made the Iranian women's rights activists develop a fear of losing their hard-earned gains over the last couple of decades.

On the other hand, taking a harsher stance against Iran, the US State Department has issued speeches and tweets, which are increasingly addressing on Iranian women's rights, while simultaneously advocating punitive sanctions. Moreover, advocates of regime change have

also depicted women's legitimate demands for gender equality as a call for toppling the IR regime. Therefore, women's rights activists are concerned that their endeavours to rebuild their movement, which faced setbacks during the Ahmadinejad presidency, may be hindered.

Sanctions can also contribute to weaken and further isolate an already sheltered movement, since sanctions make it difficult for women's rights advocates to participate in international events to connect with their international counterparts.

One reason is isolation and lack of access of activists inside the country, while the other is that international institutes/groups tend *not* to sponsor the participation of activists from inside Iran in their events given that they believe that this kind of support would contrast with US sanctions policies.

Moreover, sanctions and poor economic conditions appeared to affect the most vulnerable groups hardest. Marginalized women and children, the poor and disadvantaged people are the very groups, which rights activists strive to support. Thus, sanctions entail the women's movement to shift their priorities in favour of serving those who are in the most pressing of needs (Tahmasebi, 2018, p. 3-4).

These social actors are not financially supported from the Iranian government, the private sector or foundations, rather, they largely rely on self-funding -that can be a big burden under the sanctions. Thus, even if they manage to shift their priorities, they can only address basic needs instead of focusing on more progressive issues related to the promotion of rights (Tahmasebi, 2018).

#### [Section summary and its implications](#)

The implications of the above social history for my research is that it illustrates how the socio-political structures have framed and shifted the women's movement in Iran, which can help highlight the strategic options social actors in FCS may adopt. In this sense, this research is interested in the interplay of the IR state and FCS and how this frames the process of their struggle to promote and actualise women's empowerment. However, in order to fully investigate such activists' strategic choices and how they enact empowerment and mobilize change, it is important to outline what I mean by concepts such as feminist civil society, empowerment and what this looks like in key areas of FCS activity such as cinema and the press. Furthermore, since these ideas take localized forms in their implementation, I argue it is necessary to outline how the term feminism is understood by those working in FCS in

Iran.

## 2.4 Secular feminism and Islamic feminism

Islamic feminism is a highly disputable concept; yet many scholars advocate and implement it (Badran, 2002; Ahmadi, 2006; Afshar, 1998, 2007), other feminist scholars (mostly Western feminists), oppose its ethos as they contend that there is contradiction between Islam and feminism (Moghissi, 1998, Mojab, 2001). The following section is allocated to investigation of the fundamental ethos of Islamic feminism, and the controversies surrounding it. This is provided in order to frame the practices of Islamic feminism and debates around it in relation to Iran specifically, which will be discussed further on.

Misciagno (1997) identifies “feminism” as the ensemble of activities undertaken to challenge the notion of patriarchy either in direct or indirect manner. Paidar (1996) views “feminism” as a broad concept, which encompasses women’s movements, within any ideological and political structure, which concentrate on gender interests. In this regard, there are numerous feminisms with specific and contextualized approaches and strategies; however, they are universally committed to enhance women’s status (Halper, 2005).

Islamic feminism, as Badran (2002) identifies, are feminist discourses and methods based on an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminists aim to reinterpret the sacred texts with respect to gender issues; in addition, they disturb the gender conservatism and prevailing West-phobia beliefs among fundamentalists. In so doing, they integrate their discourses with Western feminists’ so as to entwine a new connection between Muslim and Western feminism (Ahmadi, 2006).

Note-worthily, Islamic feminism opposes the dichotomous views that creates discrepancy between tradition and modernity as well as East and West. They, then, incorporate cultural tradition (e.g. the role of women as mothers in family) in to modern values (e.g. the presence of women in social and political realms (Moghissi, 1999). Islamic feminists, according to Badran (2002), engage in the struggle to interrogate equality in Islam and strive to retrieve it throughout everyday life, exploiting means and strategies including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and history.

In contrast, some Western or Western-oriented feminists stand opposed to the ethos of Islamic feminism on the grounds that they believe that Islam and feminism are incongruous. Moghissi, for instance, argues that "Islam in political rule is incompatible with the cultural

pluralism that is the prerequisite of the right to individual choice"(1998: 43). Povey (2001) adds that secular feminists also believe that so long as religion and politics are integrated, real equality in law for women and men cannot be achieved. In the same vein, Moghissi (1999) envisages Muslim women as victims in patriarchal social structure, which is based on Islam. These secular feminists argue that the activities and goals of Islamic feminists are circumscribed and compromised (Moghadam, 2002).

Along the same line, Moghissi maintains that: "feminism, today, has grown and encompasses many brands, religious and secular, conservative and radical, heterosexual and homosexual, individualist and community-oriented, white and non-white, and feminists hailing from South and North, yet, being identified as Islamic Feminists by the others is rather superfluous" (Moghissi, 1999, p.38). These secular feminists, therefore, support completely secular government and legal system (Hoodfar, 2008).

By contrast, Kandiyoti contends that feminism in Muslim states and more specifically in Middle Eastern states -should be contextualized. She states that: "Feminisms in the Middle East have been both intensely local, grappling with their own histories and specificities, and international, in that they have been in dialogue, both collaborative and adversarial, with broader currents of feminist thought and activism" (Kandiyoti, 1996, p.7). This suggests that if we wish to understand how feminism and empowerment are conceived by activists within FCS in Iran, we need to recognize both local and international discourses which frame and mediate the movement.

My reading of the literature here, indicates that the main trends of Islamic and Secular feminism are incorporated and practiced within Iranian women's movement in a myriad of ways, and the socio-political context (outlined above) has played a key role in mediating what strategies activists have adopted (Hoodfar, 2000). For instance, the regime's gender ideology which, arguably, is centered on women's subordination and domesticity (Afshar 1985, Moghadam, 1992, Sedghi, 2007) appears to be grounded in a patriarchal culture and reinforced and purportedly justified by a patriarchal interpretation of Islamic sources (Barlow and Akbarzadeh 2008).

In this context, although the advancement of the status of Iranian women entails a coherent agenda which aligns both groups of women's interests and beliefs, secular feminism cannot be openly mobilized at the political level (Mir-Hosseini, 2000, cited in Halper, 2005). Secular-oriented women's activists consider Islam as inherently patriarchal and misogynistic

and also incapable of ever redeeming gender equality. Thus, they establish a thoroughly secular agenda and legal system which is in accordance with the international frameworks including (CEDAW) - the Charter of Rights and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Hoodfar, 2008). Therefore, in the Iranian context, they have been treated more harshly (by the Islamic republic regime) than their religious counterparts (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). Furthermore, they have not had access to political power while religious activist women do (Povey, 2001).

In this set up, after the revolution and in response to the regime's gender-suppressive policies, Islamic feminism has emerged in Iran. One reason for this is that some feminist activists became aware of the religious and traditional backgrounds of lower- and middle-class women who also found themselves "subordinate" and were antagonistic toward gender inequality (Kian, 1997, 2010).

According to Tohidi (2003), in reaction to the patriarchal and traditional hegemony of the theocratic state, Islamic feminists have sort to present sacred Islamic scriptures from a feminist perspective and, consequently, have highlighted the egalitarian standpoint of the Quran. They argue that most of the gender-discriminative -Islamic/ Shari'a laws have spring from the cultural contexts in early Islamic society.

They also contend that the sacred scriptures have been interpreted based on patriarchal contexts of the time and Islam promotes justice, equality, and freedom (Jahanshahrad, 2012). The majority of articles in the Iranian civil code are based on Shari'a law, thus, it is crucial to reinterpret them, and many women activists' see it as their responsibility to engage in the task of historicizing and contextualizing Islam so as to re-examine the Quranic verses (Kian, 2010). In this enterprise, they argue for the need to recognize the dynamism of Islam in the civil code as well as the legitimacy for authority of women in legal, political, and religious institutions (Kian, 2010).

These activists also interrogate the foundation of the civil code in Islamic law since they contend that the civil code is based on secondary and traditional principals, and are politically driven rather than divine orders (ibid). Furthermore, this wave of Iranian Islamic feminism has sort to avoid the advocacy and imitation of more Westernised forms of feminism; instead, they focus on reforming the discourse of "Islamic doctrine from within" by exploiting the language of clerical political leaders (Hoodfar, 1999). In so doing, by using the Islamic discourse, the Islamic feminists employ a strategic attempt to acquire legitimacy

(Moghadam, 2002). Through using this strategy, they destabilize the claim that feminism and issues of legal equity are Western paradigms, which aim at undermining the authenticity of Iranian society. In addition, they purport to break the male monopoly on interpreting Islamic texts (Hoodfar, 2000).

Furthermore, many Iranian Islamic feminists seek to avoid social stratification based on social background. Instead, such feminism embraces all classes of society (Kian, 1997) in contrast to Iranian secular feminists who are highly educated and from the middle to upper classes.

According to Ahmadi (2006), the synthesis of various factors such as Islamic hegemony as the source of state power, the lack of exigency in preserving the “original” Islam, the “authentic” indigenous Iranian culture, and the globalization of women’s movements, have all smoothed the path for the emergence of Islamic feminism In Iran.

Clearly, in a context such as Iran, Islamic feminism is likely to face objection and critics from multiple perspectives. Indeed, two ideologically and politically opposite groups have expressed the strongest objection to any mixture of Islam and feminism. These are: a) the right-wing conservative traditionalists and radical Islamists who adamantly oppose “Islamic feminism” because of their strong antifeminist views and feelings and b) some secularist feminists (especially among the Iranian diaspora) who hold strong anti-Islamic views and feelings. Both camps appear to essentialise Islam and feminism and see the two as mutually exclusive, and hence the term Islamic feminism as an oxymoron (Tohidi, 2010).

In this section, we have observed a dichotomy that, arguably, has developed between feminist approaches within the Iranian women’s social movement in post-revolutionary era.

First, Islamic feminists, who avoid confrontation with the regime (Sullivan, 1998) but react to the pervasion of patriarchy in Islamic laws and social structures through reinterpretation of the Shari’a so as to construct more equitable Islamic laws whereby all citizens enjoy equal rights (Mir-Hosseini, 2000). The second, secular feminists, who view religion as the major factor in the suppression and subordination of women and, thus, oppose and challenge the religious traditions (Tohidi, 2010, 2003a). They, alternatively, concentrate on criticizing the discriminatory gender hegemony of the regime, which legitimizes itself through divine prescription.

In accordance with Hoodfar, I argue that, although Islamic feminists’ activities seem to be

diametrically in contradiction to those of secular feminists, these two campaigns are practically closely allied since they share common demands as they both strive to advance Iranian women's social and legal status (Hoodfar, 1999) and challenge the dominant conservative hegemony of the theocratic regime (Kian, 2010) which essentializes the discrimination against woman. Therefore, their emergence and co-existence in Iran provides for an interesting context where tensions and contradictions may be evident in FCS and the role it plays in women's empowerment.

Next, I move on to discuss Iranian cinema and feminist press - which are two key areas of FCS given the suppressive policies of the regime toward women's organizations and the large-scale audiences that both these media have. Both the press and cinema are the focus of the papers, which constitute this thesis. My intention here is to provide a rationale for this focus and also to outline the context in which my participants are operating.

## 2.5 Women and cinema in Iran

Cinema is one of the significant areas where Iranian women express their voice and influence wherein women's issues have been addressed (TaHERi, 2011). This is due to the popularity of Iranian women filmmakers in the country (TaHERi, 2011) and their movies which raise women's issues that are well-received by Iranian women (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010). However, women's engagement in Iranian cinema has been fraught with problems right from the beginning. The following sections refer to particular historical eras in order to explain how women are represented in cinema in each one, and how feminist cinema has shifted or developed across time.

### 2.5.1 Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)

In the Pahlavi-era commercial movies were recognized as producing three main typologies of womanhood including blood women, wives, and women entertainers, which were patriarchal and hierarchical (Naficy, 2012). Mothers in this era were often presented as loyal, tolerant, obedient, forgiving, self-sacrificing and almost always wore a veil, and they only worked at home. In addition, the wife's persona in such films constituted an insignificant and merely complementary part; depicted as obedient, modest, thankful, and often veiled. This naive and voiceless identity also belonged to the sister persona (Derayeh 2010). Female entertainers were considered to be sexually available, morally suspect, and corrupting, nearly on a par with prostitutes (Naficy 2012). In general, it is recognized by those writing about Iranian cinema, that a binary operated in Iranian cinema at this time considering the



representation of women: passive and oppressed representations or sexualized. These cinematic approaches were distant from the reality of Iranian women regarding their endeavours to gain their rights (Moradiyan Rizi, 2015), and the sharp increase in the rank of women who were entering the public sphere in civil service jobs, professional positions, and higher education (Naficy 2012).

### 2.5.2 Post-Revolution Era (1979-2013)

The widely shared view of the Revolution of 1979 is that it brought about a cultural transformation designed to replace the old value system with an Islamic one and create an Islamic society (Derayeh, 2010). In June 1982, the cabinet approved a set of landmark regulations governing the exhibition of films and videos, which were considered as instrumental in facilitating the shift from Pahlavi to Islamic cinema. Some of these regulations are admirable since they ban the exhibition of all films and videos, which for example negate the equality of all people regardless of colour, race, language, ethnicity and belief, or show details of scenes of violence and torture in such a way as to disturb or mislead the viewer (Naficy, 2002). Moreover, a new grammar for film-making was developed, which encouraged a modesty of looking and acting and instituted an averted look instead of the direct gaze, particularly one imbued with desire (Naficy, 1996).

Additionally, in the post-Revolutionary cinema, veiled female bodies were generated to stand against forces that film studies refers to as the meta-desire of cinema itself, articulated in terms of American melodrama's dominant codes of voyeurism and fetishism (Mottahedeh, 2009). According to Moruzzi (2001), government regulations on film-making, and restrictions on the import of mainstream commercial foreign films led to an extremely innovative national film industry. Post-Revolutionary films also have been prominent at international film festivals garnering high praise and recognition (Naficy, 2002; Taheri, 2011). For example, in 2004, Iranian films had 1769 appearances internationally and won 103 prizes (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010).

Although women continue to be regulated and officially controlled within Iranian society and cinema, their presence and influence both behind and in front of the cameras has steadily grown (Naficy, 2002; Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010). Iranian women directors are active in both of the types of filmmaking, which have evolved in Iran, the popular cinema that operates within and debates post-revolutionary values and the art cinema, which addresses its criticisms of those values (Butler, 2002).

However, it is also recognized that government regulation and the nature of censorship have created significant limitations on the subjects of the films and representation of women. Between 1979 and 1997, there was strict surveillance on the content of movies. For instance, in 1993, the Ministry of Guidance and Culture only approved 35 scripts out of 398 (Ravadrad, 2012).

In addition, the movies with social or political subjects were almost forbidden during this era (ibid). Moreover, researchers argue that women still suffered from clichéd and stereotyped representations. They were mostly housewives doing traditional roles, they were depicted as emotional beings who could not think rationally, and they were usually assumed as marginalized or instrumental characters (Ravadrad and Sedighi Khadivaki, 2006).

Nonetheless, the reformists' rise to office (1997-2005) resulted in significant relaxation of earlier restrictions on filmmaking (Ravadrad, 2012), so many films about women's issues appeared in Iranian cinema (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010). Also, Under President Khatami (1997-2005) and extending into Ahmadinejad's era (2005-2013), the sartorial rules of representation were relaxed and pushed back by women and filmmakers -and guidelines governing the gaze were loosened. In this era, it is argued that women were physically freed from the confines of their sequestered and stationary filmic roles (Naficy, 2012).

However, this was not a straightforward pattern of progress, since, under the presidency of Ahmadinejad, the newly appointed culture minister announced that the distribution and exhibition of films, which promoted feminism, were prohibited. Additionally, the same restrictions imposed on films with social and critical themes (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010).

## 2.6 Feminist press in Iran

One of the significant features of modern Iran, arguably, is that Iranian women, arising from their own ongoing political awareness and championship for full citizenship and gender equality, are multi-dimensionally present in public life (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004). As such, women's expanding contribution to artistic and cultural production has led to the rise of a contemporary wave of feminist movement (Tohidi, 2010).

In the same vein, as Jahanshahrad (2012) notes, the Iranian feminist press tabled women's issues at the centre of political debates in Iran. Khiabany and Sreberny (2004) also state that a resilient feminist press has been the vehicle to continue forcing gender issues to the

forefront of the IR regime's concerns, reverse project of removing women from public life, and present the new ways of thinking about feminism.

Feminist press is a prominent area of FCS in Iran as debates and dialogues over gender equality and women's status appear to reflect broader antagonisms and opposition against the theocratic state and its authoritative rule. In the same vein, the hardships experienced by the feminist press in Iran are quite similar to those experienced by all publications when the regime exercises its political power (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

Therefore, the contemporary history of the press in Iran is viewed by many as one of continuous struggle to construct an open public space against a theocracy. In 2000, the regime closed down over 20 publishing companies, with journalists and editors imprisoned and even executed (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2001).

Women publishers face extreme self-censorship and disadvantages. This is when 50 per cent of female journalists hold university degree, and 35 per cent for working journalists in Iran. Moreover, out of 23 women's publications that have gained publishing permit since 1979, only 9 have survived and most are related to different groups of the ruling elites (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

There are few female editors or sectional editors and most female reporters are appointed to cover issues known as 'private' and scarcely have a chance to interview high profile state officials. Most female journalists carry out their work at the base of the pyramid of the press in Iran (ibid).

Despite these restrictions, over two dozen feminist magazines and journals (including *Zanan* (women), *zan* (woman), *Payam-e Hajar*(massage of Hajar), *Jens-e Dovvom* (the second sex), *Farzaneh* (wise woman), *Zan-e Rouz* (Today's woman), *Hoquq-e Zan* (woman's right), *Neda* (Call), *Rayhaneh*, *Mahtab*, and *Kiatb-e Zan* (woman's book)) and a growing number of web sites (such as *Zanan-e Iran* (women of Iran) and *Bad-Jens*(bad-gender) communicated ideologies, advertised events, and developed solidarity networks (Bayat, 2007).

In an interview with *Bad-jens*, Lahiji, who is the first female publisher in Iran, said that there are over 400 women's publications in Iran, more than half of them are presently active and self-supporting. The increasing number of female journalists also demonstrates significant improvement. In comparison with 50 women journalists in 1972, there were 400 female

journalists working within various publications in 1997, their proportion rising from 2.5 per cent in 1972 to 14 per cent in 1997 (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

In addition to the growing number of feminist press, publication, and journalists, some feminist publications, like *Zanan*, used the relative freedom in the Reformist era (as noted above)<sup>21</sup> to raise their voices for promoting gender equality. They not only called for women to be aware of their rights and to be politically active, but also they raised objections to the lack of participation of women in the decision-making institutions and their absence in the pyramid of political power (Jahanshahrad, 2012).

Moreover, feminist publications have strived to promote women's goals in order to foster improved social status of Iranian women and their position within the family frame. A number of women active in the feminist press as well as women's right activism distanced themselves from the establishment and tried to collaborate with other feminist groups and activists within the framework of the feminist press. The feminist journal *Zanan*, for instance, encouraged dialogue between differing sections within the women's movement (Jahanshahrad, 2012).

In so doing, through arguing against hegemonic authorities, engaging the forbidden female voices in diaspora and from the decadent monarchy period, and admitting into their pages from the writings of western feminists such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Susan Faludi (Bayat, 2007).

*Zanan*, for instance, eliminated the opposition between secular and Islamic feminism, modernity and Islam, and feminism and cultural authenticity (Najmabadi 1998 cited in Sullivan, 1998). Additionally, *Zanan*, in a series of interviews with leading intellectuals, invited the male reformers to address negligence of gender issues and the significance of women's rights.

This confirms Khiabany and Sreberny (2004) who notes that despite the hardships in establishing an independent publication for women; even the leading publications have not reflected the diversity in the women's press.

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<sup>21</sup> After the presidential elections of 1997, the hitherto dormant atmosphere existing in the political and media environment became heated. People enthusiastically welcomed the newly formed free press in which a number of key issues on human rights were discussed. Human rights lawyer and activist Kar refer to this situation as 'the Iranian media's spring' (Kar, 2005).

Among the two dozen feminist magazines/journals, Sullivan (1998) introduced four journals, including *Zanan* (Women), *Payam-e Hajar* (Message of Hajar), *Zan-e Rouz* (Today's woman), and *Farzaneh* (Wise woman) that distanced themselves from Western feminism as Eurocentric and inapplicable category in the context of Iran. Three of the four magazines call for a re-examination of male interpretation of the *Sharia* and the Islamic canon in their articles and editorials. However, their central focus varies.

While *Zanan* magazine has focused on the radical task of “decentering the clergy from the domain of interpretation,” questioning legality, justice, and canonical readings of the Qur'an, and advocating “reading the Qur'an as a woman”, *Payam-e Hajar* magazine, concentrates on “awakening the conscience of the Islamic Republic” to the plight of working women, rural women, state workers, and “other suffering sisters.”(Sullivan, 1998, p.236).

The following section outlines the feminist magazines and journals that have been studied most predominantly in the literature related to Iranian feminist press.

#### 2.6.1 *Zanan* (Women)

*Zanan*, known as the most popular women's publication in Iran, was created in 1992 as an independent monthly and its first editorial stated that the clear mission of the magazine is to debate gender-related issues in four areas of religion, law, culture, and education (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

In early 1990s, under President Rafsanjani, Iran saw a period of moderate social liberalization. This led to women's rights activists began to quietly be mobilized. One manifestation of this emerging women's movement was Islamic feminism (Moghadam and Gheytonchi, 2010). *Zanan* [Women] magazine, for example, reflected this tendency (Mir-Hosseini, 1996; Najmabadi, 1998; Moghadam, 2002, Tohidi, 2010).

In this sense, *Zanan* set off to deconstruct the patriarchal interpretations of the Islamic scriptures, offering gender-sensitive interpretations (Bayat, 2007), which would equally allow women to take on social and political positions such as judges, mujtahids (religious scholars), and presidents (Jahanshahrad, 2012).

Thus, *Zanan* established a feminist discourse within the context of Shari'a, in which, *Zanan* did not justify the discriminative provisions against women in the Shari'a. Rather, it analysed and confronted legal deficiencies related to women (Jahanshahrad, 2012).

To refuse the “innate superiority of men” which orthodox interpretations deduced from Quranic verses (including verse 34 in *Surah Nisa* in which men are favoured over women), writers in *Zanan* changed the basis of hierarchy from gender to piety through invoking the gender-free verse. This verse states that “The noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you” (verse 13 in *Surah 49*, cited in Bayat, 2007, p.166).

Consequently, the right of child-custody was no longer automatically -as the Sharia endorses- the right of men, rather, well-being of children, which Islam stresses/emphasises would determine this right (Bayat, 2007).

*Zanan*’s activities have not been limited to the gender-sensitive re-interpretation of Islamic texts. This magazine, has critically discussed social, political, economic, and legal issues from the perspectives of Iranian women’s interests and in accordance with their urgent and tangible needs. In so doing, the writers in *Zanan* addressed women’s rights in a wide range of areas such as Islamic jurisprudence, Western feminism, and Iranian religious and secular thoughts in general (Jahanshahrad, 2012), and issues of gender equality in Islam, family law, civil law, political participation, individual freedom, and employment in particular (Mir-Hosseini, 1996; Afshar, 1998).

In this sense, along with reflecting Islamic feminists’ viewpoints, a growing number of secular feminists including Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi, who are two prominent feminist lawyers, as well as Shahla Lahiji, who is a prominent publisher and writer, used *Zanan* as a relatively inclusive and open forum for creating dialogues around gender issues (Paidar, 1995).

These writers managed to illustrate legal issues to a wider readership, and confront the existing patriarchal laws on education, employment, marriage, divorce, and custody of children. Thus, they paved the way for more informed confrontations to the ruling conservatives as well as forcing some legislative reforms (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

*Zanan* was celebrated for the way in which it opened up a space and paved the way for secular writers’ contributions, additionally, this magazine published many articles written by men in the early stages. In addition, *Zanan* became a magnet for the New Religious Thinking (*now-andishi-ye dini*) which offers a refreshing, pragmatic willingness and vigour to integrate with non-religious perspectives. In this, the new religious thinkers no longer refute an idea simply due to it is Western, nor do they view Islam as a blueprint with a fixed, in-built programme for social interventions (Mir-Hosseini, 2002 cited in Taheri, 2011).

Mir-Hosseini (2002) also suggests that *Zanan* has incrementally distanced itself from its focus on progressive religious debates as the primary means of promoting women's legal and cultural issues. Alternatively, *Zanan* published articles with a focus on women's rights in feminist and Islamic discourses and round-table discussions and features with reformists for two main reasons as follows (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

First, due to the loss of two of its key contributors, Kar and Sa'idzadeh (due to arrests and convictions), and second, to remain commercially viable, *Zanan* must attract middle-class women readers, most of whom rebuffed religious oriented arguments. The conservatives' response to publications such as *Zanan* is worth mentioning. The mainstream conservative press not only continued attacks on the reformist press, they also set up three women's publications to tackle the modernist interpretations of Islam.

Firstly, *Payam-e Zan*-(Women's Message) -i.e. a monthly- is the tendency of the Qum religious seminary to more systematically integrate with the contemporary gender-conscious movements. Unlike the other two conservative titles, it is established and edited by men; however, sporadically the 'Sisters Section' within the Office of Islamic Propaganda gained credits with assisting the editorial board (Ardalan, 2000 cited in Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

Secondly, *Neda* that is not specifically a women's journal, however, since 1997, it published a growing number of articles related to women's issues. Although it is in favour of discussing gender issues, it is broadly critical of the concept of gender equality. *Neda*'s association with Khomeini (the founder of Islamic Republic) may explain the reason *Neda* tended to remain uncontroversial and follow the regulations of the Islamic Republic.

The third is *Faslnameh* which is anti-feminist and criticizes the 'translation movement' (translation of western published resources into Persian) for presenting and disseminating feminism. It even denounces 'Islamic feminism' as a foreigner's ploy to find a way to mobilize feminist ideologies and goals in Iran. This publication states that their major missions are identifying the enemies of Islam, confronting their views and neutralizing their influence (Ardalan, 2001 cited in Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

As noted above, conservatives attacked *Zanan* through various channels, however, even reformists, who gained women's support through *Zanan*'s election campaigns, neglected *Zanan* and its demands for gender equality and legal reforms (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

This negligence is evident through a new section, that *Zanan* has called, 'New Religious Thinking and the Questions of Women', drew leading male reformists into a conversation with their readers. This section, as Mir-Hosseini (2002) reported, revealed that none of these male reformists had considered gender equality seriously; this also betrayed their ambivalence over the issues related to gender equality, and more specifically in relation to the family domain.

They talked in general terms, repeated old clichés, or showed their reluctance to include women's rights in the priorities of their reform movement. Some argued that once their democratic goals were realised, other issues including 'women's rights' would be sorted out; others stated that women themselves should be the champions for their own rights and produce theories rather than merely consuming theories (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

Additionally, along with male reformists, secular women also tended to ignore *Zanan*. These secular social actors, whose organisations and voices were suppressed immediately after the Revolution, avoided engagement with the gender debates of the IR as a political act (ibid).

Since 2005, in Ahmadinejad's presidential tenure, there was a huge clampdown on press. This trend affected feminist publications, for example, *Zanan* was closed down in 2008, which was a great loss for the Iranian feminist press since *Zanan* had been a key voice for gender equality since early 1990s.

Due to this threat of closure, which continually hung over *Zanan*, it cannot afford to be more straightforward in its critique of gender inequality in Shari'a or of the IR official discourse.

Against all these odds, *Zanan* is determined to continue addressing women's issues and has been the only feminist magazine, which is commercially viable, survived three court trials, and is respected by most Iranian feminists in diaspora (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). It is worth mentioning that *Zanan* relaunched in 2014 under new name *Zanane-e-Emrooz* (Today's Woman).

### 2.6.2 *Zan* (Woman)

Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of the previous President, and then a member of the parliament (Fifth Majlis) launched *Zan* (Woman), which is the first daily paper devoted to women's issues, in August 1998 (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).



*Zan*, in its short life, managed to articulate considerable controversy through raising some significant issues during conflicts between various factions of the ruling elite. Hashemi's high profile assisted the paper to tackle the conservatives on various fronts. For instance, it campaigned for women to nominate themselves as candidates for the *Majlis Khebreghan* (Assembly of Experts) which resulted in ten women nominating themselves as candidates, though, all of them were rejected. Hashemi also tried to create women's committees in a number of cities in order to organize women activists and to put sustained pressures on local governments (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

The writers of *Zan* knew well that suppression of societal needs is not possible and they did not disregard international pressure, thus, they concentrated on issues of central concern to the international communities such as human rights abuses, stoning, and elections (ibid).

*Zan* has experienced the wrath of the conservative factions, which led to its closure for two weeks in January 1999, convicted for 'assaulting' security forces.

Following this on April 1999, *Zan* was ordered to stop publication on April 1999 - as it was convicted for 'insulting Islam' - since it published an interview with Farah Diba, the last queen in Pahlavi regime, and as it published a satirical cartoon criticizing the retribution law (known as *Qisaas in Shari'a*). Following the policy of *Qisaas* law, the blood money of a murdered woman is only half as much as blood money of a man. The cartoon displays a gunman pointing at a couple and the man suggesting 'Kill her, she is cheaper!' (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

### 2.6.3 *Payam-e-Hajar* (Hajar's Message)

In 1979, Azam Taleghani founded *Payam-e Hajar* (Hajar's Message), which was among women's publications that strived to defend gender equality.

*Payam-e Hajar* is the voice of the first generation of Islamic Republic's women activists who became disillusioned by IR policies in its early stage. Some of these activists with more radical perspectives were later ordered to close their public offices. These women avoided any association with the concept of 'feminism', and their women's activism is a combination of subversion and conformity (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). While they questioned and confronted the conservative forces within the clerical system, they were expecting to materialise their ideal vision of Islam.

Taleqani was bold in criticizing the Islamic Republic's gender policies in her journal from the outset; yet, ideological and factional politics always overshadowed the debate on women's rights and gender (Ardalan, 1999 cited in Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

In 1993, *Payam-e Hajar* was barred from publication, all its published copies were confiscated, and it remained closed for two years. This was followed by ignoring a warning to stop publishing Ayatollah Montazeri's lectures and after that *Payam-e Hajar* reappeared as a quarterly (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

In April 2000, following a speech by the Supreme Leader abhorring that 'enemies of the revolution' permeated some newspapers, fourteen reformist newspapers and magazines - including *Payam-e Hajar*- were barred by the judiciary (ibid).

#### 2.6.4 *Jens-e Dovom* (Second Sex)

The most popular and influential among minor secular titles was *Jens-e Dovom* (Second Sex) which was launched in 1998 and edited by Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani. By far- *Jens-e Dovom* -is known as the most radical and informed feminist press in Iran (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004) and its very existence reflected the greater openness and tolerance of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance 'policies under Khatami (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

The editor, Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, who is also the director of the publishing house Nashr-e Towseh, managed to collect a wide range of articles written by Iranian feminists, including those in diaspora (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

There are articles on women's movements, working women, translations of well-known feminist published works, and interviews with and writings by diasporic Iranian feminist scholars, such as Najmabadi and Tohidi. Articles in each volume had a special theme, such as Women's Organisation, Women and Modernism, Civil Society, and Women and Democracy (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

#### 2.6.5 *Zan-e Rouz* (Today's Woman)

*Zan-e-Rouz* is the oldest women's magazine in Iran and the only one that survived the Revolution. As Mir-Hosseini (2002) notes, in its pre-revolutionary manifestation, *Zab-e-Rouz* integrated advocacy of women's rights with fashion. In so doing, the writers of this magazine cover issues about corporal punishment in schools, women's domestic and unpaid

work problems of widows, and critical analysis of the portrayal of women in state-related television programmes (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

After the Revolution, *Zan-e Rouz* sustained its advocacy role, and contributed to criticise and frame the nascent discourse and policies of IR on gender. However, *Zan-e Rouz*, according to (Mir-Hosseini, 2002), has never been an independent voice and it marginalized gender debates.

#### 2.6.6 *Neda* (Call)

Women's Society of the Islamic Republic published *Neda* (The Call) that is a quarterly headed by the by Mostafavi, Ayatollah Khomeini's daughter and edited by A'rabi, his granddaughter.

In an interview with Mir-Hosseini- A'rabi states that they did not want solely to address women as their audience, rather, they intend to reform the Iranian society in order to be effective for women. She adds that firstly tend to rectify the views of men, lawmakers, and policy-makers about women's issues (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

As the editor told Ziba in an interview, *Neda* was the voice of the elite women, which demanded a share in politics for themselves. It had narrow readership, it was rarely found at newsstands, and many women did not even know of its existence. *Neda* was not appealing to other feminist journals, and was relatively sophisticated for women; thus, most of our subscribers were men, or research and state institutions' (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

*Neda* was unmoved by women's growing discontent and remained silent on gender inequalities in Shari'a law. Its writers evidently addressed the male ruling elites, not women. *Neda* viewed women's discontent as a by-product of modernity instead of connecting it to official gender policies for which they believed that there could not be an immediate solution (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

#### 2.6.7 *Payam-e Zan* (Woman's Message)

In Qom, the heart of the clerical establishment in Iran, *Payam-e Zan* (Woman's Message) was launched in March 1992. Its editorial board was entirely made up of male clerics and it was part of (*howzeh*) the publications of the Islamic Propaganda Office of Qom Seminaries.

Its gender discourse, which aimed to counter that of *Zanan*, rejected gender equality as a Western idea with no compatibility in Islam; rather, it tabled the concept of complementarity of gender duties and rights (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

It argued that the apparent inequality in rights of men and women as enacted in Islamic laws, if accurately interpreted and understood, is the ethos of divine justice.

Thus, although *Payam-e Zan* means ‘woman’s message’, in practice, it was the message of clerics in Qom (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004) that intended to find an ‘Islamic solution for the Woman Question’ (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

Although in the early years, -as Mir-Hosseini (2002) states, its articles were uniform and defensive in the arguments presented to justify the position of shari’a, its articles -more evidently- since 1997- have been more diverse and some are critical of traditional perspectives on the nature of women’s rights.

*Payam-e Zan* had a wide readership in Qom, and among religious families who would not allow *Zanan* into their homes (ibid).

#### 2.6.8 *Farzaneh* (Wise Woman)

While *Payam-e Zan* was the clerics’ response to *Zanan*, *Farzaneh* (The Wise) was that of women in the political establishment. This quarterly -launched in autumn 1993- had academic claims and presented articles in both Persian and English. *Farzaneh* argued that they established the first Iranian women’s studies journal by rejecting independent and organized feminism (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

The writers in *Farzaneh* believed that the ‘Women’s Question’ must be readdressed, analysed, and understood in the academic domain. In this, they argue that since ‘experts’ propose their informed advice to policymakers, the solutions found can then impact the society at large. Thus, *Farzaneh* proposed a top-down approach i.e. a prescriptive feminism from above (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). These writers used *Farzaneh* as a platform to engage in theological debates and intended to link intellectuals and policy makers as well as modernist and traditional thinkers (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004, p. 32).

The editor of *Farzaneh*, Ebtekar, is a veteran in the political realm in Iran. For the 1995 Beijing Conference, *Farzaneh* played a key role. Both Ebtekar and her co-editor, Ommi, organised a number of workshops in order to familiarise women’s NGOs with the agenda of

United Nations' conferences, and they both participated in the international meetings where the Conference Document was compiled (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

In 1998, in Issue 9 of spring, according to Mir-Hosseini (2002), *Farzaneh* revealed a difference of opinion between the two editors in which Ommi's editorial addressed Ebtekar and criticised the regime for its passive response, particularly that of its female members, to the anti-women policies and measures of the conservatives. She addressed Iran's decision not to ratify the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the two anti-women bills introduced by conservatives in the Fifth Majles (parliament) in 1998. Ommi admitted that *Farzaneh's* tendency to support feminism-from-above was no longer viable, but firmly defended its engagement in the organisation of women's NGOs.

She contended that she no longer believed in the usefulness of incremental solutions and doubted whether women's rights could be realized within the framework of the official recognition of Islam.

#### 2.6.9 *Hoquq-e Zanan* (Women's Right)

In March 1998, Geramizadegan launched *Hoquq-e Zanan* (Women's Rights) that argued for realization of women's equality and justice within the frame of the sharia, as well as Iranian culture (Jahanshahrad, 2012).

However, its writers offered a critical tone, for instance in the third issue of *Hoquq-e Zanan*, published in July 1998, they carried a conversation with Ayatollah Bojnurdi entitled 'Islam Does Not Permit Violence Against Women', in which the concept of *tamkin* (sexual submission) as defined by Muslim jurists was questioned (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

*Hoquq-e-zanan* wrote on legal rights of women in Islam, on women's political participation, and on women's movements in the world, which reflected a discussion of the development of feminism as well as its various manifestations across the world (ibid).

#### *Section summary*

The Iranian feminist press has been both player and pawn in the developments of gender debates forum in the fragile political landscape of Iran (Mir-Hosseini, 2002; Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004). In the recent history of Iran, the Feminist press has continued struggling to develop an open public space against the theocratic regime (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).

In the light of all above, it can be concluded that unlike *Neda* and *Payam-e Zan*, which were both debating women in relation to clerical structures of power and proposed ‘Islamically’ and ‘politically’ acceptable gender perspectives, the other journals and magazines outlined above are independent voices, which have been rooted, in civil society since they strived to establish public space (Fraser, 1992) and participate politically. This is enacted through the medium of creating dialogues and making demands and developing diversity of voices and opposing campaigns within the feminist press.

Although these publications have taken different positions on gender debates, they all appear to share common aims and to agree on their premises regarding gender relations and women’s rights. Nonetheless, they have different views on gender rights and the means of achieving them.

Finally, as Mir-Hosseini (2002) points out, the gender debates in Iran have been largely confined to the feminist press. Thus, I have decided to focus on social actors operating in the feminist press (as well as cinema) in this thesis -since my perception is that such social actors have significant insights into how FCS can mobilise change in Iran with respect of women’s empowerment. My intention is to outline how these social actors perceive their role both in constructing alternative worldviews that affect the status of women and how such perceptions are actualised through their practices.

### Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the contradictory social status of Iranian women using indices from international development organizations as well as academic sources focused on gender issues in Iran. This data helps to explain why gender issues in Iran are worthy of research and I have also highlighted how themes of legal injustice against women and the non/low women’s political participation are central issues with regard to gender in/equality in Iran.

This chapter also outlines an overview of the social history of the Iranian women’s social movement in post-revolutionary Iran. In so doing, this overview argues that socio-political structures/environment contribute to the formation and operation of FCS in ways that frame the strategic operational choices of the social actors within FCS. Such an argument will be further scrutinised in the papers that form this thesis.

This chapter, then, identifies two main trends in the Iranian feminist/women’s movement, which are Islamic Feminism and Secular Feminism, and highlights how both are adopted

and enacted by feminists/women's right activists as they make strategic operational choices in their work. I will revisit these strategic choices as well as the feminist trends and approaches through the papers and in the discussion chapter of this thesis. Finally, I have provided information on two key areas of feminist civil society-feminist cinema and feminist press - in order to give some background information on the social actors operating in these areas and their work, which will be the focus of this research. In the next chapter, I move on to discuss women's social movements in the MENA region in order to further outline the context for this research.

## Chapter 3: The overview of women's social movements in the Middle East and North Africa

### Introduction

Having outlined the social status of women in Iran and the role of Iranian FCS in championing women's empowerment, this chapter now provides a comparative presentation of the social status of women across the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). My purpose in doing so is to portray the social movements and activism in this context as a background to the main study. The following sections discuss activism in the region as well as the most prevalent themes in the literature relating to women's movements and organizations. In providing this overview, I will also outline further gaps in the literature that I have identified relating to women's organizations and the social movements of women in MENA, which this study addresses.

### 3.1 The Comparative presentation of social status of Middle Eastern Women

I noted in Chapter 1 the contradictory situation in Iran between women's high level of education and low indicators in other areas such as their experience with legal injustice and their low/non participation in the political arena. This is comparable with many Middle East countries. Kelly and Breslin (2010) suggest women outnumber men at the tertiary education level with the ratio of female-to-male university enrolment in Qatar and the UAE, for instance, being the highest worldwide. Moghadam (2008) highlights that young women in the MENA region are not only healthier and more educated than their mothers, but also their generational improvement has been greater than that in any other major world region.

Yet like Iran, women in MENA experience greater obstacles playing active public roles and finding jobs in their society than women do elsewhere (World Bank 2004). Academic and policy-oriented studies have identified chronic gender inequalities in as being the major obstacles to economic and human development progress (Moghadam, 2008) in this region.

Kelly and Breslin (2010) state that despite constitutional guarantees in many countries, women throughout the region experience legal forms of discrimination that are systematic and pervade every aspect of life. These authors add that Middle Eastern women are facing systematic discrimination in both laws and social customs which is deeply entrenched societal norms that is combined with conservative interpretations of Shari'a (Islamic law),



this continues to relegate women to a subordinate status ( Kelly and Breslin, 2010). Women in the MENA region are significantly underrepresented in senior positions in the private and politics sector, and in some countries, they are completely absent in the judiciary. Middle Eastern women, most visibly, face gender discrimination in personal-status laws, which regulate inheritance, marriage, divorce, child guardianship, and other aspects of family life (ibid).

According to Joseph et al (2007), most Middle Eastern women have less right to membership of the state and have less access as citizens to the social, political, civil, and material resources of the state comparing to Middle Eastern men. In general, they have less space to exercise individual agency to gain their rights. For instance, one measure of progress for obtaining their rights is the proportion of held seats in national parliaments by women. The UN Statistics Division reports that the MENA region lags well behind other regions in terms of this measure, although there has been some progress (Moghadam, 2008).

The MENA region is often associated with Islamist movements, rather than broader social movements. Therefore, scholarly research as well as popular attention have focused on transnational mobility and the strength of Islamist movements (Moghadam and Gheytnchi, 2010). Moreover, it is commonly believed that the absence of democratic politics and the presence of authoritarian regimes create a challenging environment for the development of civil society or/and social movement activism (Brumberg, 2002; Diamond, Plattner, and Brumberg, 2003; Posusney and Angrist, 2005).

Norton et al. (1997) identified economic restructuring, liberalization, and the authoritarian state's penchant for weakening formal associations as the key contributing factors to the maintenance and reproduction of patriarchal structures in society (Egypt, Iran and Jordan are worthy examples). However, despite the authoritarian state's desire for control, the economic shortcoming of the state and occasional political reform (i.e., liberalization) have created conducive space for the emergence of several independent voluntary associations, as well as some rights-oriented organizations across the MENA region.

The sheer number of women's organizations are arguably a significant part of the picture here. Women's movements in the MENA region are portrayed in the literature as becoming increasingly vocal and visible, especially in Algeria, Iran, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Turkey- as they call for democratization and women's rights (Joseph 2000; Moghadam, 2003).

Since the 1980s, the growth of mass education and the end of colonialism are widely viewed as triggering the development of women's associations, organizations, and movements that cover a wide array of discourses and ideological orientations (see Rizzo, 2005 on Kuwait; Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2006 on Morocco; Charrad, 2007, 2010 on Tunisia; Hasso, 2001 on Palestine; Moghadam, 2005 on transnational feminist networks).

Al-Ali (2003) reports that an analysis of the aims and activities of women's groups in various countries, including Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine, reveals that women activists have mobilized around issues related to development and modernization. These include women's rights to education, work, and political participation, which have traditionally been the accepted demands of women activists and part of the discourses of male reformers and modernizers.

Women's movements in the contemporary Middle East, as Arat (1998) points out, have been extremely constrained by prevailing political and social structures, ambiguous state policies, and lack of clear institutional goals; however, they are potential agents of democratization processes. In this sense, women's movements oscillate between adherence, cooperation, and opposition to existing structures (i.e. the structure of state and national and international political constituencies.) Moreover, some women's movements occasionally strive to manoeuvre and expand political spaces, though, rarely rejecting the system in its totality (See Arat, 1998 for the case of women's movement in Turkey). Kelly and Bresline (2010) state that in nearly all of the countries in the region, progress is impeded by the lack of democratic institutions, freedoms of association and assembly, an independent judiciary, and extremely restrictive rules on the establishment of civil society organizations.

Based on the above, there has been a substantial research agenda investigating how gender is understood in the Middle Eastern region and the operations and achievements of women's social movements. I will now discuss this literature focusing on key themes that I have identified in my reading on this topic in order to show the concrete activities, which I argue, comprise FCS in this area of the world. Note here that although this literature does not explicitly refer to the concept of civil society or FCS, my argument is that such movements are compatible with the definition of FCS I have outlined in the previous chapter.

## 3.2 The main trends in the studies of women and women's social movements in the MENA

Anthropologists and historians, women's studies scholars, political scientists, and sociologists respectively (Charrad, 2011) have conducted studies of gender in the Middle East.

The creation of two peer-reviewed journals dedicated to the subject, *Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World* in (2003) and the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* in (2005) illustrates the expanding growth of the field of gender study in the region. The *Encyclopaedia of Women in Islamic Culture* is also a major endeavour worth mentioning (Joseph et al. 2003–2007).

Turkey and Egypt have been the national contexts where much of the research in the region is located (Charrad, 2011). However, since the interest in Middle Eastern countries has been partly driven by dramatic political developments, the Palestinian territories and Iran have received more coverage lately (Ibid).

The least attention has been paid to Gulf countries. One exception is Arenfeldt and Golley (2012) who mapped Arab Women's Movements in the UAE and Yemen. They investigated Arab women's contribution and responses to the transformations of the societies in which they are operating. Doumato (2001) also demonstrates how Saudi women are at the centre of national debates regarding culture and the role of the state as the guardian of culture. Al-Mughni (2001) explores the historical development of women's organizations in Kuwait since the 1960s and Carapico (2001) analyses Yemeni women's public roles and civil rights in order to distinguish various historical contexts for women's rights.

From my reading of literature on Middle Eastern women's social movements and organizations, I have identified several key themes, which are outlined below. Discussing these themes will allow me to map out the areas in the related literature that have received less attention, which allows me to subsequently identify the gaps in the literature that my research addresses.

### 3.2.1 Women's movements as national movements

Some key studies in the field focus on women's organizations that have been shaped in a close relationship with nationalist movements -which is related to the colonial history of the majority of the countries in the region. Among these studies, some argue that nationalism

downgrades women's issues based on the argument that the unity essential to the anti-colonial struggle should be prioritized. Among these studies are Lazreg (1994) in Algeria, Gruenbaum (2001) National Islamic Front (NIF) in the Sudan, Giacaman and Johnson (2001) on Palestinian women.

Giacaman, Johnson, and Peteet (2001) argue that nationalist movements have inspired and legitimized women's movements; however, they have not necessarily promoted gender equality or reconstructed gender relations.

Saktanber (1997) and Taraki (1997) also contend that nationalist movements in Turkey neglect the moral premises of patriarchy and therefore, the emancipation of women has been relegated as secondary to democratization and development in importance.

In contrast, Fleischmann (2003), Hasso (2005), and Peteet (1991) demonstrate that although Palestinian women are predominantly operating within nationalist organizations, they have participated in a new form of associational life and have discovered a "language of refusal and militancy" (Fleischmann 2003, p. 11), which has equipped them with a chance to question gender norms. Jad (2004, 2008) and Strum (2003) also view the emancipation of Palestinian women closely interrelated and mutually interdependent with the occupation.

Therefore, this theme in the literature indicates diverse perspectives on the interplay between nationalist social movements and those aimed at women's empowerment and it appears that the nature of this relationship may vary between countries and be dependent on localized specific contexts.

### 3.2.2 Women's legal status and family law

Within Middle Eastern women's studies, a large body of work examines family laws and women's legal status, and the ways in which the laws are upheld by the state and by religious institutions.

Joseph and Slyomovics (2001), for instance, highlight that feminist activists in several countries have lobbied to change family law, however, there have only been small successes in countries like Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, and (for a while) Egypt. Moghadam (2008) also shows that women's activism and research -in this region- has offered an agenda for the reform of family law as well as women's civil and political rights through a discourse that is composed of international standards of human rights coupled with a re-reading of Islam.

In the same vein, Moghadam (2003,2013) states that women's groups -in MENA- are working toward the following aims: (1) modernization of family law; (2) criminalization of violence against women (3) granting women nationality rights; (4) enhancing women's employment and political participation.

Kelly and Breslin (2010), Singerman (2003), Strum (2003), King-Irani (2003) similarly present the development of the concept of women's rights and women's participation in civil society in Tunisia, Central Asia, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan and Palestine. These studies outlined a list of legal issues, women's right activists across MENA have championed so far (e.g. family law and gender-based violence); they identified the obstacles women's right activists faced (e.g. scarcity of data on women's status, restrictions on human rights advocacy and civic organizations, and patriarchal and traditional legal system).

Moreover, they have outlined their achievements in the areas of employment, education, and political representation in certain countries (including Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt). In addition, Yassin and Hoppe (2019) documented the amendment of the policy on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Lebanon, which included limited official recognition of women's rights to collective land. This success was achieved following the Soulaliyate movement in Morocco, and the passing of laws for a minimum age for women's marriage in Yemen.

### 3.2.3 Women's civil rights

Some of the key studies in relation to Middle Eastern women's organizations/social movements emphasize the citizenship rights and civil rights of women.

Joseph (1996), for example, explains the interaction of citizenship and gender within the constructs of the state, religion, communities and the individuals. In addition, Joseph (1993) criticizes the uncritical import of western concepts of citizen rights, nation-state and civil society to the Middle East. In so doing, she argues that, unlike the nation-state in the West, the Middle Eastern nation-state has been shaped on kinship-based relations that have led to the reproduction and consolidation of the patriarchal state and therefore, the creation of a gendered and hierarchal civil society. She, then, contends that gender-based civil societies assimilate to gendered states and thereby patriarchal relations that govern the state inevitably dominate civil society.

Moghadam (2003) also seeks to make theoretical sense of contemporary women's rights movements in the region. In this sense, she explores how feminists in countries of the MENA region not only challenge the power of the state but also their second-class citizenship –which is mainly institutionalized in patriarchal family laws. She then highlights how, despite facing impediments created by religious institutions and the state, women's rights activists in the region manage to make demands regarding access to the public sphere, equal participation in national communities, and equal family rights. Thus, Moghadam (2003) suggests that such feminist activists manage to feminize civil society and engender citizenship based on these concerted efforts.

#### 3.2.4 Western vs indigenous feminism

Another prevalent theme that has emerged in the related literature is the use of Western versus Muslim/Local Feminisms in relation to the women's social movements in the region. Badran (2009), Ahmed (1992) and Treacher and Shukrallah (2001), for example, all state that although some activists may come close to it, most women's groups differentiate themselves from Western feminism, which is often perceived to have little relevance to the Middle East and has been conceived as a legacy of colonialism and Western hegemony in the region.

Graham-Brown (2010), similarly, notes that the relationship of organized women's activities in the MENA region to women's movements in the West can be problematic (cited in Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001) - since feminism is a provocative term in this region that tends to be perceived by many (men and women) as a dangerous imported ideology.

Al-Ali (2003), in contrast, states that women's movements in the region strive to legitimize their activities as being within the boundaries of 'Islamic culture/Middle Eastern culture'. This determines the prevailing parameters of women's organizations and often severely hinders and restricts them. However, she adds that a small, yet increasing, number of women's groups, decline to abide by the guidelines of largely accepted nationalist discourses and therefore they confront the notions of 'western' versus 'authentic' culture altogether.

Islamic feminism is also an emergent theme related to the debate between western and localised feminist ideologies and how these are taken up by women's movements in the MENA region. As noted earlier, the concept of Islamic feminism refers to the trend in which some women's activists consciously strive to achieve their goals and seek change within the framework of Islam and through a reinterpretation of the Qur'an and other key religious texts

of Islam (Moghadam 2002; Badran, 2009; Mojab, 2001).

Among women and social groups championing greater gender equality across the region, Islamic feminists are increasingly significant (Fernea 1998; Arat, 2005). Cooke (2001) presents a discussion of the work of feminist scholar-activists such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi, and Zaynab al-Ghazali. Majid (1998) also views it as the form of feminism most likely to succeed in the region. In contrast, Tohidi (2003) warns against any ideology -including Islamic feminism -that presents itself as the only accepted discourse to articulate women's demands.

Some scholars also explore the relation between religion, gender, state and civil society in particular countries. For example, White (2003) looks at civic culture, Islam, civil society, and state (ideology) in urban Turkey. She examines the compatibility of civil society and Islam and concludes that civil society scholars in the region need to explore the extent to which particular state ideologies (of which Islam is one of many) can nourish civic culture rather than obstruct it. She, then, suggests a move away from investigating whether civil society and democracy are compatible with Islam.

Similarly, Kirmani and Phillips (2011) investigates how social actors within women's organizations, development agencies, and Muslim faith based organizations (FBOs) try to promote women's rights within an Islamic framework or with the involvement of religious leaders in Iran. She concludes that efforts to engage development interventions with religion that focus on the promotion of women's rights - signify a considerable shift in development practice and discourse, which has historically been deemed as a secular project.

Confronting Western representations of Middle Eastern women is also one of the most common themes in the related literature and is linked to post-colonial thinking and the debate between western and indigenous forms of feminism. Literature that confronts representations of women in the MENA region has criticized the legacy of colonialism and orientalist scholars who have tended to assume the existence of a stable and unified set of cultural characteristics within the region. This literature has investigated the binaries of Islam/West and confronted powerful narratives about the passive, victimized Middle Eastern woman (Charrad, 2011; Kandiyoti (2001); Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001).

Al-Ali (2005), moreover, point out that western feminists do not have to/should not speak for Arab women. In the same vein, as Joseph (1993) suggests, the region does not share a common culture, language, political boundary or vision; rather, the region has various

cultures that have continually changed. Even when Middle Eastern scholars conduct comparative studies, they have deep respect for the political economic, historical, and regional specificities (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

There is also a wide array of studies that have demonstrated the ways in which women have been organized into nationalist movements, left-wing movements, and Islamist movements (Badran 1996; Paidar, 1995; Hasso, 1998; Clark and Schwedler, 2003; Clark 2004; Arat, 2005). These studies, then, demonstrate the wide range of organizations with diverse focus and interventions, which contradict the fallacy of a unified cultural feature in the region. In the same vein, Moghadam (2003) shows that Islamist women's groups and secular women's groups have conflicting agendas and exhibit mutual antipathy in many countries.

In light of the above-mentioned critique of orientalist<sup>22</sup>, it can be concluded that women's activism in the MENA region can only be understood in localized/contextualized terms in that it can bring various notions of rights together (Abu-Lughod 1998, Tohidi, 2003b, Sadiqi and Ennaji 2011, Kandiyoti, 2001).

### 3.2.5 The historical development of women's movements in MENA

The historical development of women's social movements in relation to the socio-political environments in the MENA region is another emergent theme in the related literature. Al-Ali (2003, 2005), for instance, explores the aims, activities and challenges of women's movements in the Middle East. She demonstrates the similarities among movements in relation to both their historical emergence, their close affiliation to nationalist struggles, contemporary ambiguous government policies, repression of civil societies, and prevailing authoritarian political cultures.

Graham-Brown (2010) also investigates the historical context and political climate in which women's movements have developed. These include campaigns of anticolonialism, nationalism, and the development of new states (Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001). Similarly, Okkenhaug and Flaskerud (2005) and Arfaoui (2007) studied the three historical phases of development of the feminist movement in Tunisia, and its achievements in relation to their request to change the family code, to promote political participation of women, and to adopt secular policies.

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Saied (1978) defines orientalism as the western condescending representations of "The East" i.e. the societies and peoples inhabiting in Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.



Tohidi (2010) also provides an overview of the current women's social movement in Iran, with a focus on its historical background and predominant characteristics of leading feminist activists in post-revolutionary Iran. She concludes that despite ideological divergence and differences in strategic choices between organizations that have emerged over time, the Iranian women's movement have, in practice, converged to achieve a common goal i.e. tackling the patriarchal system.

### 3.2.6 Comparative analysis of the women's movements in MENA

Another prevalent theme in the related literature is comparison between feminist campaigns in the region. Moghadam and Gheytnchi (2010), for example, compare two recent cases of feminist activism - the Moroccan and Iranian campaigns for family law reform. Here, they demonstrate the way that political structures have shaped the strategic options available to activists and have therefore, influenced movement frameworks. They conclude that while an open political environment is conducive to movement growth and success, including cooperation for legal and policy reform (Morocco), the closing of political space entails extra-institutional feminist contention and transnational links (Iran).

Al-Ali (2003) explores diverse contexts where women's organizations are operating; she also researches their relationship with the national/international constituencies and their role as a force for democratisation. She concludes that women activists in countries such as Jordan, Egypt and Palestine tend to operate around issues related to development and modernization. These include women's rights to education, work and political participation, which have been traditionally part of the discourses of both male reformers and women activists. Yet, more sensitive issues such as violence against women and women's reproductive rights have been considered by only a few women's organizations.

Moghadam (2013), similarly, investigates the link between women's rights groups and democratization in the Middle East, and in particular in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco. Through this comparative analysis, she highlights the revolutionary contribution of middle-class Middle Eastern women, including secular and Muslim feminists who use the languages of feminism, socialism, liberalism, and emancipatory Islam to question their traditional roles and status, to demand social and political change, to participate in social movements, and take part in ideological battles.

### 3.2.7 State feminism

The relation between state and gender policies is also among prevalent themes in the related literature. Rabo (1996) explores Syria and Jordan state's gender policy, state feminism, state's patriarchy, and gendered civil society. She, then, shows how the dependency on the state's power on gender (state's feminism) creates a space wherein both men and women can contest the state's definition of 'private' and 'public' spheres, and, therefore the state power.

Arfaoui (2007), White (2003), Göle (1991, 1996), Toprak (1996) study state feminism suggesting that this has not considered what happens behind closed doors (domestic realm), but has focused instead on expanding women's public roles and in particular urbanized elite women.

Al-Ali (2003), similarly, states that Nasser and Ataturk had similar policies towards women, namely imposing reforms in the framework of (attempted) modernization. In this sense, both regimes promoted women's equality and rights within the public realm of education, as well as political participation, however, women's rights in the so-called private sphere of the family have remained taboo. Joseph (1993) also reveals the perils of state feminism as getting resolved rather than confronting power relations.

### 3.2.8 The women's movements in conflicted areas in the MENA region

The relation between women's groups/organizations and conflict in the region is a present but weaker emergent theme in the related literature. Gruber and Throm (2012), for instance, report that women's participation in the Egyptian revolution and how the current women's movement has positively affected women's empowerment in the process of social transformation after revolution. Similarly, Moghadam demonstrated the role of women in the Arab Spring (2013) and showed the constructive contribution of women's groups to peace building, conflict resolution, human rights and democratization in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq (2001).

Al-Ali and Pratt (2009), similarly, investigated how gender identities, relations, and roles are constructed and negotiated within transnational socio-political fields related to 'post'-conflict reconstruction in the context of the Middle East (with more specific focus on Iraqi-Kurdish and Palestinian women's organizations). Richter-Devroe (2008) also investigated the relation between peace building interventions and its potential contribution to gender

empowerment in the Palestinian context. This paper discusses various gendered approaches in relation to conflict resolution and concludes that contextualized culturally-embedded gender norms may prove conducive to both conflict resolution and women's empowerment.

In the above section, the main themes of the literature on Middle Eastern women's organizations and social movements have been identified and presented. Here I have highlighted evidence of regional differences and diversity in both the achievements of such organizations and also their ideologies. At the same time, I have highlighted some convergence in that there is evidence that change can be mobilized through such movements/organizations but that understanding this requires sensitivity to the issues raised in particular contexts. The following section will now outline the gaps in this literature, in order to show how this research offers a contribution to the debates outlined above.

### 3.3 Summary of the literature on women's social movements in the MENA region.

Much of the recent writing about women's movement/activism has focused on formal organizations, such as professional syndicates, development organizations, clubs and private voluntary associations that reflect the interests of the middle class. To my best knowledge of the literature on women's social movement and organizations in the MENA region, much less attention has been devoted to the cultural realms of civil society. This can be seen in few studies that have focused on women's press (Booth, 1998; Shakry, 1998; Ettahdieh, 2003; Eftekhari 2003) or literary activities (Hatem, 1998; Sullivan, 1998) in championing against gender inequality, but they have not discussed the obstacles faced through such activity, the opportunities they provide, or the coping/thriving strategies used. Nor have they investigated their activities using the theoretical lens I have outlined in the previous chapter.

Additionally, apart from a few studies that have generically shed light on the success and the failure of the women's social movements (Singerman, 2003; Strum, 2003; King-Irani, 2003; Yassin and Hoppe, 2019; Okkenhaug and Flaskerud, 2005; Arfaoui, 2007; and Kelly and Breslin, 2010), the rest present a descriptive and general account of the aims and interventions of women's movements in the region. As will be highlighted shortly, this study conducts in depth analysis of the work and voices of the social actors operating in FCS in order to unpack the discourses they are articulating and how they perceive the value of their work in enacting the discourses of women's empowerment.

Similarly, the majority of the studies reviewed above present a somewhat instrumentalist mode of advocacy in which women's organizations are viewed as striving to provide

resources and opportunities for women including literacy and education, jobs, welfare, and to the lesser extent social rights (e.g. Al-Ali, 2003). In this sense, these studies often focus on upper middle- and middle-class women involved in most feminist projects who share the notions of “awakening,” “promoting women’s rights,” and “empowerment” (Abu-Lughod, 1998) with the beneficiaries as the recipients of the interventions.

In contrast, my study focuses on an intrinsic mode of empowerment. This mode as Kabeer (1999) notes, refers to exploring in depth the processes by which women’s empowerment might be enacted - it focuses on transformational issues of social justice and power and thereby structural transformation rather than the implementation of policy and policy change.

In this respect, this research investigates the contribution of FCS to women’s empowerment by looking at how social actors perceive their role in creating collective consciousness and collective confrontation to patriarchal hegemony through producing cultural products within feminist publication, press, and cinema. In this perspective, civil society and the potential expansion of rights has laid the groundwork for more directed and self-conscious social movements that can confront the power of the state and patriarchal culture.

Surprisingly, the majority of studies in the related literature outlined above investigate women’s collective activities under terms such as women’s organizations, women’s social movement, and in a lesser number of studies, women’s non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, there are only a couple of studies that refers to the term civil society in relation to gender (Al-Ali 2003, 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that “studies of gender relations are still very much the domain of female researchers, who study other women, while macro-level studies of state and civil society are still mainly the domain of male researchers, who are, in reality, studying other men” (Rabo, 1996, p. 162).

In the next chapters, I explore literature on civil society and gender development, in order to highlight how research based on this conceptual framework addresses a gap in the literature on the absence of gender in civil society theories.

## Chapter 4: The knowledge gap on the relation between gender and civil society

### Introduction

This chapter aims at demonstrating the knowledge gaps in the literature on gender and civil society by highlighting two key aspects: a) that the relation between gender and civil society has not been researched sufficiently in the civil society discourse; b) in feminist political theory, there is little attention paid to the role of civil society in producing or/and enacting a gender egalitarian agenda. In this pursuit, this section shows that whilst some feminist theories have criticized the civil society discourse and agenda since the 1980s they have not proposed alternative theories of civil society from a feminist perspective. Indeed, the majority of this work has focused on critique of the public/private dichotomy within definitions of civil society. My intention in this thesis is to investigate a feminist concept of civil society (FCS) which can assist me to highlight how it may be implicated in the processes by which women's empowerment is realised. Throughout this chapter, in compliance with Howell (2007), I have used FCS in relation to women who collectively strive to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. These, arguably, can be embodied within wide range of activities and/or movements by various organisations including NGOs and feminist media. Therefore, I use the terms feminist/women's movement, NGOs, and FCS interchangeably throughout.

### 4.1 Locating women's empowerment in the civil society arena

Historical analysis has demonstrated that women have been deprived of political and economic participation and their full rights as citizens (Jones and Jonasdottir, 1988; Pateman, 1989; Carroll and Zerilli, 1993). Their exclusion from political decision-making positions, and their absence from leadership positions in international development agencies, has led to the emergence of civil society as the alternative arena in development where women can potentially bypass some of the barriers that they have encountered concerning opportunities and equal access to formal political/leadership positions (Potter, 2004). Furthermore, some literature suggests that some women leaders exercise a more nomadic style when compared to their male counterparts by oscillating between the worlds of formal politics and civil society (Howell and Mulligan, 2005).

Women's engagement in CSOs also offers a potential space to empower them to claim their

spheres of influence. As Potter notes, “many areas of civil society are sympathetic to the empowerment of women and others form a powerful platform to have the ideals of equal participation aired in a public, sub-state space” (Potter, 2004, p. 19). In the same vein, Hagemann (2008) views civil society as a key to enabling women to renegotiate their political participation as well as social division of labor and time.

Hagemann (2008) argues that such potential has, historically, always been there. In contrast to the common portrayal of early civil society as all male-dominated, women were engaged from the beginning and their public activities -including debate on the meaning of civilization and demanding equality- served to expand and consolidate key political institutions.

Furthermore, Howell (2003) contends that women’s organizations are figuratively significant as they occupy and protect a non-governmental sphere whereby they challenge the state power; in addition, they represent their potentialities for political and social change. She adds that over the past three decades women’s organizations have shaped a global feminist agenda for gender equality and economic justice.

In the same vein, feminist theorists/organizations are advised to exploit the terrain of civil society -as Phillips (1999) mentions: “The battle for sexual equality has to be won in civil society, for there is a limit to what can be achieved through the ‘right’ legislation alone” (Phillips, 1999, p. 58).

In sum, civil society not only provides opportunities for women to influence on and contribute to the structuration of the equality agenda, but also it targets women’s empowerment to facilitate ideal and equal participation (Potter, 2004).

Yet, despite this potential possibility for women’s emancipation, until recently civil society theorists have not integrated a concept of gender in their theorizations of the concept. Similarly, feminist political theorists have given short shrift to the concept/agenda of civil society (Schwabland et al, 2016; Howell, 2007, Howell and Mulligan 2005; Hagemann, 2008). The next session will proceed to delve into the reasons and the ramifications for this.

## 4.2 Gender in theories of civil society

As noted in the previous chapter, research on civil society has experienced a conspicuous renaissance both theoretically and empirically since the 1980s (Ehenberg, 1999, Cohen and Arato, 1994). Much of this preoccupation has been focused on the importance of civil society

to democratisation processes, which has implicated the relationship between the state and civil society in different welfare and political contexts and the intersecting relations between civil society and the market (Howell, 2007, Howell and Mulligan, 2005).

However, despite the comprehensive work, which has been carried out on gender and equality in a variety of fields, namely, development studies, political theory, social policy, and international relations, it is puzzling that civil society theorists have seldom raised the relationship between gender and civil society (Schwabensland et al, 2016; Hagemann, 2008, Howell, 2007). This is not to say that studies have not been carried out on women's organizations, on the contrary, there have been many (Howell and Pearce, 2001; Howell and Mulligan, 2005; Hann and Dunn, 1996; Carbone, 2017).

The point is that the broad sphere of civil society has not been studied through a gender lens. While feminist theorists have concentrated their analysis on the social construction of the public/private dichotomy, civil society theorists have been more focused on the relationship between the state and civil society and to lesser extent with the market (Howell, 2007; Howell and Mulligan, 2005). Hence, the gap lies in the failure of the civil society theorists and feminist political theorists to engage with each other's frameworks for the above given reasons. The following section will elaborate further on the reasons for this gap.

#### 4.2.1 The reasons for the lack of collaboration between civil society theorists and feminist political theorists

##### *4.2.1.1 Public/private dichotomy in relation to civil society*

The reason for this absence may lie in the historical development of literature/theory on civil society throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment political thinkers, such as de Tocqueville, Rousseau, Ferguson, and Paine, Hegel, and Marx all contrasted the notion of civil society to both the state and the family on different grounds (Hagemann, 2008; Howell and Mulligan, 2005).

Their prime reason -in relation to this contrast- is their perspective on the state-civil society relationship. In this sense, in exploring this relation, they operated with an assumption that the 'public' is a generic individual male with females limited to the private sphere (i.e. domestic or family spaces) (Hagemann, 2008). Furthermore, they considered economic relations integral to the realm of civil society and since they discursively separate the political economy from the household economy; civil society has consequently been defined

as non-state and non-family arena (Howell, 2007).

Hegel, for instance, positioned civil society as operating between the two hierarchical poles of the state and the (patriarchal) family. According to Pateman (1989), Hegel envisaged man as having his actual and substantial life in labour, in the state as well as in struggle with the external world. In contrast, he conceived women as having a destiny in the family (Hagemann, 2008). Thus, since the familial was not counted as part of civil society, this sphere excluded women -by definition. In knowledge of this history, feminist scholars (Fraser, 1992; Pateman (1989) have conceived this dichotomy between public and private as a cultural construction rooted in the Enlightenment/post Enlightenment era in which women were assigned by “nature” to the private, the household, and the family, while men were assigned to the public. Thus, since civil society always operates in the public sphere, it is useful to examine how men and women are represented in the public and how they are making use of the public space (Hagemann, 2008).

In more contemporary theoretical accounts of civil society, Hagemann (2008) argues that the concept is still subject to the dichotomy of the public/private sphere, with the equation of the “public sphere” with “civil society” in the literature such as that written by Habermas (1991).

Habermas views civil society as “a sphere of interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary organizations), social movements, and forms of public communication”. (Seethi, 2007, p.5). Landes (1992), a feminist historian, has opposed Habermas’ perspective on this equation (public sphere with civil society) and stated that Habermas defined the public sphere as the body of private persons assembled to discuss matters of “public concern” or “common interest”, and thereby isolated the public sphere as a structure within civil society. Since Habermas differentiated this public sphere from family, this private person refers to a male participant and this public concern is exclusive to family and thereby women.

Hagemann (2008) also critiqued Habermas’ notion of the public sphere since he argues that “the autonomous private individuals, presumed to be actors in the public sphere, are constructed as men who set free, by virtue of female or servitude labour, from all work from household and family, and from all caretaking” (2008, p. 29). These participants (men) are thereby constructed as independent, but in fact, their independence is based on the work of



their dependents (including women). Eley (1994) adds that this gender exclusion is part of the expansion of a typical culture of civil society and of the related public sphere, which is linked to other exclusions in Western and Central European civil society (e.g. those based on class).

Due to the problems and ambiguities related to the term 'public sphere' (as noted above) (Ibid), contemporary feminists and gender historians opt for the term *public space*, which refers to any place where communications related to the state, society, the economy, and culture *occurred* (Hagemann, 2008) (I use this term in papers 2& 3 referring to the site wherein filmmakers and journalists are operating). Ryan (1990, 1996), particularly, have demonstrated the existence of competing publics, which acknowledges heterogeneous subjects. In addition, the political theorist, Fraser also speaks about the multiple publics of civil society (Fraser, 1997).

The gendered distinction between public and private, according to Hagemann (2008), has also played a significant role in liberal theory. In this set up, the private refers to a sphere of social life wherein intrusion upon or interference with freedom requires special justification, whereas, the public refers to a sphere regarded as more justifiably or more generally accessible -at least for educated and propertied men of accepted race and faith. The label of private, and the valorisation of personal freedom that is associated with it, then, helps to immunize institutions like the family from public scrutiny under public norms and from regulation (Ginsborg, 1995).

To summarise, all of the above literature indicates how feminists have focused their critiques on the public/private distinction and its associated gendered division of labour, which they argue, is an underlying assumption in theories on civil society. This relates to the fact that, even when the notion of civil society is articulated in seemingly gender-neutral sense and thereby welcoming to women, the problem still drives from a non-feminist agenda.

In this sense, this body of literature has arguably evaded engagement in regenerating civil society as a concept built on a feminist perspective and interrogating gender relations within civil society.

#### *4.2.1.2 The role of the family in relation to civil society*

The second reason for some of civil society theorists like Hegel, Gellner, de Tocqueville and Marx to exclude family and gender relation within family from civil society arena- is

that they considered civil society to be a modern phenomenon. In this sense, they argued that the organizational structure of civil society was shaped in the context of capitalist industrialization, thus, blood-bound-relationships and ethnicity are considered as traditional and therefore excluded (Howell and Mulligan, 2005).

Moreover, these theorists discursively reinforced the separation of the political economy from the household economy, thereby masking the structural interrelations between the domestic sphere, civil society and capitalist economy.

Howell (2007) conceives the family as a residual boundary-marker -used by civil society theorists- in order to clear the analytic path for the investigation of state/civil society relations. She adds that most writings on state-civil society relations make no reference at all to the family, or indeed gender relations. As a result, most civil society theorists fail to investigate how gender relations permeate the state and civil societies and how these gendered sites of power reinforce norms and values governing how women and men should and do behave.

Kocka (2004) states that the assignment of family to the so-called private sphere reinforces the historically developed dichotomy of public and private, which eclipses our understanding of both the role of family within and contributions to the project of civil society and its gender-segregated structure and process of functioning.

Hagemann (2008), states that political feminists, similarly, understand that the conventional boundaries between the state, civil society, and the so-called private sphere have pushed domestic life out of the realm of politics. She adds that, in contrast to this exclusion, some political feminists focus on the subordinated status of women in families, the right to control their bodies, sexual violence against them, and gender division of labour (Hagemann, 2008).

Moreover, Howell (2007) states that if civil society theorists could become more engaged with the feminist problematisation of the public/private dichotomy, they may have been better equipped conceptually to “explore how the family shapes norms and practices in the sphere of civil society and how gendered power relations -rooted in the patriarchal family relations- pervade the spheres of family, market, civil society, and state” (2007, p.47).

This neglect of the family in the language/agenda of civil society, according to some political feminists, has led to a gender blindness that is reflective of a more general failure

in political theory and other social sciences to absorb the concepts, methods, and theories developed by feminist researchers over more than three decades.<sup>23</sup>

However, number of contemporary theorists in politics have integrated family as a significant part of civil society. Cohen and Arato (1994), for example, conceptualize the family as the “first association” of the civil society arena (1994, p. 631). In this, they distinguish civil society from the state and the economy. In their idealized depiction of the family as an egalitarian social unit, the family provides an arena where the principles of “horizontal solidarity, collective identity and equal participation” are firstly experienced and constantly reproduced. Such principles, in turn, form the bedrock of other associations of civil society and democratic political life. This picture, however, glosses over the unequal power relations and hierarchies prevalent within families, often drawn along gender and inter-generational lines and underpinning processes of exploitation, violence and abuse within families.

In the same vein, Pateman (1989, cited in Phillips, 2002) contends that family relationships are at the core of the civil society arena and therefore opposes dominant modern civil society theorists who do not recognize blood relations as significant to the concept. Similarly, McLaverty (2002) and Howell (2004, 2005) consider family as a fertile soil whereby democratic values and egalitarian agenda can be grown. Reverter- Bañón (2006) asserts that including family within a communicative frame of civil society can lead to dislocation of the patriarchal system.

Moreover, in light of the above discussion, I argue that the inclusion of the family within a concept of civil society has a significant implication to any study on Middle Eastern civil society. According to Joseph (1993, 2000), Middle Eastern civil societies -as well as state apparatus- are highly embedded in communities, kinship, and family relationships. This in turn suggests the need to examine if and how Western concepts of civil society are appropriate when employed for the purpose of analyzing Middle Eastern civil society. In this thesis, I argue that a concept of civil society that includes the family is significant in enacting a feminist perspective appropriate to the Iranian context. This is particularly important given that many of the discriminatory issues identified in Chapter 2 in this context (such as legal injustice against women) relate to how the family and power relation

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<sup>23</sup>Feminist political theorists and philosophers such as Okin (1979); MacKinnon (1989); Pateman (1989, 1998); Phillips (1991, 1998); and Fraser (1992, 1997) have pioneered research on gender relations and the gendered assumptions that underpin political thought over the last three centuries.

within family is understood from a social, cultural, and political perspective. Thus, a project of women's empowerment in Iran must address women's rights in relation to the family, with the latter forming a crucial part of FCS where such rights are championed.

#### *4.2.1.3 Historical patriarchal discourses in theories of civil society*

Arguably, the third reason -for the absence of a gender dimension in the research realm of civil society- is that the discourse of civil society is legitimized by reference to the past, and particularly to traditions (Howell and Mulligan, 2005).

Hagemann (2008), in this regard, states that focusing on the usage of the public/private dichotomy as public/domestic (mentioned above), springs directly from patriarchal practices and theories of our past (from the enlightenment and the post enlightenment period). Fundamental to this dichotomy from its theoretical beginnings has been the division of labor between the sexes (within the household and in the broader social arena).

With this regard, Hagemann (2008) and Howell (2007) warn women to be cautious when the language of civil society is used for debates about state deregulation or community provision of welfare services. There is a danger that these ideas push women into the private sphere and family care, i.e. the unpaid and undervalued "care" sector that is compelled by prevailing economic and social structures.

Overall, the lack of research on the relationship between civil society and gender has influenced empirical knowledge and the development of constructive strategies for emancipation (Howell, 2005). There is a silence in relation to gender that has led to a more pervasive hegemonic framework, which is more submissive rather than challenging to the gendered blindness of civil society (Howell, 2007).

Sauer (2004), for instance, points out that hierarchy and inequality determine the strategies of gendering in civil society and in state policies. The gendering strategy of civil society ,then, was and is a hegemonic process in which inequality is reinforced; every gender-related compromise in civil society has constructed gendered state institutions and vice versa. For instance, the commonly perceived criteria for membership and participation in civil society are based on gendered, nationalistic, racialized, and class specific norms- a worthy example of this hegemonic process (cited in Hagemann, 2008).

This is supported by, Kocka (2004) who argues that by conceptually disparaging the private as non-political and thereby irrelevant to the "common good", mainstream civil society

theorists have historically tended to consolidate gender-hierarchical divisions of labour in theory and practice. Civil society serves and is served by a normative masculine subject because the gendered division of labour means that many women occupy positions on the outside of civil society (i.e. in the private sphere).

In fact, feminists argue that the concept of civil society is seen as the domain of the male citizen, who is also independent and free from most family and household responsibilities and therefore free to pursue his professional work as well as every form of political engagement in civil society and state politics (Kocka, 2004). This ignores the structural, economic, and social prerequisites required to provide opportunities for the equal participation of women in civil society.

#### Section summary

What I have shown in this section, therefore, is that mainstream civil society theorists (such as Habermas), historically, have not recognized gender in conceptualizing civil society since they have dichotomized the private and public sphere, (locating family in the private sphere) and have rendered the active agent as independent and free from private responsibilities (Howell and Mulligan, 2005). In a patriarchal society, such as Iran, this has led to such agents being seen as male with limited space for women to manage their agency in both private and public spheres. I argue, through this thesis, that there is a need for research to recognize and reveal power relations, gendered norms and practices, and the opportunities and obstacles for women's empowerment in this terrain.

The forthcoming session will inspect the disengagement between civil society and feminism theorists and how their mutual incorporation can benefit women.

#### 4.3 Locating feminism in civil society

There are a number of reasons why voluntary associations and the politics associated with civil society might be attractive for feminist activists. First, because a feminist perspective is -or at least should be- radically pluralist, and pluralism finds a more welcome home in the associations of civil society than in either the family or the state since -as noted in the previous section- gender hierarchical relations are originally constituted within family, moreover, state politics are exclusive to women (Howell and Mulligan, 2005).

The second reason is that some of the associations that spring up in civil society have looseness, informality, and even indeterminacy that makes them particularly hospitable to

feminist politics. Feminism is and always has been in some sense about social transformation and reform. Thus, from the outset, feminists demanded equal rights, and while criticizing all forms of misogynist politics, they have become, despite widespread discrimination, active in civil society in practice (Howell and Mulligan, 2005, Hagemann, 2008). In this respect, some argue that engagement in civil society was feminists' first step towards political engagement with the state (Phillips, 2002).

In addition, since the mid- to late 1990s, feminist researchers have explored women's movements and organizations in the fields of development studies, political science, and feminist history of social policy (Rabo, 1996; Howell and Mulligan, 2005; Beckwith, 2000; Howell, 1998; Phillips 2002). Feminist historians such as Sklar (1999, 1993), McCarthy (1999, 2001, 2003), Koven and Michel (1993), Michel and Koven (1990), and Skocpol (1991) have carried out work on the historical role of women's organizing in the USA and Europe in shaping state welfare provision, employment, and public values and social legislation (McCarthy's, 2001).

As noted earlier, Hagemann (2008) reports that feminist researchers, since the 1980s, have criticised the different approaches that are central to the definition of civil society. In the early stage, they questioned whether civil society is potentially an "open" or incomplete project that needs to be fully realized -as an egalitarian agenda -in the future, or if the structure of civil society is inherently exclusive since they are based on hierarchal gender divisions of labour that needs the complementary female "other" for survival.

Among some political feminists, Pateman (1988) exposes the patriarchal underpinnings in the works of Social Contract theorists such as Locke and Rousseau, who, in Pateman's words, see women as unable to transcend their bodily natures in the manner required of individuals who are able to uphold the universal laws of civil society.

Phillips (2002), also, draws attention to the seemingly innocent but highly gendered view of the public and the private apparent in Hegel's work. In the *Philosophy of Right* (1821) "Hegel depicts women as having their "substantive destiny" in the family, while men's lives were played out in the state and civil society" (Phillips 2002, p. 72). Post-structuralist theorists such as Butler (1992); Butler and Scott (1992); Barrett and Phillips (1992); Scott (1997), Zerilli (1994); and Kristeva (1981) use genealogical and interpretative frames of analysis (Squires 1999, pp. 105–111) to query and destabilize seemingly fixed binary concepts such as "gender" and "sex". In this sense, they tend to challenge basic assumptions

of political theory, and to highlight the fluid and inherently political nature of meanings and concepts.

Similarly, Elsons (1995) created a model that outlined how gendered norms, values, and identities are circulated through and shaped in different sites; this model makes gender integral to the analysis of states, markets, civil societies, and households.

However, despite this potential, it appears that feminist scholars have not offered a re-working of the civil society concept (Howell, 2007). As noted above, mainstream scholarship on civil society, has tended to ignore feminist scholarship from the very beginning (Howell and Mulligan, 2005, Hagemann, 2008).

However, at the same time, Philips (2002) states that the concept of civil society plays a minimal role in the feminist reconstruction of the world as well. Philips added that given the discussion on the dichotomy of public and private sphere (along with the discussion about citizenship) has been central to any feminist analysis, feminists have remained surprisingly silent on the concept of civil society.

Howell (2007) and Mwambuli (2008), similarly, assert that feminist theorists have not become involved in the civil society debate since they consider the dichotomy of public and private spheres as too deeply-rooted in the notion of civil society. This division not only causes the exclusion of women from the public sphere, it also obscures the right of women as citizens. Consequently, civil society has not been a conceptual reference point for theorizing gender relations, even though women activists may have used the language of civil society in their rhetoric (Howell, 2007).

In light of all above, I argue that the way civil society is conceptualized is not through the gender lens and that the critical feminist work on gender relations has not led to a re-evaluation of theories of civil society from a gender perspective. However, given that the socially constructed public versus private divide has given rise to an enquiry around women and the state, both theoretically and empirically, I suggest there is no logical reason why feminist political theorists should not also assess civil society as a socially constructed site of gendered relations. Unpacking the public in this way may allow feminists to theorize better how civil society discourses, spaces and organizations, and practices are shaped by, and in turn reproduce, configurations of gender relations.



#### 4.4 Towards a concept of Feminist Civil Society (FCS)

So far, I have identified the gap on *gendering civil society* and *theorizing gender relations* - pervading through the spheres of state, civil society, market, and the household. This gap has inspired me to move beyond the boundaries between the family, civil society, and the state in defining a concept of FCS. In doing so, following Howell (2007), I give attention to the fluidity of gender power relations within the above mentioned spheres and thus focus the concept of FCS used in this thesis on the interconnectedness, fluidity, and permeability of power relations and patriarchal hegemony through the spheres. This allows me to investigate how the social actors in the feminist civil society are struggling to present and challenge these hierarchal power relations within the terrain of civil society.

My approach here is appropriate to the context for this research (Iran) given that, arguably, there are no clear boundaries between the state, family, and civil society in operation in this context. I argue that this is related to the theocratic/authoritarian nature of the state and the presence of a quasi-independent civil society that is built upon community and highly controlled by state.

Transcending beyond boundaries in defining FCS also assists me to delve into issues of power and subordination within the realm of civil society (see paper 2). Thereby, I may be able to critically examine the debates that portray civil society as the realm of the benign, virtuous and harmonious, in contrast to the venal, oppressive state.

Furthermore, the context for this research has motivated me to historicize and contextualize the conceptual framework on civil society. In this pursuit, I explore how socio-political factors/settings influence the operation (inclusion) of feminist civil society (FCS) in the public space in Iran and how the social actors within FCS are navigating/operating within various socio-political climates. Thus, the activities of social actors are central to how I understand FCS since it is through such activities that they can challenge hegemonic structures and contribute to social transformation. By looking at the strategies such social actors employ, I will look at how they are exercising their agency to engage, operate, and challenge the gender power relations- within feminist civil society.

#### 4.5 The gap in the literature on media as a key element of civil society

In light of above, the following section summarizes the key arguments that underpin this research, the gaps in the literature identified and how this research will address them.



As shown in the previous chapter, there are substantial efforts dedicated to studying women's social movements/organizations in the Middle East. However, the dearth of knowledge lies in the overlap of the two areas of literature. Feminist civil society (FCS) in the Middle East – has not been sufficiently investigated nor has the relationship between gender and civil society been reconceptualised in either feminists' theories or in theories of civil society (Howell and Mulligan, 2005, Howell 2007; Hagemann, 2008). This gap is even more conspicuous in relation to FCS whose activities are specifically focused in the cultural realms including women's right activism, feminist cinema, and feminist press.

To the best of my knowledge, the only studies on media as an emergent element of civil society are those conducted in relation to the Iranian press and social media (Khiabay and Sreberney 2004, Khiabany and Sreberney 2001, and Jahanshard, 2012). In addition, no study has been conducted on the role of feminist cinema and feminist publications and press as emergent elements of feminist civil society, on the discourse of the documents produced by feminist civil society, or on the perception of the creators of these documents about their contribution to women's empowerment. In general, the scholarship on women's studies in Iran mainly focuses on women's social movements, women's organizations, and women's NGOs.

Moreover, from my understanding of the literature on the Iranian women's social movement, there are few studies focused on the relation between the socio-political environment and the operation of women's organizations/groups in Iran. In this respect, Moghadam and Gheytonchi (2010), briefly outlined the operational strategies of women's groups (as they name them) in relation to the political climates in Iran and Morocco; however, my study presents an in depth analysis of the operational strategies of Iranian feminist civil society in relation to socio-political environment wherein they are operating (particularly in Paper 3). In addition, there is a dearth of research employing theoretical frameworks to study civil society and more specifically feminist civil society in Iran. As will be highlighted in the next chapter, this study employs Gramsci's theoretical framework to investigate the potential contribution of civil society -and the hegemonic battle within this terrain- to promote empowerment of subjugated groups. Hence, Gramsci's framework is the basis of conceptual framework and analytical framework utilized throughout the papers/whole thesis.

## Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed feminist critiques of theories regarding civil society highlighting the problematic public/private dichotomy which has led to the exclusion of women from civil society as a public sphere. I have also highlighted how feminist perspectives have subsequently given less attention to reconceptualising civil society in ways that can accommodate a feminist agenda. A key argument in this thesis is that civil society is a gendered space that is ripe for social action, transformation and regeneration and the enactment of women's empowerment. Here, I draw on Howell (2007) explicitly to outline Feminist Civil Society (FCS) as a concept. The purpose of this thesis is to indicate evidence of this in the perspectives and work of the social actors I have interviewed. The next chapter will outline the theories that construct the underlying conceptual/analytical framework of this research.

## Chapter 5: Conceptual framework chapter

### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of how civil society as a concept has been defined and understood in the literature. This chapter includes two parts 1) the main contemporary approaches to understanding the idea of civil society, its definition, and roles as a key constituent in the social development agenda, and 2) various theoretical framings including justification of my decision to focus on Gramsci's related perspectives. My intention is to show why a Gramscian perspective is required for understanding civil society in Iran and how the extension to his work, by Laclau and Mouffe, also offers relevant tools to understand the role of civil society in fostering women's empowerment.

### 5.1 Civil society in the development agenda and as a constituent of social development

According to Keane (1998), the renaissance of civil society as an attractive concept lies in the basic phases of modernity and the developing distinction between the state and civil society, which emerged in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.

Many philosophers and political and social scientists, including Cohen and Arato (1994), Ehrenberg (1999), Gellner (1994), Habermas (1991), Hall (1996), Kean (1998, 2003), Fraser (1992), Howell (2007), and Walzer (2002), have engaged in an intensive debate over civil society, however, the concept remains contested and ambiguous. Reviewing the related literature, the three most widespread approaches for defining civil society are the "normative", "field-logical", and "action-logical" (Hagemann, 2008).

With regard to the normative approach, the following paragraphs will provide a brief overview of definitions and characteristics of civil society before moving on to explaining the other two approaches. My purpose here is to show how my concept of FCS is located in a broader debate regarding the nature of civil society and its relation with the state.

#### 5.1.1 Normative approach to civil society

The emergence of the "good governance policy" agenda in the 1990s led to the growth of the concept of civil society in the development policy arena. In this approach, civil society is framed in universal terms as the source of public virtue and civil response, an arena where citizens can contribute to public good (Lewis and Kanji, 2009). Hulme and Edwards (1997), similarly, consider "civil society" as a panacea, and call it "the magic bullet" for

development, which they assume is a replacement for the state's service provision and social care.

Kean (1998) suggests that supporting civil society reflects the responsibility of citizens and policy makers to develop pluralism, to question dogmatic norms through the recognition of public accountability, and to expose institutional complexity as crucial obstacles to the accumulations of power.

From this perspective, civil society -under the normative guise- also plays a crucial role in the development of a participative democracy through which citizens are enabled to influence state decisions about themselves. For instance, Potter (2004) described the role of civil society as mobilizing public opinion, assessing accountability of government, facilitating participative democracy and consultation. This consultation refers to participating actively in policy making through civil society, which not only “humanizes the bureaucracy, but strengthens the capacities of communities and individuals to mobilize and help themselves” (Midgley, 1986, p. 8). In the same line, Edwards (2004) points to “Three Potential Complementary Faces” for civil society (with normative assumptions regarding what can be achieved). These are, first, the goal of building a “good society”; second, the arena where ordinary citizens can participate to reach that good society; and finally, the means by which society can accelerate the achievement of progress.

International agencies have also defined civil society in universal and normative terms. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provides a simple and transparent definition for civil society: The independent, non-governmental realm of citizen activity is termed civil society. As the nexus for participation in governance, civil society is essential in a democracy for political expression and influencing government policy choices (USAID, 2019). Thus, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a vital role in enabling people to claim their rights, in promoting rights-based approaches, in shaping development policies and global partnerships, and in overseeing their implementation (OECD, 2010, 123).

All the above definitions and framings of civil society are identified as normative since the concept is seen as universally good by definition - citizens are participating in and contributing to a good society within the realm of civil society.

For the normative approach, civil society is, in short, a utopian vanishing point for the democratization of states and societies, formed following a Western liberal model (Hagemann, 2008). However, this utopianism, which some suggest is closely related to

today's European reality, has its drawbacks and limitations, more specifically, for the analysis of a non-Western civil society such as Iran, where the inherent "Western-centrism" of the normative approach may be highly problematic (ibid). Hann and Dunn (1996) demonstrate that civil society organizations are not necessarily operating from the premise of individual liberalism which is the basis of Western utopia -particularly, in non-Western societies.

### 5.1.2 The field-logical approach

In the field-logical approach, civil society refers to the "largely self-regulated space of civic engagement between the state, the economy, and the private sphere" (Kocka, 2004, p. 68); which in this approach generally refers to the family. Kocka (2004) characterized the individual and collective actions within civil society as including personal initiatives, openness and pluralism, communicative competence, the ability to participate in constructive conflicts and avoid violence, and the systematic connections of particular and universal interests.

Civil society is therefore, an in-between sphere that is governed neither by economic norms of the market (i.e., by profit maximization and competition), nor by the alienation norms of the state (i.e. the monopoly of physical violence and bureaucratic power), or by the interest of the family and the private sphere with its intimate/personal relations. Rather, social order is achieved through cooperation, communication, and deliberation. In sum, whereas the normative approach portrays civil society as good public sphere and highlights the concepts of good governance and citizen participation, the field logic approach emphasizes the demarcation among state, economy, and private space ( i.e. family) and views civil society as a between sphere, independent of the rest.

In relation to the field-logical approach, an OECD report (2010) defines CSOs as all non-state organizations and non-market forces outside of the realm of family where people are organized to pursue common interests in the public sphere. They encompass a diverse range of organizations including cause-based CSOs, service-oriented CSOs, and membership-based CSOs such as community based organizations, environmental groups, women's rights groups, faith-based organizations, cooperatives, chambers of commerce, labour unions, professional associations, the not-for-profit media, and independent research institutes.

The field-logical approach is also viewed as highly problematic according to some scholars (such as Hagemann, 2008) because it generates significant problems with regard to

demarcation among the three spheres of state, economy, and family. In addition, Hagemann (2008) adds that it does not make clear the distinction among the three possible usages of civil society as a utopian political norm, a descriptive term of historical practices, and an analytical concept. Hagemann suggests that the reason for this lack of clarity is that the field-logical approach is still closely related to the normative approach. In this sense, it depicts civil society as a draft of a project that has utopian features. This is a promise yet to be completely fulfilled even if the today reality of European society accords much more closely to this project.

### 5.1.3 An action-logical approach to civil society

Within an action-logical approach, civil society is a web of associations and activities that are independent of state, which binds citizens together in terms of common concerns and through their existence and actions. This approach includes within civil society a much wider range of initiatives and associations based on family relations, neighbourhood networks, and religious groups. Thus, arguably, it offers a definition that is relevant to non-Western civil societies. Moreover, it assists with challenging the conventional separation between public and private sphere (Hann and Dunn, 1996) since it is more inclusive and takes family relations and community networks (often seen as belonging to the realm of the private) into consideration. The following perspectives/definitions on civil society reflect the action-logical approach toward civil society.

The United Nation Development Program (UNDP) describes civil societies as consisting of “non-state actors whose aims are neither to generate profits nor to seek governing power. They unite people to advance shared goals and interests.” (UNDP, 2001, p. 2). OECD (2010) states that CSOs perform based on the shared values, ideologies, and objectives of the people they are engaged with. Their responsiveness to a variety of situations means that many are concentrated on social justice and human rights, including the rights of women, youth, children, and indigenous people. Thus, the emphasis on shared goals and interests in this perspective on civil society suggests it is worthwhile concentrating on CSOs, which are orientated towards social solidarity with marginalized groups and focus on social justice.

Similarly, Edwards (2004) identifies three main actions of civil society within various schools of thoughts, including neo-liberalism, nationalism resurgence, and legalism. These three actions are collective, creative and value-based since civil society is essentially viewed as producing collective action -through associational structures, across society and through

the public sphere; it provides an essential counterweight to individualism. As creative action, civil society provides consensus and proposals for a development agenda; and as values-based action, civil society may change consumerism and individualism by providing a balance to the dominant influence of state authority and the incentives of the market.

However, the action-logical approach has also been criticized for focusing too heavily on ideal forms and traits. In other words, both in the analysis of historical and present-day practice, neither the arenas nor the forms of action that comprise civil society manifest themselves in an ideal-typical fashion. Following Trentmann (2002), I argue there is a need for further development of the action-logic approach in three ways. First, there is a need for a conceptual framework for analyzing civil society should include recognition of both the ideologies and historical practices at work since it is essential to see how civil society has developed and is developing through dynamic tensions such as those between inclusion and exclusion, paternalism and tolerance. Second, any essentialist perspective on civil society should be avoided; rather, the diverse meanings and various functions of civil society should be underlined -in ways that recognize differences- both between societies as well as within them. Therefore, the international and imperial dimensions interwoven into the histories of civil society need to be accommodated.

The next section provides a brief critique of a Euro centric discourse, structure, and practice regarding civil society in order to highlight the weaknesses of this approach and to frame my argument for a diverse and dynamic conceptualization.

## 5.2 The critiques of Eurocentric approach to civil society

Hangemann (2008) notes that some scholars have criticized the discourse of civil society for not paying sufficient attention to differences and diversity. She adds that this has led to an underestimation of the significance of the gender dimension as well as other differences and respective meanings -including religion, race and ethnicity- and the creation of asymmetries and hierarchies in the concrete historical practice of specific civil societies.

Hann and Dunn (1996) and Randeria (2001, cited in Hangemann, 2008), for example, challenge the Eurocentric perspective of debates on studying civil society in Latin America, Africa, and India. They state that the Western model of civil society is concentrated on the tension between an autonomous individual, usually conceived as a male, and the state that includes only open and secular institutions based on voluntary membership.

Within non-European societies, this understanding of civil society is not useful for capturing the various kinds of social integration at play as well as how civil society might exercise solidarity and safeguard civility. In the western model, the developmental path of a few Western European civil societies is generalized to apply to all societies. More precisely, I argue that a Eurocentric model generalizes one social stratum and one gender in its account of civil society organizations, as the universal developmental path (Randeria, 2001 cited in Hangemann, 2008).

This discussion of exclusion and inclusion is not only related to the gendered, social, and racialized borders of civil society, it is also related to political, social, and cultural practices (ibid). Furthermore, Randeria (2002) argues that the active groups, movements, and organizations in civil society have also created asymmetries and hierarchies of power within and between civil societies that exclude some over others (cited in Hangemann, 2008). This is manifest in the way they have defined both membership and their individual identity. Accordingly, Kean (1998) and Tester (1992) suggest that we must incorporate the negative tendencies of civil society (e.g. enactment of hierarchies) as a necessary object of, and on the other hand regard civil society as a historical project that is dynamic and unfinished, reflecting the dynamics and structures of the society in which it is located.

In this respect, Hann (1996), therefore, argues for a comparative and descriptive view of civil society that includes differences in historical experience, social structures, and processes of transformation. Such a non-formative and open approach would also be quite fruitful for the analysis of the gender dimension of civil society. Moreover, there is a need to focus on the cultural dimension of the project of civil society, in particular, the multifarious cultural and discursive practices which create meaning, shape action, and engender violence (Mergel and Welsch, 2001 cited in Hangemann, 2008).

### 5.3 Developing a definition of civil society that is relevant to the Iranian context

So far, I have reviewed the main contemporary approaches to understanding the concept of civil society, and its definitions and roles as a constituent in development agenda. I now consider how the contemporary normative (western) perceptions of civil society (discussed above) contrasts with- the socio-political conditions in Iran.

This contrast can be described as follows: first and most importantly, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Iran, although mostly financially independent from the state, are operating within the conservative regulatory framework of the state (Razzaghi, 2010;



Boroumand and Boroumand, 2000; Chaichian, 2003). This means the field-logical approach toward civil society is not appropriate to my study, since the demarcation of state, civil society, and market is not applicable to the context of Iran.

Furthermore, contemporary western understandings of civil society rest on democratic mechanisms inclusive of political parties and assume an independent communication media, and individual liberties, which I argue, contrasts with the theocratic politics in Iran given the authoritative regime and its repressive policies.

Lastly, in mainstream scholarship regarding civil society, cultural elements such as cinema and journalism are given insufficient attention. This is even more noticeable in the literature on FCS in the Middle East including Iran (the focus of chapter 3). Therefore, I argue for a definition of civil society which recognises such cultural practices since, arguably, this can provide us with a vision toward how power relations are established and reinforced through hegemonic projects exercised by dominant groups and whether/how the subordinated groups can be emancipated within cultural space of civil society.

Therefore, given the inadequacy of the above definitions of civil society for studying the Iranian context, I will now outline the Gramscian related perspectives and the rationale for employing it in my research.

#### 5.4 Why a Gramscian perspective on civil society? Rationale and conceptual contributions

The conceptual framework in this study has been developed based on a perspective on civil society and battle of hegemonies that is rooted in Antonio Gramsci's work. Below I outline how Gramsci defines civil society in more detail but first I provide a rationale for selecting this perspective. This choice has been made based on four considerations:

Firstly, Gramsci's stance on the relationship between civil society and state (as discussed in the following session) is in accordance with the status of civil society in the Middle East in general and Iran in particular. In this sense, Iranian CSOs are not organized by the state, yet, they are operating within the governments' regulatory framework (Jahanshahrad, 2012; Razzaghi, 2010). Gramsci's understanding of integral state that consists of both political society and civil society symbolize state/civil society relations in Iran since the authoritative nature of the IR regime and its strong hegemonic project within Iranian civil society makes the demarcation between the two spheres almost impossible.

Secondly, the politically suppressive conditions under which Gramsci was writing *The Prison Notebooks* bears a strong resemblance to that of the context of my study. Gramsci was well aware that the notebooks were subject to close and suspicious inspections; therefore, he had to apply some strategies of concealment so that his notes survived and so realize his long-lasting project. Similarly, many authors demonstrate that the social actors operating within civil society in Iran are prone to a similarly suppressive situation (Al-Ali 2002; Eggherman et al 2010; Squire, 2006; Boroumand and Boroumand, 2000, Moghadam and Gheytauchi, 2010) and must adopt strategies to enable their work to be heard or seen.

Thirdly, by excluding the private/public dichotomy (as discussed below), Gramsci developed a concept of civil society which is inclusive of the family and accordingly a realm in which women can practice socio-political roles (Gramsci, 1971, p. 131). In this view, the social protests along with the associations of the labour movements, women's movements, and philanthropic initiatives of denominational communities contributed to shaping civil society. This is aligned with the focus of this study on Iranian FCS, which consists of women who are struggling to contribute to women's empowerment. Moreover, Gramsci's emphasis on confronting the construction of cultural and ideological (dominant) hegemony (Hagemann, 2008) is in alignment with the focus of this study on the cultural hegemonic project operating within feminist press and cinema.

Lastly, I have outlined above the need to question the application of western standpoints on civil society in non-western countries (Zinecker, 2011; Chaichian, 2003; Kamrava, 2001). Whilst Gramsci's particular biography, with a childhood in a deprived Sardinia followed by his university studies in Turin, his critical work in this context relating to European industrial capitalism, indicates that he might have something to tell us about the interaction between developed and developing countries and the social relationships involved and mobilized by this interaction. In this sense, employing Gramsci's theoretical framework in this study can be viewed as a promising avenue to overcome the false binary of the Western modernity/Middle Eastern tradition and to open up a dialogue among scholars across countries in the region. This may lead to contextualization of the Western concept of civil society in a non-western/non-democratic context.

The following section will provide an overview of Gramsci's perspectives on civil society and state relations, the exercise of power through coercion and hegemony, the hegemonic battle, and the transformation of power relations through enactment of counter hegemony.

This will be followed by Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on hegemonic interventions and how I have employed their related views to expand and contextualize that of Gramsci in the context of Iran and in relation to Iranian FCS.

#### 5.4.1 State and civil society in Gramsci's perspective

Gramsci identifies the state as an "integral state" which is consisted of "political society + Civil society" or "dictatorship + hegemony" (Gramsci 1975, p. 763-64, 801, 1020).

In this sense, Gramsci presents two, closely related, realms of the state in his work, which although oppose each other, together constitute what he presents as an "integral state" (Ehrenberg, 1999).

One is narrow and the other is broader, in this set up, the narrow one refers to administrative, military, and juridical organizations of governmental system that are the guarantor of peace, order, and security. Gramsci identifies this realm as political society and argues that direct force and command are exercised in this sphere (Fontana, 2006, 2008).

The broader realm, which he identifies as civil society, includes a combination of the organizations that are commonly called private in other theories. He views civil society as "the powerful system of earthwork" and he refers to it as "formidable complex of trenches and fortifications of the dominant class" (Gramsci, 1975, p.332-3). According to Gramsci, there are diverse structures, institutions, and socio-cultural practices, which constitute civil society. These institutions include schools, libraries, various clubs, religious groups, voluntary associations, universities, mass media, and the other social groups that today pluralist theorists term them as interest/pressure groups (Gramsci, 1971; Bobbio, 1979; Murphy, 2001; Fontana, 2006). These institutes constitute ideological and cultural sites of civil society, thus, they are the hegemonic apparatus of civil society.

At the same time, Gramsci considers the institutions of civil society to operate in economic and material ways. Newspapers, magazines, journals (mass media in general), publishing houses, educational and scientific institutions and their whole complex systems are seen to generate, store, communicate and retrieve knowledge which is dependent on an economic, material, and technological base. In addition, this complex network of institutions, parallels, and is based on a market, which has access to it. This market expands in progressively growing concentric circles from a specialized group of intellectuals to mass audiences. All these markets must be economically and intellectually capable of creating demands; these

include both accessible income and literacy. Therefore, the generation of permeant consent or hegemony cannot not be realized without a material base including economic, technological, and spatial (Fontana, 2006).

A Gramscian interpretation of state/civil society is in contradiction with liberal and neoliberal doctrine (such as those in the field-logical approach outlined above) in which state and civil society are distinctly separated. In this, Gramsci argues that despite a certain judicial and legal distinction between the two, at the social, economic, and political level, the difference between state and civil society is only made for analytical purposes (Gramsci, 1971, p. 160). For the state to retain its moral and material strength, it must be able to assimilate ideological and cultural activities (educational, economic, political, and even religious) that take place within civil society in order to gain legitimation support from civil society.

#### 5.4.2 Hegemony

The relationship between ideological/cultural and economic/material -which is shaped within civil society-, is a significant element in Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1975). In this respect, Gramsci identifies hegemony as the dominance of one class or group over the other classes and groups; one that is established and substantiated through creating consent rather than reliance on coercion or violence.

In other words, the values or beliefs, ideologies of the dominant class are consented to by those from non-dominant classes/communities because they are seen as 'right' or natural. Therefore, Gramsci (1971) associates hegemony and civil society with consent and community. However, whilst hegemony is representative of consensus, it also can be the realm of conflict, competition, and factional strife. In this sphere, diverse systems of knowledge, beliefs, and different views of the world confront each other in the struggle to become dominant/common sense in society. It is through this process of competitions and conflicts that consent is generated, popular support is gained, and consensus is mobilized.

The consensus amongst people is also known as public opinion or political hegemony and this is presented as the contact point between political society and civil society, and between coercion and consent. "Once the state intends to initiate an action which is not too popular, it preventively generates the "public opinion" desired". In this sense, the "state organizes and consolidates certain elements within civil society. 'Public opinion is the political content of the public political will that is possibly contradictory and discordant' (Fontana, 2006, p.

37). Thus, there is a conflict over the monopoly of the institutes of public opinion, that is, newspapers, parties, and parliament. These struggles end up in only one force models opinion and therefore national political will, reducing the opposition to disorganized and atomistic dissent (Gramsci, 1971, p. 914-915). In other words, public opinion, formed and organized within the terrain of civil society, is a leading force in the generation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements. Thus, public opinion can both legitimize and delegitimize the power of state (Fontana, 2006).

In a similar vein, Gramsci argues that since civil society is the terrain of competition and conflict, antagonistic groups to the dominant group and to its system of belief and value (Gramsci calls them subaltern classes) can counterbalance any legitimizing activities. (Gramsci, 1975).<sup>24</sup> Gramsci views these antagonistic activities as the ‘war of the position’, which is a series of intellectual and moral battles that take place within the terrain of civil society with the aim of constructing different social and political realities (Fontana, 2010).

Consequently, Gramsci argues that overthrowing the hegemony of the dominant class (bourgeoisie in his own term) is not simply about controlling resources; rather, it entails dislocating the consensual basis of their support and relocating it to the subordinates. In this sense, hegemony is not only central to the power of the dominant class, it can equally be a resource for subordinates’ power (Fontana, 2006). Establishment of a new hegemony requires creating a new interpretive horizon that replaces the old ideology. Hence, the interest of a subordinate group (working class in his own term) can become universalized and other groups may consent to the emergence of a new counter-hegemonic order (Haugaard, 2006). This transformation of a dominant hegemony to a subaltern hegemony, which can lead to the transformation of power relations, is realized through what Gramsci called ‘battle of hegemony’ i.e. the intellectual and moral battle of subordinate social groups against the supremacy of dominant groups.

The key determinant phenomenon, which facilitates hegemony, is ideology. To Gramsci, the strength of ideology is based on the capacity of a set of ideas to unify divergent interests into a single hegemonic interpretive horizon.<sup>25</sup> This unity can be realized through common perceptions, ideas, and moralities. Fontana (1993) and Ives (2005) argue that this consensus

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<sup>24</sup> These groups may exist at different stages of development, some embryonic, some hardly politically conscious, and others more ideologically coherent and therefore better organized (Fontana, 2006).

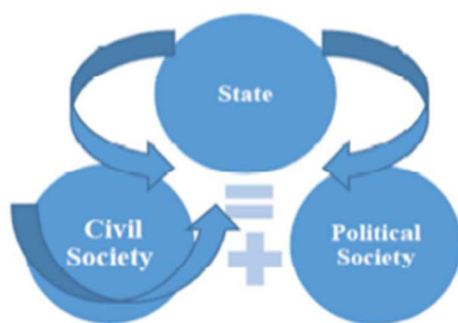
<sup>25</sup> An interpretive horizon is local site of perception and a local field of worldview; this has its own specific structure of logic and meaning (Haugaard, 1997, p. 179).

springs from the ability of social actors to create new-shared meanings or as Gramsci states, the ability of intellectuals (organic intellectuals) to universalize the consciousness of a particular group (1971, p. 375-377).

For Gramsci, the legitimacy, stability, and sustainability of the overall socio-political structure is achieved by means of intellectual, moral, and cultural systems articulated by intellectuals. “Intellectuals play the role of mediators between the subordinated groups and the elites” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). They link state and civil society and facilitate reciprocal communication through connecting civil society (political parties, interest groups, sects) with political society (administrative and public organization).

The below figure demonstrates Gramsci’s understanding of integral state and the circulation of hegemony between state and civil society.

Figure 4: Circulation of Hegemony between State and Civil Society (developed by the author based on Gramsci’s theories)



The arrows on the left side of the figure represent the hegemony that is shaped, disseminated, and reinforced between state and the civil society. In this, state synchronizes subordinate groups’ worldview into their own conception of world through communicating with the religious, cultural, ideological, educational, and political activities taking place within civil society. At the same time, the arrow on the right side of the figure represents the coercive/material power, which is exercised through state institutions including army and the administrative organizations -in order to substantiate the state’s dominance and gain legitimization from society.

#### 5.4.3 Enactment of counterhegemony

Turning back to the battle of hegemony, Gramsci, originally, proposed this concept to identify the subordinate social groups in a bourgeois modern society who are capable of

challenging the supremacy of the dominant groups intellectually and morally. In the same context, Gramsci stated that a subordinate group (subaltern) would not reach equal status to the ruling class unless they develop what he defines as “critical understanding of self” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333).

Internally in terms of consciousness and externally in terms of organizational structures, subordinate groups exhibit, and are characterized by incoherence, fragmentation, and disintegration. Therefore, such groups are prone to the initiatives and actions of dominant groups (Gramsci, 1975 cited in Fontana, 2006) and they cannot be unified unless they are able to become part of the “state”. Gramsci then argues that, for this reason, the history of subaltern groups is intertwined with the story of civil society and he views their story as a functionally “discontinuous” and “disaggregated” part of civil society (Gramsci, 1975, p. 2288 cited in Fontana, 2006).

Therefore, instances of subordinate activities that are independent from the state, and therefore, manifest opposition, either culturally or politically, to the confirmed system of beliefs and structures of power, must be identified. In doing so, subaltern activities can, according to Gramsci, commence the process of becoming hegemonic or counterhegemonic as they begin to know themselves.

This raises the question, which processes or activities can develop subordinate groups’ critical consciousness and political coherence in order to confront the hegemonic system of belief? Gramsci, in this respect, analytically distinguishes between those who know i.e. intellectuals and those who do not know and merely feel i.e. people-nation. In this, although intellectuals are seen to have knowledge, they do not necessarily possess understanding or feeling. On the other hand, people may possess feeling or/and understanding but not knowledge. The synthesis of both is crucial to the processes by which hegemony is confronted and challenged.

Social and political knowledge of people through understanding with feeling and passion is contradicted with the abstract and purely historical and scientific knowledge of intellectuals. Gramsci then adds that intellectuals’ knowledge can become politics and life only when it is linked to the feeling of the people. He argues that the synthesis of intellectuals and people and knowledge and passion provides the persuasive force for political and historical activities (Fontana, 2006, 2008). Such synthesis can transform a disorganized and fragmented subordinated group into an actor who is capable of confronting an established

system and capable of proposing a viable alternative to it.

This process is necessarily hegemonic and it entails both a conscious and reflexive movement, from passively accepting a given reality to actively engaging with it, and a movement from fragmentation to unity/integration (Fontana, 2006). Active engagement involves a condition of strife and conflict, such that the subordinated group realize themselves oppositional to the dominant group. Such a hegemonic process is the formation of “personality” who is a social and political subject that is cable of acting in history (Gramsci, 1971, p. 340).

In addition, acting in history, for Gramsci, involves speaking as political actors in society. Therefore, Gramsci argues that the transition of subordinate (subaltern) to hegemonic requires transformation of the subordinate language into the hegemonic language. Since articulation of (counter) hegemony is closely related to the generation and proliferation of an opposite worldview and alternative structures of knowledge, the type and nature of the subordinate language is significant to the creation of hegemony.<sup>26</sup>

However, Gramsci argues that confrontation of the hegemony of the dominant group as the main hegemonic web of class alliance entails the subordinate group going beyond realization of full class-consciousness (i.e. becoming a class-for-itself). In so doing, he states that central to developing a counter-hegemonic strategy for the subordinates is to present their interests as universal; therefore, they would attract the other groups and classes. This is what he identifies as expansive hegemony (Gramsci, 1971,132-133; Mouffe, 1979, p. 183; Torfing, 1999, p. 111) in which the subordinates (subaltern) present their interests as universal interests of ‘the people’ or ‘nation’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 181, Ives, 2004).

In light of the above, it can be concluded that any hegemonic/counterhegemonic movement operates at two levels and through three underpinning steps. At the internal level, the synthesis of intellectual knowledge and that of people culminates in the *critical self-consciousness* of subordinated groups and consequently the formation of the social group of self-government and self-discipline (*step 1*). These self-constituted groups are composed of coherent political/social actors who *oppose the hegemonic system of belief and established*

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<sup>26</sup> In other words, language equates to the construction of the knowledge and constitution of the worldview in which both capture and construct a reality. Language and knowledge presuppose each other mutually. Thus, like knowledge, language does not represent reality passively, nor it describes pre-existing world, rather, language structure, construct the world actively, and subjects it to the values and ends developed by knower/speaker (Gramsci, 1971, p. 38-43; Fontana, 2006, p. 42).

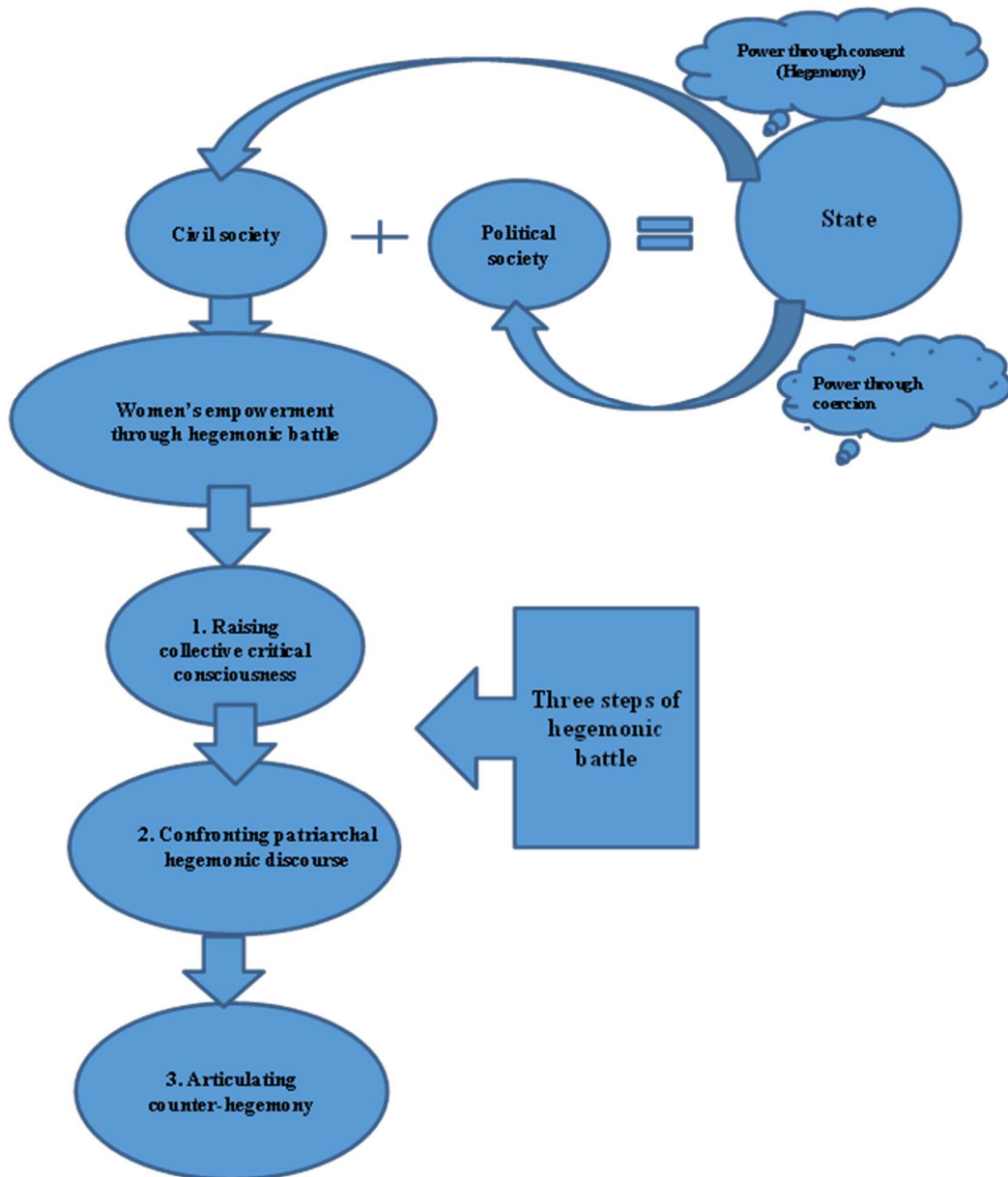


*system (step 2). On the other hand and at the external level, these social groups/actors, operating in civil society, disseminate and extend the group's perception of the world (counter-hegemony) throughout the society (step 3).*

In this study, I will utilise the above account Gramsci's perspectives on civil society/state relations, hegemonic battle, transformation of hegemonic system of beliefs, and the articulation of a counterhegemonic strategy. In so doing, throughout the research I have contracted the above three steps into the following: step 1 - raising collective critical consciousness, step 2 - collective confrontation of hegemony, and step 3 - enactment of counterhegemony. The following figure demonstrates further Gramsci's concept of the battle of hegemony.

The following figure demonstrates three steps of raising collective critical consciousness, collective confrontation of hegemony, and enactment of "counter-hegemony" as a means of empowerment (developed by the author based on Gramsci's theories on civil society/state and hegemonic battle)

Figure 4: The Three Steps in Gramscian Conceptual Framework



A discussion of these three steps and their relevance to the research is indicated across all three papers where I operationalize the conceptual framework more fully. For this reason, I have not explicated this here. I now move on to explain how Gramsci’s ideas have been taken up by more recent theorists in order to address key limitations identified in his work.

### 5.5 Laclau and Mouffe’s perspectives on hegemony and counterhegemonic interventions

Gramsci’s view on hegemony, although widely prevalent in political and social studies, has some drawbacks with regard to the articulation of “counter-hegemony” and transformation

of power relations. For instance, his overt concentration on social class-in its historical sense -is thought by some to have- led to the negligence of diversity both within and between subordinated groups (Haugaard, 2006; Rear, 2013; Leggett, 2013). In that, being a post-Marxist- he mainly focused on proletariats amongst other subordinated groups. Secondly, Gramsci presumed the enactment of counter-hegemony as rendering the subordinate's hegemony to the hegemonic language, which means changing hegemony at the ideological level (from that of the dominant group to that of the proletariat).

Laclau and Mouffe, drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemonic battle, developed their perspectives on hegemonic/counterhegemonic practices. In this pursuit, they advanced Gramsci's concept of the hegemonic battle at two levels, first, in relation to ideology and second, in relation to social class essentialism. The following section will outline their position. This is relevant to this research because the focus on women's empowerment requires an understanding of the subordinate not (only) in terms of class status, but in terms of gender and patriarchal forms of hegemony. Similarly, the move away from a view of counter-hegemony that is purely based on a unified ideology is not appropriate because the Iranian context involves many struggles and forms of oppressions.

Laclau and Mouffe, unlike Gramsci, emphasize challenging the discourse (of hegemony) rather than ideology (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Haugaard, 2006). According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001) hegemony has roots in discourse and is not related to ideological 'truth' claims (Haugaard, 2006) i.e. ideologies are seen as discursively constructed rather than materially 'real'. Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) addressed the issue of class essentialism in Gramsci's work by challenging the view that civil society operates a single field of hegemonic battle (based on class relations) but instead they recognized hegemonic battles (plural) taking place within many domains of social life and involving many forms of oppression (not only those linked to class). This opened up the concept of hegemonic battle to include struggles over a diverse range of social relations, including those of gender (Rear, 2013).

#### 5.5.1 Laclau and Mouffe's focus on discourse

As noted above, Laclau and Mouffe replaced ideology with discourse in their advancement of Gramsci's perspective on battle of hegemony.

Their notion of discourse stems from Foucault, who was inspired by, the concept of 'meaning holism', which is originally created by de Saussure (1960). In that, the meaning of

the words is not derived from the direct relation of signifier and signified (word and the object it refers to), rather, from a set of relations between words. In Foucault's genealogy, the analysis of language is furthered to provide the reproduction of meaning as a historically developed set of categories enabling us to make sense of the world (a discourse).

Therefore, Foucault's concept of discourse offers an extended interpretive horizon beyond words and language. Discourse, covers social life entirely to the extent to which all social actions require the reproduction of meaning (Haugaard, 2006). This is supported by Laclau (1990) who argues that "the category of discourse can be coextensive with social and also be understood publicly available and essentially incomplete framework of meaning which enable social life to be conducted." (Howarth, 2000, p. 104; Laclau, 1990. P. 90).

Laclau and Mouffe also argue that in the process of reproducing meaning, an inclusion/exclusion process is continually at work within a discourse. In this, the relational nature of any meaning requires the exclusion of potential other meanings. Such continually excluded meanings are the source of "local" resistance on a daily basis (Ryan, 2006, Newman, 2006). Therefore, since these systems of meaning or discourses construct themselves self-referentially, this can be continually the source of potential instability. In this sense, any system of thought can be constantly subject to disintegration since they are contingently constructed systems of conventionality (Haugaard, 2006).

Haugaard (2006), moreover, suggests that one of characteristics of hegemony is the process through which one system of meaning contributes to the creation of certain types of power and hinders others. In this sense, hegemony is sustained through the capacity of discourse formation in order to unite masses into shared modes of interpretation or consensus, which consolidate particular relations of domination. This consensus, which Gramsci considers as central to hegemony, is based upon meaning (Ives, 2004).

#### 5.5.2 Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on counterhegemonic intervention

Laclau and Mouffe criticize the utilization of discourse by the right to establish a hegemonic bloc. Just like Gramsci, they do not intend to go beyond hegemony; rather, they intend to construct an alternative hegemony of the left (counter-hegemony) (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2000). In fact, they suspect the idea of transcending hegemony is an act of exclusion, which is similar to Foucault who viewed any claim to truth as an attempted 'will to power'. In this system, truth performs a specific stabilizing role. Therefore, if a discourse is true, to some extent it is stable. Therefore, truth, as a disguised "will to power", becomes

a site of struggle.

Following Foucault, there are two main types of power conflicts (pertaining to discourse, which are implicated in the production of counter-hegemony): first, the conflict within a discourse that will lead to the reproduction of the rules of the game, and second, a deeper conflict over meaning itself. In negotiating such deep conflict, there is the potential to destabilize a discourse and produce an alternative discourse (constructing an alternative social reality). Foucault analyses such deep conflicts in his work on history and considers these conflicts as significant sources of possible social resistance and social critique (Haugaard, 2006).

In this sense, a counterhegemonic strategy does not simply entail the replacement of the personnel of specific relations of domination; rather, it entails a replacement of a world ordering reality, as 'it is hegemony that is the problem, not who benefits from it' (Clegg and Haugaard, 2009, p. 413).

In the same vein, Mouffe (2000) contends that central to the articulation of a counterhegemonic strategy is the internal logic and ontology of existing hegemony. She argues that the most effective strategy for developing counter-hegemony is radicalization of the logic of the key concepts ('quilting points' in her own word) of democratic liberalism. She, then, argues that if the Left utilizes key concepts from an existing hegemonic discourse; the radicalized discourse will earn significant support from the existing hegemonic bloc while creating a new hegemony. Therefore, it can be argued that there is an implicit claim in Mouffe's strategy that such key points have an essential telos or logic, which can be used to articulate a counterhegemonic strategy (Haugaard, 2006).

Laclau and Mouffe (2001), moreover, state that social actors, who oppose some suppressive force (such as patriarchal discourses), develop common identification and, thus, become a common political frontier or horizon. In the same vein, Laclau and Mouffe adds that as the hegemonic bloc condenses the social field into a rigidly ordered ensemble of elements, a logic of equivalence directs the disordered social field into a political frontier that is identified against some common enemy whether internal or external.

At the same time, a logic of difference steps in the opposite direction through sustaining the differential and rule-type situation in order to diffuse antagonism. (Mouffe, 2000; Laclau, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). By proposing logic of equivalence and difference, Mouffe (2000) opposes against the idea that the hegemonic idea can or should be confirmed, rather,

she argues that the crucial objective is to avoid closure for this eliminable gap. Therefore, depending on context, one logic/tradition can be applied for challenging the over-determination of the other.

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) identify the final step of hegemonic/counterhegemonic intervention as articulation of a new hegemony. In this, resistance or opposition (antagonism in their own word) proceeds to fragmentation i.e. an open “void” in social life, which eventually leads to the eruption of contingency, the advent of political subjectivity (frontier formation), and consequently the reordering of social space (Ryan, 2006, p. 194-196). This sequence describes the process formation of hegemony and its reformation (counter-hegemony).

Overall, Laclau and Mouffe do not envisage the counter-hegemonic intervention as a revolutionary act that solves the problem of domination once-and-for-all; rather, they propose a counterhegemonic strategy that, although functions as a directing force, it avoids closure over the social field, therefore, domination can be contested continually.

In this sense, they demonstrate that no discourse is capable of being completely hegemonized, nor can the construction of antagonisms and dislocation be eliminated. As Mouffe puts it, ‘every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony’ (2008, p. 4).

### 5.5.3 Implication of Laclau and Mouffe’s (counter) hegemonic intervention for feminist civil society (feminist cinema and press)

Laclau and Mouffe (2001), without any inclination toward any specific ideology of feminism, did insist, the idea of challenging hegemony can be exercised with regard to women’s empowerment in the context in which “a feminine pole subordinated to a masculine pole” (2001, p. 217-218). Hence their extension of Gramsci’s framework is relevant to this research and, arguably, their ideas around contested discourses in their perspectives on counter-hegemonic intervention is significant to understanding how women’s empowerment may be enacted by social actors in FCS.

They also view hegemony as a decision, which efficiently articulates and determines political identification toward specific structural relations. Thus, the implication of this Laclau and Mouffe’s perspective (outlined above) indicates that in patriarchal societies such

as Iran patriarchal hegemony determines the political trend toward suppressive structural relationships (e.g. legal injustice against women and low women's underrepresentation in political sphere).

At the same time, the pursuit and advancement of FCS - as a site of unified social division - can potentially contribute to realizing feminism more generally as a political frontier. Following this line of argument, this feminist political frontier may destabilize the patriarchal sedimented system of meaning (hegemony) which can culminate in the dislocation of the patriarchal social structure (ibid).

Lastly, in accordance with Mouffe (2006), I contend that Gramsci's work regarding the battle of hegemony can be employed to explain how media (cinema and literature as she exemplified) is a public space in which hegemony can be reproduced, confronted, and counterhegemonic strategies can be articulated. Thus, feminist cinema is arguably a key site in which voices against patriarchal hegemony can be expressed and alternative hegemonies can be pushed forward. Finally, since Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe's theories allow us to investigate empowerment as articulated through the enactment of counterhegemonic discourses - I argue that this is a useful toolbox to unpack the work of social actors in feminist cinema and press.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the theories of Gramsci (1971) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on challenging power relations through the transformation of hegemony and the exercise of "counter-hegemony" in order to provide a conceptual framework that then appears in the three papers that are to come. I have argued that both theoretical positions are useful in conceptualising how the work of social actors in FCS might challenge patriarchal discourses in the Iranian context and enact alternative discourses and their relations of dominance (which can be seen as counter-hegemonic). This argument requires an understanding of civil society which sees it as integral with the state but which recognizes this relationship as characterized by tensions and conflict. I argue this view of civil society is also aligned with Gramsci's definition - also captured in this chapter. As can be seen from the above, such tensions and conflicts (or antagonisms as Laclau and Mouffe put it) are crucial in the articulation of counter-hegemonic discourses, and are always played out in relation to consensus with the hegemonic discourses. This will be seen more concretely as the papers progress drawing on Gramsci's three steps of the hegemonic battle: raising collective critical

consciousness, collective confrontation of the patriarchal hegemony, and enactment of counter hegemonic discourses.

Moreover, this thesis addresses the gap in the literature regarding FCS and its contribution to women's empowerment in countries with a theocratic state, which have been under-researched. In general, "the role of religion in promoting and hindering civil society is a much-neglected topic in the social science" (Powell, 2007). Therefore, this research aims at investigating the potential contribution(s) of FCS to women's empowerment in Iran. This can have implications for the relationship between theocratic states and feminist civil society.

Overall, by exploring the potential contribution of feminist cinema and press/publications to women's empowerment, this study can add to the literature in a range of various disciplines including civil society/state studies, gender studies, feminist media studies, Middle Eastern cultural studies, and feminist cultural politics.

The next chapter will provide an outline of methodology and methods that have been employed and ethical concerns that have been addressed- in this research.



## Chapter 6: Methodology

### Background to methodology

In this chapter, I will be outlining the methodology and methods of data collection, which have been employed in each of the three individual papers as well as detailing the research design. All three papers presented in this thesis have their own methodology section. Therefore, this chapter will demonstrate how the different methods link together as a coherent whole under the conceptual framework regarding civil society and hegemonic interventions outlined in conceptual chapter. Thus, this chapter provides an account of how the sum of three papers amount to a cohesive whole, rather than repetition of the methods already detailed in each paper, (though repetition is sometimes unavoidable). This chapter will also present a detailed account of the ethical concerns raised during the research process and the mitigating strategies that I have employed to address them.

This thesis contains three papers with diverse foci and methodological approaches; together they also constitute a whole with several lines running throughout. For instance, the conceptual framework (outlined in the conceptual chapter) -which discusses Gramsci's - perspectives on of civil society as an emancipatory terrain for subordinated groups through hegemonic battle -has been continually drawn on throughout the thesis and has informed the methodology employed across all three papers. In addition, there is also a sense of development across the thesis in which the three papers build on each other's findings. For instance, paper 1 provides the data analytical approach for the second paper. Therefore, the approach employed in this thesis can be summed up as 'methodological pluralism' (Payne, 2006, p. 174) which I view as a strategy to address the epistemological complexities I have experienced in developing and presenting the three papers of this thesis. The methods applied in the three papers can be briefly identified as follow:

Paper 1 - analysis of a document produced by a high profile (male) religious scholar and published in a feminist publication – using an analytical framework that integrates a Gramscian political framework regarding civil society with Bakhtinian literary concepts as a conceptual tool.

Paper 2 presents an analysis of interviews with feminist writers/ journalists operating in Iranian FCS to explore their perceptions of their role and the contribution of their work in mobilizing women's empowerment.

Paper 3 presents an analysis of interviews with feminist filmmakers as social actors in Iranian FCS focusing on their views regarding their role and the strategies they employ to mobilize women's empowerment. This paper uses the aforementioned Gramscian framework coupled with Laclau and Mouffe's perspective on counterhegemonic intervention.

In the forthcoming section, I outline how the conceptual framework has shaped the overall methodology and focus of the three papers and how this addresses the research questions that this thesis addresses. This will proceed by an account of the methodology applied in each paper as well as ethical considerations and mitigation policies.'

### 6.1 How the conceptual framework informs the research questions

As outlined above, the multiple methods employed in this study can be considered as a 'whole' framed by the Gramscian political perspectives outlined in conceptual chapter, which focuses on the hegemonic battle and transformation of power relations through articulation of counter-hegemony.

Thus, this thesis is entirely concerned with examining and contextualizing this Gramscian framework within the operation of Iranian FCS. In this sense, the conceptual framework, which I have outlined in conceptual chapter, is a key constituent of this thesis since it provides an understanding of Gramscian concepts regarding power and the transformation of power relations through articulation of counter-hegemonic strategy. Moreover, the critical reflection on possible limitations of applying Gramsci's perspectives in Iranian context, this study integrates Gramscian perspectives with that of Laclau and Mouffe's regarding counterhegemonic interventions.

This conceptual framework has been further conceptualized through the construction of the analytical framework presented in paper one as well as the argument -regarding the expansion of Gramsci's perspectives- put forward in papers 2 and 3.

In light of the above, the research questions that this thesis addresses have been framed as follows.

## 6.2 Research questions

1. What ideologies are communicated in the discourses of FCS document? How can these ideologies be analysed using Gramscian theory on battle of hegemony? This question is addressed in Paper 1 particularly where I have analysed one document produced by a religious scholar and published in a feminist publication. Here I explore how this document creates a discourse that can be mapped on to the three steps identified in relation to Gramsci's hegemonic battle. In addition, paper 1 addresses the second part of the question through unpacking the counterhegemonic discourse evident within the document and investigating how this counterhegemonic discourse is articulated within the theocratic state's existing hegemonic discourse. This paper investigates how this articulation occurs through the language of the text rather than through the voices/perceptions of social actors who produced it which is the focus of the next two research questions.
2. How do the social actors within Iranian FCS view their role, contribution, and positionality of their articulated discourse in promoting women's empowerment? Here I am interested in how social actors voice their perceptions of their own role in FCS and the contribution their work makes. I am concerned with how such perceptions fit with Gramsci's three steps of the hegemonic battle in order to see how social actors view both the affordances and limits of their work in mobilizing women's empowerment as well as state/FCS relations in Iran.
3. What are the strategies that the social actors in FCS report employing to operate in their given socio-political context? This question transcends beyond social actors' perceptions of their role and contribution and moves to explore the strategies they report applying within the Iranian socio-political context -in which they are operating- to mobilize women's empowerment. This involves investigating the strategic operation of FCS through employing a Gramscian perspective on the hegemonic battle in addition to using Laclau and Mouffe's perspective on counterhegemonic intervention, which can capture dynamic and nuanced strategies applied in Iranian FCS (see chapter 5).
4. What can these findings tell us about relationship between state and civil society in Iran (gender specific)? In light of the above, I will reflect on what the findings that

address the first three questions tell us about the relationship between state and civil society in a theocratic context like Iran.

In accordance with Kothari (2004), after realizing the research aim and objectives, I need to apply a systematic way of constructing my study using a research design, which justifies the decisions made in the project regarding data collection and generation. Having said that, the question of research methods is secondary to the question of research philosophy that is identified as the basic worldview, which guides the research, not only in choosing method but also in ontological and epistemological ways (Guba and Lincoln, 1994 cited in Saunders, 2012).

The research philosophy employed in this research will be explained in the forthcoming section:

### 6.3 Research philosophy (Ontology and Epistemology)

The research philosophy, which informs this study, is critical realism. This philosophy is adopted for two main reasons. Firstly, the key features of critical realism correspond with the critical and potentially emancipatory objectives of my study, as will be explained in following section. Secondly, critical realism aligns with the conceptual framework, the research design, and data analytical procedures used in my research. This study mainly draws on the works of Sayer (2000) and Collier (1994) on Critical Realism.

#### 6.3.1 Critical Realism and its implications for this research

Critical realism not only differentiates the world from our experience of it, but it also distinguishes between the real, the actual and empirical (Bhaskar, 1989). Firstly, the real is whatever exists; it can be natural or social, irrespective of whether we have an adequate perception of its nature, and whether it is an actual/empirical object for us. Secondly, the real is the domain of objects, their structures and powers. Regardless of being physical or social, these objects have established structures and causal powers, which is the capacity to behave in certain ways, and to have passive powers or causal liabilities i.e. specific vulnerabilities to certain kinds of change.

The real in this definition concerns objects, their natures or structures, and their causal powers and liabilities, whereas, the actual relates to the consequences of the materialization of those powers. Actual is related to what happens when these liabilities and powers are activated and thereby produce change (Sayer, 2000).

The empirical is described as the realm of experience and is connected with either the real or actual, in a contingent way. In that, the actors experience the empirical, which is the subset of all that is real and actual. In this sense, actors' experience is captured in the empirical world through observation, whilst some objects are not directly observable; we can infer their existence empirically through identifying causal mechanisms which explain what is observable. Thus, existence itself does not depend on observability alone. In order to make claims about what does exist, a critical realist considers causal criteria as well as the criterion of observability (Collier, 1994).

This causality relates to a stratified ontology of critical realism in which in social world, social actors and their roles, identities, and the powers that they can draw upon are partly dependent on their relation to one another, and to the relevant constituents of the context (Sayer, 2000). This stratified ontology is also in line with the notion of empowerment in this research since it emphasizes the responsiveness of people to their contexts, which derives particularly from their ability to interpret situations rather than merely being passively shaped by them.

The following figure illustrates the stratified ontology of critical realism further:

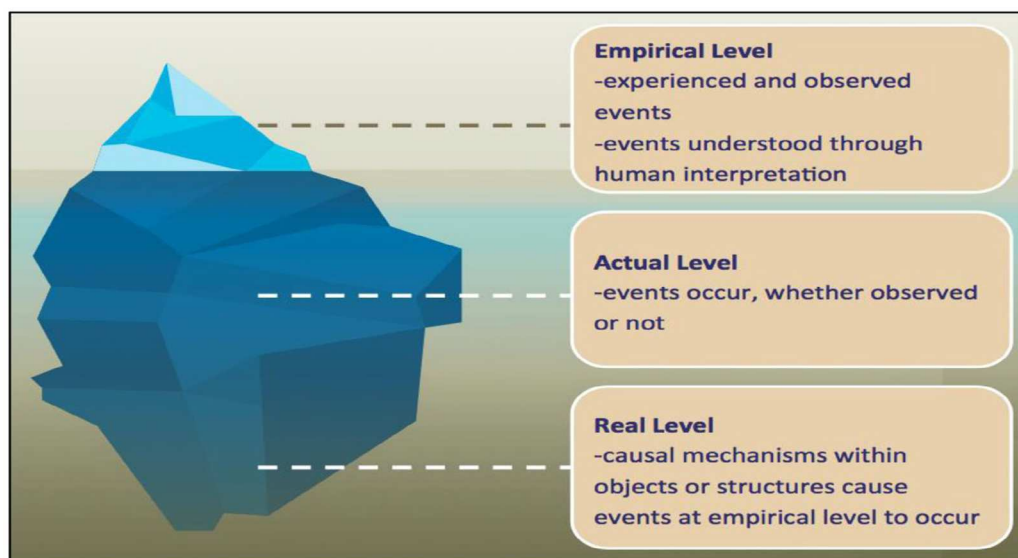


Figure 6: Iceberg Metaphor, Critical Realism ontology, (Fletcher, 2017, p. 183)

In line with the critical realists' 'stratification of reality', Iranian FCS, the state, the patriarchal social structure, and the documents produced by FCS (films, books, magazines) are all considered real since they all possess passive or active power (mechanisms of causality) which might lead to certain kinds of social changes. The actual, in this research,

refers to the process of realization of the latent powers and, consequently, any concrete alteration in power relations that are manifest in challenging the dominant ideology (hegemony) and creating an alternative ideology (counter-hegemony). The empirical in this study is related to the perceptions of the social actors of their own works as well as understandings, perceptions, and experiences of me -as the researcher.

A significant implication of this ontological framework for my research is the recognition of the possibility that powers may exist unexercised (Sayer, 2000). In that, Iranian women and social actors within FCS, although currently subordinated, have latent powers that can be actualized. Similarly, the patriarchal social structure and the theocratic state may have passive power or causal liabilities which render them vulnerable to social change (as Gramsci (1971), Laulau and Mouffe (2001), and Sayer (2000) suggest).

As noted above, in critical realism, the social world, social actors' identities and roles are often interrelated, so that what a social actor and institution can become or do is dependent on their relation to the others. Therefore, the causal mechanisms (power relations and power conflicts) that this research seeks to investigate are not linear; they are dynamic and mutually dependent. To capture such dynamic mechanisms, I have investigated how the discourses of FCS's document are interacting with each other and with the socio-political context in which they are situated (paper #1) and how the social actors in FCS articulate the ways they are responding to and thereby contributing to the production of the socio-political structure by producing and communicating ideologies in their works (paper #2&3). This can provide me with findings which can help me understand the relationship between the theocratic state and feminist civil society in Iran.

#### 6.4 Research methods and approach to data generation

This study concentrates on how the social actors in FCS are supporting women's empowerment in Iran through their publications, films, and human rights activism. *Qualitative research* facilitates access to various and many aspects of social realities. This is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) who state that: "The qualitative research approach is the investigation of things in their natural setting attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.7). Moreover, this approach enables the researcher to "build a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell, 2009, p.37). In general, this approach will be preferred when

the phenomenon under study is complex and less responsive to quantification (Creswell, 2009). In this research, a qualitative approach in the form of multiple case studies is used in order to explore the discourse and perspectives of the social actors who have participated in the study. In order to address the research questions, I have used a research design which combines different qualitative data collection techniques and analysis procedures as outlined below.

## 6.5 Research strategy

### 6.5.1 Collective/ multiple case studies

Case study has been applied in this study since according to Robson (2011), this provides a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence, 'specifically when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not distinctly evident' (Yin, 2009, p.18).

Merriam-Webster's dictionary (2009) defines a case study as: "An intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person, community, or situation) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment" (Cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 134).

According to this definition, case study has some distinctive features (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Stake, 2003), which make it appropriate to this study, which can be outlined as follows:

First, case study focuses on 'individual unit/s'. Stake (2003) calls this feature 'functioning specific' or a 'bounded system'. In the social sciences, the case has working parts, it is purposive, and it is an integrated system yet often has its own entity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Therefore, the significant factor in defining a case study is the choice of individual unit/s of study and the setting of its boundaries. The selection of cases in this study, in line with this prominent factor, is bounded to specific individuals/associations with specific functioning i.e. operating within feminist civil society.

The second characteristic of a case study is that they are intensive. Therefore, case studies comprise a certain amount of completeness, richness, and depth for the unit of study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Accordingly, I have employed case study in this research since I can obtain in-depth information on social actors operating within FCS in Iran, their documents, activities, their experiences, and their coping/thriving strategies. In so doing, I have not only

investigated the potential and perceived role of FCS in promoting women's empowerment in Iran, but also I have explored their navigating/operating strategies to meet this end.

Third, case studies often concentrate on developmental factors which means that a case evolves in time, often as a string of interrelated and concrete events that occur 'in such a place and at such a time' and that constitutes the case as a whole (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). In the same line, applying case study in this research has provided me with comprehensive information on how the activities of FCS in Iran have developed historically since the revolution and the last four decades. Although this is not the main focus of the empirical data collection, knowledge of this historical development has informed my interpretation of the data (e.g. where social actors make reference to previous historical eras as in paper 3).

Lastly, case studies stress the 'relation to the environment' i.e. context. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) state that adopting a case study design will be particularly significant when it is not possible to draw a boundary between the phenomenon and its context. The implication for my research here is that the activities of the social actors in FCS are interrelated with and influenced by the broader socio-political context in Iran.

#### 6.5.2 What type of case study does this research employ?

Among the three types of case studies, which are identified by Stake (2003) (intrinsic, instrumental and collective), I argue that this research is a collective case study due to the nature of sampling, philosophy, and purpose of this study.

Stake (2003) states an intrinsic case study aims at gaining a better understanding of a particular case. This intrinsic case is not selected because it represents other cases or illustrates a particular problem/traits but due to its particularity and ordinariness. The purpose of this research is not to understand some abstract construct or generic phenomenon, nor is this case study aimed at theory building or generalization.

An instrumental case study, according to Stake (2003), is aimed at providing insight into an issue or redrawing generalization. In an instrumental case study, the case is of secondary interest to the phenomena under investigation. Yet it is looked at in depth, its context is scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, in order to help the researcher perceive an external interest. Whether the case/s is considered as typical of other cases or not, its selection as the focus of study in an instrumental approach is to advance understanding of other issues/interests.



Where a researcher has less intrinsic interest in one particular case, they may jointly study a number of cases so as to investigate a phenomenon or general condition. This is called a collective case study, which is an instrumental type study that is extended to several cases. The collective cases in question are chosen because understanding them will lead to gaining a better understanding about a still larger collection of cases (E.g. similarities across cases which can lead to abstraction). Yin (2003) identifies collective case studies as being in the multiple-case category, and focuses on the consistency of the collected findings from different cases that enables the researcher to generalize from the findings at the abstract or conceptual level. I have adopted this type of case study in my research since investigating the activities of the participants (their publication and films) and their experiences have provided me with a broad insight into how this work is viewed to enact the more general phenomena of empowerment in accordance with Gramsci's framework. The collective cases allow me to examine this phenomena and therefore, 'see' the process of empowerment across a range of different cases (i.e. domains of FCS activity) -which are reported by these social actors -within the socio-political context in which they are produced.

Instrumentalist and collective casework requires an understanding of the critical phenomena under study in order to make a good selection of cases (Patton, 1990; Vaughan, 1992, Yin, 1989 cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Here, I argue that my experience as a social actor in FCS and as a researcher on similar topics has provided me with sufficient insight to enable me to make a sensible selection of cases for this research.

This research has started with a topical concern i.e. the potential/perceived contribution of FCS to supporting women's empowerment in Iran, their obstacle/opportunities, and their coping/thriving strategies.

Next, I have concentrated on issue-related observations that are the reported/observed activities of the participants involved in my study. Finally, I have interpreted the reported/observed data that shape the findings. In so doing, I have made analytical generalizations from the particular cases which are the focus of my three papers to the theoretical level (Gramsci's framework on hegemonic battle and transformation of power relation taking place between FCS and state) (Yin, 2003).

The general design of case study in this research is illustrated in the following diagram:

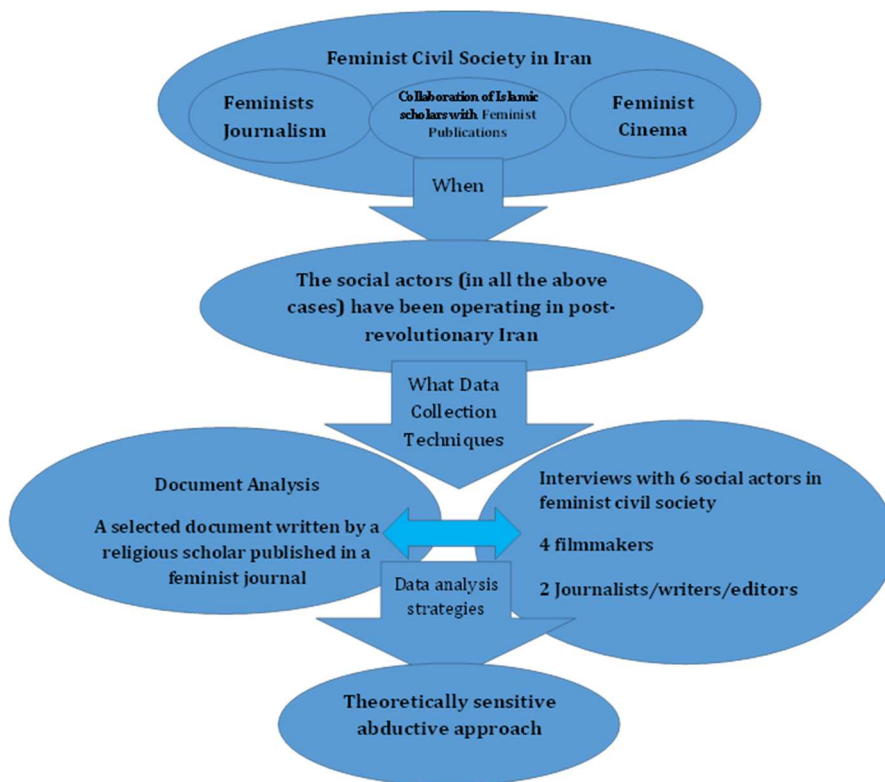


Figure 7: the design of case study in this research

As illustrated above, the overall case is feminist civil society (FCS), which is understood through multiple cases i.e. a) the coalition of a (male) religious scholar with a feminist publication, b) the feminist press, c) feminist cinema. These cases are defined by the areas of their activities within FCS, which in turn identify the boundaries of the cases (i.e. journalism, collaboration of Islamic scholars with feminist publication, and filmmaking).

## 6.6 Data collection strategies:

### 6.6.1 Document analysis

Document analysis has been adopted as the first data collection strategy. It assists me to address the first research question i.e. what ideologies are articulated in the discourse of FCS? and how these ideologies are communicated? In order to carry out document analysis, one selected publication of the feminist journal of “Women’s Strategic Studies” was selected (paper#1).

Hedayat nia has written a dozen of articles concerning women’s social, familial, and legal

rights<sup>27</sup>. This document has been selected for the following reasons; firstly, the focus of this research is the investigation of potential/perceived contribution of FCS to women's empowerment, and more specifically empowerment in relation to legal justice and the political participation of women. As noted in Chapter 2, these themes raise a number of issues which have been the subject of campaigns and debate in FCS in Iran and are identified areas of inequality in several global indices.

The focus of the selected document, which is a case of collaboration between a religious scholar and feminist publication' in Paper 1, is the political decision making around the expediency of women to stand for presidential election based on the term '*Rejaal*' in article 115 of IR constitution. This document, therefore, aligns with the overall aims of this research. Additionally, it offers an interesting site for studying my phenomena of interest (i.e. empowerment discourses within FCS activities) since it is produced through collaboration between progressive religious scholars and feminist activists. Whilst such collaboration has been endorsed in the literature, no study, so far has conducted theoretical analysis of the documents produced by Islamic scholars in favor of women's rights that are published in feminist publication.

Through analyzing this document, I investigated the ideological discourses constructed via the FCS' document, how they are communicated, how they are positioned from the discourses of the state, and how these discourses shaped by and respond to the socio-political context in which they are produced. Therefore, this analysis allowed me to critically examine the Gramscian conceptual framework through exploring whether it is evident in the discourses of this document.

Lastly, the analysis of this document, prior to the semi-structured interviews outlined below, enabled me to establish an initial understanding of the discourses constructed within the work of FCS. Employing this approach facilitated the use of crisscrossed reflection in which an investigation is interpreted against one perspective and then interpreted against others.

### 6.6.2 Qualitative interviews

The structure of a qualitative interview is not rigid and prepared in advance; rather, it is flexible, continuous, and iterative (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). However, it should be borne in

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<sup>27</sup> please see the following page for the list of his related publications:  
<https://www.magiran.com/author/farajollah%20hedayatnia>

mind that the qualitative interview is a “conversation with purpose” (Webb and Webb, 1975, p.130). This study adopted this method for the two following reasons: Firstly, it helped me to generate detailed information on the experiences and opinions of social actors involved in FCS – thereby allowing me to answer the research questions in general and in particular question 2 and 3. This provided me with a broader insight on how these social actors confront the patriarchal hegemonic discourse through creating a dialogue and communicating alternative ideologies in their documents.

Additionally, I have viewed the data from semi-structured interviews with social actors in FCS and document analysis as complementary since each type of data informs the other. The second reason for conducting interviews is that: along with document analysis, it enabled me to learn about the obstacles that social actors within FCS perceive they are facing and how they report strategies for navigating the context in which they are operating. This has provided me with some implications for understanding the relationship between state and feminist civil society in Iran and how the discourses of the documents produced by FCS are shaped by and respond to their given socio-political environments.

#### *6.6.2.1 Semi-structured interviews*

The particular form of qualitative interview I have used in this study is semi-structured in nature. Ritchie et al (2013) argue that in order to conduct semi-structured interviews, the researcher must construct the themes and questions in advance. In this case, such themes and questions were developed in line with research questions, research objectives, and informed by the conceptual framework drawn on Gramsci’s perspectives on civil society and transformation of power through hegemonic battle. In addition, since the interviews took place after I had begun the document analysis above, I was able to adapt the questions asked in light of the initial stages of this analysis.

However, in order to develop rapport and gain a deeper understanding of the situation through the interviews, I asked some questions which were not planned initially. In accordance with Saunders et al (2012), I posed a range of different questions including open questions, closed questions, and probing questions. Concerning the means of recording data, I opted for audio recording for two reasons. It firstly, allowed me to focus more observantly on the interviewees, which then reduced the possibility of misinterpretation or over interpretation of the data (Saunders et al, 2012). In addition, audio recording the interviews

with social actors increased the authenticity of the data since it was retrievable and I could check my understanding on repeated occasions.

The participants in semi-structured interviews in this study included eleven social actors in FCS in Iran who are filmmakers, writers/publishers, and journalists whose publication, artwork, and activities are mainly focused on empowering women in two areas i.e. political participation of women and legal injustice against women (Please see interview guide in Appendix 6). I have disregarded five interviews due to limitations with regard to the PhD completion timetable, the required word counts, and to a certain extent the irrelevance of the articulated material within the interviews.

Thus, six interviews out of eleven form the data that is the focus of papers 2 and 3. These interviews were selected for the papers based on their capacity to empirically exemplify the theoretical and conceptual argument being put forward. For instance, in paper 2 I have focused on two journalists operating in FCS because they provide contrasting accounts of how social actors might articulate a counter-hegemonic discourse (following Gramsci's account hegemonic battle). In the following section, I will further explain the sampling criteria and the details of the involvement of the research participants.

#### 6.7 The rationale for the selection of the participants

Among the various forms of sampling, which is outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), this study adopted information-oriented sampling -with the sample determined by the selection of cases. As noted above, the overall case in this study is the case of Iranian FCS, which (in this study) consists of a) the alliance of religious scholars and feminist publication, b) the feminist press, and c) feminist cinema in Iran. In order to select the cases for this research, I have used two information- oriented sampling techniques. I have adopted both 'Maximum Variation case' and 'Paradigmatic case' strategies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The maximum variation strategy allows one to obtain information about the significance of various circumstances -in relation to the selected cases- in terms of process and outcome (ibid). Thus, this study has focused on diverse social actors in various types of FCS activity ranging from filmmakers in feminist cinema to writers, journalists, and publishers active in feminist press/publication. They are different based on the type of activity they engage in but also their experience; yet, they all articulate that they focus on promoting women's empowerment through their activities.

The other strategy adopted for the selection of cases in this study was the 'Paradigmatic Case' strategy. This involves selecting cases that highlight the general characteristics of the society in question. Hubert and Dreyfus (1986) see paradigmatic cases and case studies as central to human learning as they have metaphorical and prototypical value (Hubert and Dreyfus, 1986 cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). However, there are no rule-based criteria for identifying paradigmatic cases, rather, according to Dreyfus, intuition is central in identifying pragmatic cases (ibid). Having said that, intuitive decisions must be accountable, in the sense of being sensible/explicable to other practitioners. As such, in this study, although I selected participants who aligned with some of the characteristics of FCS in Iran, using my inside knowledge as a social activist, I also checked my reasoning with my supervisory team to ensure my rationale was sound.

The cases in this study were selected since their activities are focused on the two main social areas, which are political participation of women and legal injustice against women. While all the participants in this study focus on wide range of social issues in their activities, legal injustice against women and low/none political representation of women in Iran are common themes in their work.

Although six participants is a small number, this was justified by the richness of the data generated through the interviews and the extent to which they met the requirements of the three papers.

Lastly, the participants were all female, as they constitute *Feminist Civil Society*, which is defined as: "women organizations/ institutions that aim to promote women and to improve women's status" (Howell and Mulligan, 2005, p. 205).

#### 6.7.1 Identification, approach, and recruitment of the participants

I initially recruited participants through my own personal network which I have developed through my experience of working in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Iran over the past 6 years. I did this by contacting various 'gatekeepers' who are involved in leading and co-coordinating relevant NGOs in Iran and asked their help in contacting social actors within FCS including filmmakers, journalists, and writes.

I worked with these gatekeepers to identify the research participants who have authored documents/directed films relevant to the research objectives. I also used on-line searching and reviewing of the FCS literature to ensure recruitment of participants meets the inclusion

criteria referred to in my section on the selection of participants above.

My initial email to participants introduced the research and explained that I would contact them by phone to see if they were interested. I was conscious not to rely solely on email for recruitment as many social actors are high profile people and extremely busy and not likely to respond to a single email. Once participants had been contacted by email, for those participants who had not responded, I telephoned them to explain my research. After explaining my research, I requested them to voluntarily participate in my research and provided them with the participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form by email. I reminded them that participation was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw from the research at any time (please, see Appendix 7).

Participants were given at least two weeks to digest the information in the PIS and decide whether to take part in the research. If they decided to participate, I requested that they sign the consent form. At this point, I again emphasized the voluntary nature of their participation and that they were free to withdraw at any time.

The PIS and Consent form were provided in Persian- translation validated by other postgraduate researchers and staff at the University of Manchester whose mother tongue is Persian.

I did not anticipate that the research participants in this study would experience any pain, discomfort, inconvenience or changes to their lifestyles. However, I prepared a Distress Policy -which details mitigation strategies- in the unlikely event that any of the participants would become distressed in response to an interview question.

## 6.8 Conducting the interviews

Each semi-structured interview took between one hour and half to four hours. I originally planned to conduct interviews that lasted no more than an hour and half; however, the participants had much more than expected to say, therefore, some interviews took about 4 hours.

The interviews took place in a room in a university setting in Iran and/or in a vocational/language institute. The research participants were informed that they could take a break in the middle of the interviews or finish the discussion some other time -if they wished so. Where the interview lasted over an hour and a half, I ensured that both participants and I took a break to avoid harm or inconvenience. The semi-structured interviews were

audio recorded with the permission of the participants.

As noted above, the questions asked in the interviews were in alignment with the research questions and research objectives. I revised the questions four times while writing the literature review and context chapters and the analysis of the document that inform the first paper. Reviewing the records and the transcriptions demonstrates that a couple of participants avoided responding to some questions or responded very briefly to questions that asked about how their positions and arguments relate to that of the IR state. This inspired me to reflect further on my positionality while conducting this research that demonstrated in the following section.

## 6.9 Positionality and reflexivity

### 6.9.1 Positionality

Knowledge production is a social practice in which the conditions and social relations of the researcher with the research participants (Sayer, 1992) influence the outcome of the research. Research cannot be considered complete “until it includes an understanding of the active role of the analyst’s self, which is exercised throughout the research process” (Smith, 1988, cited in England 1994, 248).

The researcher needs to recognise the role their specific positionality plays in producing knowledge (McDowell, 1992). Here, positionality refers to “perspectives shaped by researchers’ unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identifiers” (Mullings, 1999, 337).

Thus, it is crucial to identify the social position that informs my perspectives about the subject under study. As I mentioned earlier in Introduction Chapter, although I was born and raised in a middle-class family wherein I was relatively empowered, I have experienced gender inequality and gender injustice within the patriarchal society in which I was raised. This motivated my decision to join a few civil society organisations (CSOs) whose interventions focused on supporting marginalised women and disadvantaged children.

Having been an active member of these CSOs, I have gained deeper understanding of both gender injustice practices and the state’s oppressive approaches and agendas toward civil society in Iran. Additionally, learning about the agendas and practices of CSOs - in other countries- with similar interventions and beneficiaries, raised questions about the



differences between the agendas of Iranian and foreign CSOs; and how Iranian CSOs can improve their interventions within the given socio-political environment.

This motivated me to focus my research (MSc dissertation) on the women's CSOs in Iran. The findings of this research showed that these CSOs were striving to enhance women's empowerment at an individual level -by providing resources to limited numbers of disadvantaged women- rather than promoting collective and transformational empowerment. The findings<sup>28</sup> of this research together with my experience of working for the aforementioned CSOs inspired me to a) focus on understanding the contribution of Iranian feminist civil society to women's empowerment in cultural realms of civil society and b) contribute my share in theoretical and methodological understanding of such contributions in this thesis.

My previous experiences and positionality were helpful during fieldwork since I was well aware of the context of research, it was easier to access and build rapport with the participants of this research. The links I had before the fieldwork aided me to arrange meetings with research participants. For example, the funder and coordinator of one the NGOs I have been working for, who was one of the participants in my MSc research, facilitated an interview with a high profile filmmaker. This filmmaker, moreover, functioned as a gatekeeper facilitating interviews with the rest of filmmakers. Had I not had this established network within FCS, accessing the internationally claimed filmmakers and journalists/writers would have been impossible.

My positionality did not only benefit me in terms of access to participants but also it affects the time and resources (the archive of their films and magazines) the participants dedicated to my research. In this, although they are all internationally acclaimed filmmakers and high profile journalists, the majority of them spent more than two hours on each interview. In some cases that the interviews did not finish within one session, they offered meeting for the second and even the third time to complete the interview. Moreover, they provided me with the archive of their magazines, journals, and films in order to support my research.

In the same vein, my positionality had an important influence on the nature of our interactions as well as my learning experiences throughout the research procedure. This is related to the special jargon or terms the social actors used. For example, they kept refereeing to certain processes and social events that were mutually comprehensive or they kept

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<sup>28</sup> For the further details on the findings of this research, please, see the introduction chapter.

referring to the state officials as “they” or “these men” that I could understand to whom they are referring. Lastly, they invited me to review their -yet to release- films and their book launches in order to broaden my understanding of their activities and works.

However, my positionality as a researcher undertaking PhD studies in a Western university might have influenced some of the research participants –to make prior assumptions about me. I noticed that some participants were initially reluctant to talk openly or elaborately and they confined their response to brief answers or they used a moderate and soft tone. I perceived it as either they considered me as state’s agent or a researcher affiliated to UK government. Bearing it in mind, I tried to minimise such assumptions by adequately explaining the objectives of my research verbally and by giving them the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (please, see Appendix 7). Most of the interviewees shared their ideas more openly afterwards.

Overall, my positionality has undoubtedly influenced my research, and this will be discussed briefly in the following section.

#### 6.9.2 Reflexivity

It is crucial to reflect on how the researcher’s preconceived assumptions, beliefs and background can impact on the way data are generated and analysed (Snape and Spencer, 2003). The process of reflexivity entails the “process of continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of a researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (Berger 2015, 220). Therefore, the aim of reflexivity is not to avoid biases, rather, to acknowledge and reflect on how those biases shape the processes and the outcomes of the research (Creswell, 2007).

In this sense, reflexivity helps me to self-reflect on and recognise my positionality and the relation to the research participants as well as the broader research context. The primary reason for choosing this specific research topic was my personal experience of both being an Iranian woman and therefore being subjected to gender injustice in a patriarchal society as well as being a member of FCS striving to tackle gender inequality.

Thus, it is not only the knowledge gap -on the operation of the FCS under a theocratic state and their coping and thriving strategies to foster women’s empowerment-, which inspired me to select this topic. It is also my intention to understand the contribution of cultural realms within FCS to women’s empowerment in Iran and to contribute my share in theoretical and

methodological understanding of such contributions. I perceived this might lead to strategising ways to enhance the operation and contribution of Iranian FCS to women's empowerment within their given socio-political environment. Such personal attachment with the research topic has had its advantages and disadvantages.

On one hand, expressing the personal reasons for selecting the topic of this research helped me to build a quick rapport with the research participants. The fact that I have been an active member of FCS gave me an 'insider' position (Berger, 2015, p.222). However, since the participants considered me as 'insider', they started become more receptive and open. In a couple of cases, they raised their voices while they were sharing their experiences of negotiating with state's bodies to secure the permit for production and dissemination of their works. I suggested that the interview could be discontinued. However, they insisted that their stories should be told in order to enhance the contribution of their works and to improve their negotiating power with the state.

As I progressed in the fieldwork, I started reflecting on how their tone might have affected the way I understand their operation and their relation with the state. In writing my findings and in synthesising the data, I compared their narratives with those who had a moderate tone in reporting their negotiations with the state. In so doing, I tried to make sure that they are equally represented.

On the other hand, my personal attachment to the research topic also influenced my interview with a religious scholar (the author of the document analysed in paper 1). For example, in investigating his motivation for contributing to feminist publications, my concern about amendment of the law was explicit. This scholar was not defensive but supportive of the amendment of the law regarding the expediency of women for presidential position. Having said that, he told me that "those of you who are studding in the West, are highly influenced by the Western thinking...". I clarified again that my PhD studies was not funded by UK government and it had not in any ways influenced my research. I also appreciated his efforts and contribution to feminist publications. Then the interview continued smoothly, though, I decided to discard this interview since he mainly focused on discussing SDGs 2030 and the discussion was deviated from its focus. From this experience, I learned to frame my questions with the religious scholars, in case of future potential interviews, by appreciating their contribution to feminist publication and by allowing them to tell their prospective toward their contribution.

Lastly, my initial assumptions also changed during fieldwork. Before starting the fieldwork, I assumed that all the social actors in FCS might have negative perspective towards state/civil society in Iran. However, one filmmaker mentioned the certain occasions in which the state financially supported filmmakers. Furthermore, my initial assumption was that the filmmakers would adopt more informal strategies to negotiate with state officials. Yet, my findings demonstrated that they collectively engaged through authorised channels to negotiate with the state. These new findings made me review my theoretical discussion to inform my analysis better. Further reflection over the entire process of research including data analysis is presented in the discussion chapter.

#### 6.10 Storage and protection of data

Data gathered from the participants have only been used as per the consent agreement signed by the participant (please, see Appendices 7-10). No data or personal information has been shared with any third parties. Other personal information such as phone numbers, email addresses or business cards have only been used for the research purpose and have been stored in an encrypted medium or locked filing cabinet.

The analysis of the interview data was conducted in a private study area in Tehran, Iran, and/or at University of Manchester by myself. The 'essential documents' and data for this study will be stored in the University archive for a maximum of five years.

I have presented my preliminary findings to my research participants verbally towards the end of the research and I will provide a written report which can be circulated amongst participants and potentially disseminated more widely within the FCS organizations.

The participants will *not* be identified through dissemination and have been anonymised throughout this thesis (see ethics below).

#### 6.11 Data analysis

The data has been translated and transcribed by myself, I have done all my tertiary studies in English and I did my undergrad in English linguistics, these experiences have helped me translate the data. Following transcription and translation of the collected data, data analysis was carried out directed by the purpose of each paper.

In an overview, one may argue that the papers are structured around discourse analysis (paper #1), discourse analysis (paper #2), and thematic analysis (paper #3). This, however,

would not recognize the complexity of the analyses, the interconnections, and the interrelations between these forms of analyses that are conducted in this thesis. For example, the overview of the literature on the regime's policy -around women's standing for presidential election (in the context section) - informed the selection of the document analyzed in paper one. Thus, the review of the literature precedes the discourse analysis of the document -produced by a high profile (male) religious scholar and published in a feminist publishing house.

Moreover, although each paper has diverse aims, focuses on different forms of data, and employs a different data analytical approach, a common underlying factor -in all three papers- is the use of the Gramscian conceptual framework outlined in the conceptual chapter.

I now discuss the analytical frameworks that have been developed/employed in each study in order to explain how they each contribute to a cohesive whole project. In addition, I will also present the rationale for applying them as data analytical approach in each study.

**Paper #1: The role and contribution of feminist publication in promoting women empowerment and gender equality in Iran: the case of “*Rejaal*”<sup>29</sup> and the expediency of women to stand for the presidential election.**

This paper proposes an analytical framework that identifies the hegemonic project undertaken by document written by a progressive religious scholar and published in a feminist journal. This document discusses the use of the term *Rejaal* in political decision making around “if women can stand for presidential election”. As noted already, this framework draws on a Gramscian perspective on civil society as a potential empowering sphere wherein subordinated social groups- including women- can transform the power relations through raising collective critical consciousness, confronting the hegemony of the dominant group, and articulating counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). In addition, it utilizes Bakhtinian “Dialogism” to explore how FCS's documents communicate their ideological positions in order to promote women's empowerment and create counter hegemony in accordance with the Gramscian perspective on the transformation of power relation through hegemonic battle.

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<sup>29</sup> *Rejaal*, is a Quranic term that is referenced in IR constitutional (Article 115) with regard to “whether or not women can stand for presidential position. While the literal meaning of this- formal and classic- term refers to men, Islamic scholars interpreted it as religious and political person.

Given that Gramsci's theories/concepts focused on empowerment of subaltern social groups were not reflected in his writing on language and grammar, I have integrated his related theories with Bakhtinian's perspectives to explore the politics of language and generation of meaning (discourse), within the document produced by feminist publication. This integration have enabled me to use Bakhtin's literary analytical concepts including heteroglossia, dialogism, and othering- as conceptual tools- in order to analyse the discourse of this document. This has allowed me to investigate the potential alignment between the hegemonic project articulated by the document and Gramsci's conceptual framework. In so doing, I have explored how the social actors in FCS are creating dialogue, heteroglossia, and multiaccentuality in their documents and artwork and whether/how, these strategies might help them to de-hegemonize the dominant patriarchal hegemony and create an alternative hegemony based on the will of subordinated group (women).

Paper 1 provides further detail on how I have defined and operationalised this conceptual framework.

### **Paper # 2: The role and contribution of feminist's press in promoting women's empowerment in Iran: the analysis of the interviews with two journalists in Iranian feminist press**

In order to seek evidence of a hegemonic project at work in feminist press in Iran, in this paper, I present an analysis of interviews with two influential authors/journalists. This examines how these feminist journalists/writers perceive their role and contribution to women's empowerment through creating public debates/dialogue and making demands which enact the identified underpinning processes of Gramscian hegemonic battle i.e. raising collective critical consciousness, confronting the hegemony of the dominant group, and articulating counterhegemony (Gramsci, 1971).

Thus, I have explored whether/how the dialogue and demands that feminist press articulates and communicates are in accordance with the Gramscian perspective on the exercise of hegemonic battle. In this sense, although I did not employ Bakhtinian's literary concepts as a data analytical tool; I utilize the epistemology of Bakhtinian's dialogism<sup>30</sup> in order to

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<sup>30</sup> 'Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world whereby everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole-there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue. Therefore, the unitariness is relative to the overpowering force of multi-voices and thus dialogism '(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426).

explore how both journalists articulate a hegemonic battle in their works -in order to foster women's empowerment- and more importantly to compare their accounts on their articulated discourse. This is manifest in their words reporting the use of different voices/discourses in interaction with their audience, government bodies, and myself throughout the interviews.

Overall, I have explored how the journalists/writers in Iranian feminist press see and report their contribution to the confrontation of the dominant patriarchal hegemony and articulation of counterhegemonic discourse to support women's empowerment.

### **Paper # 3: Iranian feminist filmmakers' perceived contribution to women's empowerment**

In this paper, the data is resourced from interviews that were conducted with four leading women filmmakers in Iran. The interviewees are all internationally praised film makers whose films have common themes of social injustice and inequality, discrimination and injustice against women, breaking traditional/conventional norms about women, women's social positions and rights in Iranian patriarchal society, and political representation of women in Iranian public space. I have selected these participants purposefully based on their knowledge and hands-on experience in film making with respect to two main themes i.e. the legal injustice against Iranian women and the low political representation of Iranian women (please, see the context chapter for the rationale of the selection of these two themes).

To address the research questions outlined earlier, I applied an abductive research approach (Given, 2008) which begins with a thematic analysis of the collected data and proceeds to map this onto a Gramscian conceptual framework which is then extended using the Laclau and Mouffe's perspective on counterhegemonic interventions (as outlined in chapter 2). The themes generated are outlined in the paper. I have utilized thematic analysis in this paper in order to a) capture the range of understandings that the filmmakers articulate in relation to the role their films play in promoting women's empowerment; b) explore how these understandings fit with the theoretical account of how empowerment and transformation of power relation occur (drawing on the conceptual framework described above, and looking for points of departure between the themes and the theory to generate new insights into how counter hegemony is articulated in the eyes of feminist filmmakers); c) investigate what strategies these filmmakers reported employing in order to navigate in the socio-political context wherein they are operating. Further detail on the operationalization of this framework is provided in paper 3.

Taken together, all three papers present different perspectives on how a Gramscian framework can be employed in studying the work and perspectives of social actors in FCS in Iran. In this sense, I argue that using the theory in diverse ways allows me to explore its value and usefulness ‘in practice’ and rigorously examine its explanatory power. However, I have explored the limits of contextualization of Gramsci’s perspectives to capture the hegemonic project of FCS in Iran and offered potential extensions to his theories (e.g. by using Bakhtin and Laclau and Mouffe) which I argue, are essential in order to theoretically and empirically identify the undertaken FCS’s hegemonic project in Iran.

The following section will detail the ethical concerns and the related mitigation policies taken in this research.

### 6.12 Ethical considerations and mitigation strategies

This section outlines the ethical considerations relevant to this research. In this sense, I outline how I have followed University protocols and guidelines set by the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee. Additionally, I reflect on my position in conducting this research in order to recognize my authority as a researcher and the ethical implications of this. The researcher position is a powerful position and without critical reflection, it can sometimes lead to exploitation of the participants (in terms of both how the research is planned and carried out and how the collected data is interpreted). Thus, my reflexivity as a researcher is key to understanding and reducing such exploitations.

In the following sections, I will firstly identify the main ethical considerations in this study; which will be followed by outlining the mitigation strategies adopted:

- First, due to the theocratic structure of the state and its policies and perspective towards civil society and women’s rights movement (as outlined in Chapter 2), this research potentially raises sensitive issues and needed to be carried out cautiously.

In light of this, I made effective precautions to protect my research participants and myself from any harm, which may have resulted from participating in this research. A key thing to note here is that in recent times, I am aware that Iranian civil society (including FCS) has been operating freely and legally in what might be considered to be an open political climate– compared to the conservative era of 2005-2013. Since the last presidential election in 2013 in which the Reformists won, Iran has enjoyed a more liberal political climate in which many key terms in public discourse have been changed. Aligned with these reforms,



an environment of understanding and trust between state and civil society has been developed which has positively influenced the legal status of the civil society organizations and their operations. Therefore, civil society organizations are recognized as independent as long as they are operating within religious regulatory framework of the state.

Furthermore, civil society organizations have been granted legal status, which means they can legally operationalize their interventions/activities. They also have the right of association, co-operation, and communication with public bodies and other civil society organizations. They can also highlight gender issues in the national media, so long as this does not contravene the religious regulatory framework. Furthermore, following the reformists recent international policies, FCS in Iran has been able to cooperate and re-establish dialogue with global women's movements, which has benefited women activists and feminist civil society in Iran.

Given this more open political space, I felt that conducting this research at this point in time carried less risk in terms of negative implications such as intimidation or distress to the research participants or/and me. Here my insider role as an activist in FCS is critical in arriving at this judgement, with this providing a more reliable picture on the risks associated with the research than might be the case if I had been evaluating the ethical risks as an outsider to the Iranian context.

Having said this, an important mitigation strategy here was to a) be cautious and diplomatic in my use of the language in terms of depoliticizing the discourse of data both at the level of data collection and during the data analysis; b) ensure that I recruited participants from organizations which are legally recognized and have familiarity with the state and clerical leaders ; c) ensure that myself and my participants do not have contact with the (state and foreign) media regarding this research during data collection and analysis. This also included being aware and cautious of the outlets through which the research will be reported after completion (please see the final part of the introduction chapter for the potential journals to which the papers will be submitted). Again, I reiterate that the research participants and I are familiar with the Iranian politics and the discourse of Iranian government, and are also experienced in how to use the language of clerical political leaders to act as social actors in civil society and to conduct research projects. This was part of the criteria for recruiting the participants.

- The A second key ethical issue identified related to, ensuring the confidentiality of the personal information of the research participants, in order to avoid inflicting any harm from participating in the study.

Here, I applied three different strategies.

Firstly, the interviews were conducted in a private room in a university or vocational/language institute where the research participants were comfortable and safe.

Secondly, concerning the anonymity and possible identification of the participants, I made sure that the participants were not easily identifiable in the reporting of the data. This was challenging since some social actors are 'well known' in the Iranian FCS context and could be easily identifiable from the data. Therefore, I have undertaken the following measures to anonymize their identities within this thesis and the broader dissemination process:

a) I have chosen participants or social actors whose works focused on the broad themes of legal injustice against women and the political participation of women. There are many social actors working in these areas of FCS in Iran, which makes it difficult to identify a particular actor since there are many documents produced on these topics.

b) I have recruited some participants who have not published seminal works i.e. that is highly distinctive in terms of content and contribution.

c) Full anonymization of the data - In addition to anonymizing all person identifiable data, I have not used the title of any document or film in reporting the data. All of the names that appear in the three papers are pseudonyms in that I have replaced the names of individuals, places, organizations etc. I found this feasible given the sheer scale of documents and films that are focused on gender issues/equality as well as the large number of social actors in FCS in Iran. Furthermore, any analysis of such documents have been translated from Persian to English - which further distanced my reporting of the data from the author(s) work. Therefore, the identity of the participants has been protected as far as is possible.

The third strategy was to keep personal information in a secured file. The personal information (name and contact address) of the research participants have been stored separately from the transcript of their interview and their documents and cross-referenced by a code known by myself- as the principal researcher alone. I have translated and transcribed all the data myself. Furthermore, all the data, files and transcripts have been analyzed by myself in a private study using a private dedicated laptop computer, encrypted

and double pass-worded which will not be accessible to anyone else.

Lastly, after the transcription of the audio recordings took place, the data on the audio tape were immediately destroyed. The transcriptions were subsequently transferred to the University of Manchester secure network drives via the VPN (virtual private network).

- A third issue identified was the need to avoid causing any inconvenience or harm to the research participants in terms of location of interviews and/or drawing them away from their work time or lunch break.

Regarding this third ethical concern, I conducted interviews in a private room in a university or a vocational/foreign language institute. Moreover, I had sought to conduct interviews outside of their work time.

- A fourth ethical issue is about avoiding physical harm to the research participants due to the long duration of the interviews (four hours in some cases).

Considering this concern, I gave utmost attention to keeping the interviews as brief as possible in order to avoid exhaustion by guiding the discussion to avoid digression from the topic. Nevertheless, some of the interviews were much longer than anticipated because the participants wanted to express their perspectives in full and tell the story of their work as social actors. Since it was important that I give the participants the opportunity to have a voice, I did not want to stop the interview. However, I did remind participants that we should take a break, and offered the opportunity to conduct the interview in two parts. Furthermore, before each interview, participants were informed that they could discontinue the conversation at any point when they feel uncomfortable in the flow of the discussion or feel exhausted and resume at a later date.

- A fifth ethical issue that I have considered is the need to build rapport with the participants.

In this sense, as part of the information giving and consent taking process, I disclosed my full career positionality to all research participants. This involved informing them that I have been an active member in some of the civil society organizations that are working on gender projects in Iran and a PhD researcher affiliated with University of Manchester. I also informed participants that I have already conducted several research projects on civil society in Iran and I shared these research reports with participants so that they could understand my positionality in the research better.

- A sixth ethical concern was to secure voluntary and fully informed consent from the research participants.

As noted already, the research participants were informed in detail about the research aims and objectives as well as the affiliation of the researcher to University of Manchester. I also informed them that participation was entirely voluntary and they free to withdraw at any time. The participants were given two weeks to make a decision about whether they were willing to take part in this study. Once participants committed to taking part either through email or through phone call, I emailed them the PIS form and the consent form. At this point, I reminded participants once again that they could withdraw from the process whenever they find it necessary. Social actors (interviewees) were asked to sign the consent form prior to the interview.

### Chapter summary

This chapter presents the whole research project that the three papers in the thesis draw on and demonstrates how they form a cohesive whole. In so doing, this chapter has described the project's philosophy and methodology in relation to the overall aim of this research - that is to identify the contribution of Iranian FCS to women's empowerment, their experienced opportunities/obstacles, and their coping/thriving strategies in the given socio-political environment.

Additionally, the three papers and their foci, contain diverse data sources which I have outlined and I have also introduced the data analytical approaches employed in each paper. However, I have also argued throughout that all three papers share a common underlying conceptual/analytical framework, which draws on Gramsci's perspectives on the transformation of power relations through hegemonic battle within the civil society sphere. With this mind, I have argued that the papers can be seen as focusing on 'cases' which help to understand the wider phenomena of empowerment in Iranian FCS. These diverse cases have helped me to examine the value of Gramsci's concepts to the Iranian context - allowing me to consider the extent to which these concepts can be analytically generalized.

Lastly, this chapter allowed me to present information about this research project, which would not be necessarily reported in a journal articles. Particularly key has been the ethical issues and the mitigation strategies which required specific attention because of the nature of this research.

## Paper 1: The role and contribution of feminist publication in promoting women empowerment in Iran: the case of “*Rejaal*”<sup>31</sup> and the expediency of women to stand for the presidential election.

### **Abstract**

This paper proposes an analytical framework, which is used to capture the hegemonic project undertaken by feminist author(s) -in the Iranian feminist publications as an element of feminist civil society (FCS). This framework draws on a Gramscian perspective on civil society as a potential empowering terrain in which subordinated social groups -including women- can change the relations of power through raising collective critical consciousness, confronting the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group, and articulating counter hegemonic discourse (Gramsci, 1971, 1980). It also utilizes Bakhtinian “Dialogism” to explore how document(s) -produced by a feminist publication- communicate their ideological positions in order to promote empowerment and whether/how, their hegemonic project is in accordance with the Gramscian perspective on hegemonic battle as a means of transforming power relations. I demonstrate the usefulness of this framework through an analysis of one key publication, which discusses the use of the term *Rejaal*<sup>32</sup> in political decision making around “if women can stand for presidential election”.

This analysis suggests that the author is engaged in the articulation of a counterhegemonic discourse that operates within the Islamic discourse of the theocratic state. Therefore, by using a Gramscian-Bakhtinian analytical framework to analyse the above-mentioned document, this paper demonstrates how the author is able to challenge predominant discourses regarding gender power relations in Iran. In so doing, I show how the document creates a heteroglot environment in which diverse voices/discourses condition each other including the dominant patriarchal discourse, which, consequently, culminates in decentralization/confrontation of the dominant discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, Gramsci, 1971). Lastly, this paper contends that the dialogue/interaction between FCS (here, feminist publication) and progressive religious scholars provides social actors in FCS with critical approaches toward religion that can be mobilized in favour of women’s rights.

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<sup>31</sup> *Rejaal*, is a Quranic term that is referenced in IR Constitution (Article 115) with regard to “whether or not women can stand for presidential position. While the literal meaning of this- formal and classic- term refers to men, Islamic scholars interpreted it as religious and political person.

Key words: Women Empowerment, Power, Hegemony, Civil Society/State, Feminist Civil Society.

## **Introduction**

A significant body of literature demonstrates that the empowerment of women and achievement of gender equality are catalysing the attainment of sustainable human development, peace, and good governance (UN Women, 2013b, Potter, 2004, UN, 2014, United Nations Global Impact, 2018). Thus, it is argued that governments should be committed to guaranteeing gender equality and equal opportunities for women to participate in the social, economic, and political realms (UN Women, 2013a). In contexts where there is an observed absence of accountable government mechanisms, which address the status of women in society, many argue that civil society can be a potential channel through which women can exercise socio-political power and articulate their agenda (Potter, 2004, Phillips, 2002; Bystydzienski and Sekhon, 1999; Howell and Mulligan, 2005; Pateman, 1988).

This paper reports on research, which examines the role of feminist publications- as an emergent feminist civil society (FCS) - in championing gender inequality in Iran. Using discourse analysis, this paper considers how the documents produced by feminist publications can support women's empowerment in Iran, how they articulate and communicate particular ideologies, and how these ideologies are positioned in relation to the ideologies of the state (Iranian government).

This paper proposes an analytical framework, which is used to identify the ideological project undertaken by author(s) within feminist publication. This framework draws on a Gramscian perspective on civil society as a potentially emancipating terrain in which subordinated social groups- including women- can change the relations of power through raising collective critical consciousness, confronting the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group, and articulating counter hegemonic discourse (Gramsci, 1971). It also utilizes Bakhtinian “Dialogism”<sup>33</sup> - as a conceptual tool- to explore how documents produced by FCS (feminist publication) communicate their ideological positions in order to promote empowerment in accordance with Gramscian perspective on hegemonic battle as means of power transformation. I demonstrate the potential usefulness of this framework through an analysis of one key publication, which discusses the use of the term *Rejaal* in political decision-making around “if women can stand for presidential election”. I chose to

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<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin, (1981); Ives, 2004.

focus on the (Quranic) term *Rejaal* due to its crucial role in determining whether women can stand for presidential election. Currently, this is the only term- used in the IR constitution- to determine that women cannot be approved as an eligible presidential candidate<sup>34</sup>. The document analysed in this paper discusses the interpretation of *Rejaal* by Islamic scholars in the early history of Islam, the lawmakers in IR, and progressive contemporary Islamic scholars. It is worth mentioning that the author of this article is a high profiled (male) religious scholar, however, the article is published in a feminist Journal. This author has written a dozen articles concerning women's social, familial, and legal rights<sup>35</sup>. This article was selected in accordance with the foci of this study which are a) investigating how the selected document confronts IR state's use of the term *Rejaal* for decision/policy making around expediency of women for presidential election, b) verifying the proposed analytical framework by analysing this document.

### **Empowerment from development discourse perspective**

The framework I use in this study focuses initially on the concept of empowerment in order to explore the empowering potential of the feminist civil society's interventions. Women's empowerment is a key concept in the development literature and is seen as the ability of women in controlling their destiny (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002). This implies that empowered women not *only* need to have equal access to resources and opportunities -e.g. land and employment- but also they must have equal capabilities -e.g. education and health. Furthermore, in order to make strategic decisions, they need to have the agency to make use of their capabilities (including economic and political capabilities), resources, and rights (Kabeer, 1999, 2001). More importantly, for exercising these capabilities and resources, they *should not* be vulnerable to violence. (Grown et al., 2005).

Although the significant role of women's empowerment is highlighted as a contributing factor to sustainable development in three dimensions including: social, economic, as well as environmental development (UN Women, 2013b), the concept of women's empowerment- in development discourse- has *not* been defined profoundly and authentically (Kabeer 1999, Smyth, 2007, Cornwall, 2007). Terminology commonly used within development organizations to communicate about 'gender and development' remain

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<sup>34</sup> Mir-Hosseini (2000,2001); Kian (1997)

<sup>35</sup> please see the following page for the list of his related publications:  
<https://www.magiran.com/author/farajollah%20hedayatnia>

problematic. Some terms are entirely absent, while others are used loosely and inappropriately. Terms such as ‘empowerment’, gender, and gender mainstreaming which originated in feminist thinking and activism have lost their moorings and become depoliticized (Smyth, 2007). However, there are indications that gender discourse and debates can take a more radical turn through the acknowledgment of the drawbacks of gender mainstreaming, the deepening of the understanding and interest in the concept of empowerment, and explicit adoption of human-rights language (ibid).

In relation to the definition of power and empowerment in development organizations, the equation of power to “ability to make choice” is qualified in different ways. The first and most important aspect concerns the conditions of choice, which entails distinguishing between choices among a variety of different alternatives, the absence of alternatives, or high cost alternatives. The second aspect of this qualification relates to the consequences of the choice and whether the choices are strategic life choices or ranked as second-ordered. More importantly, the consequences of choice should be evaluated with regard to their transformational influence on destabilizing and challenging social inequalities. Therefore, according to Kabeer (1999), the conceptualization of women’s empowerment should be inclusive of both individual and structural change since social structures shape resources, agency as well as achievements. These social structures also determine the parameters based on which various categories of actors can pursue their needs and interests and promote their ‘voice’, meanwhile; the same parameters may hinder other groups from pursuing their interests. Lastly, social structures have great impact in shaping individual choices, therefore, the way people identify their goals and values is representative of the social status, as well as their individual backgrounds.

Thus, arguably, the change in decision-making ability must transcend the level of the individual since, in a context in which the cultural values confine the ability of women to make strategic life choices, social structural inequalities cannot be challenged by individuals alone (Haugaard, 2006). In this sense, the project of women’s empowerment is based on collective solidarity in the civil society arena as well as the public arena, given the significant role of civil society organizations and social movements in creating conditions to transform patriarchal structures and reduce the burden for individuals (Kabeer, 1999, Howell and Mulligan, 2005). In this paper, I focus on this notion of collective (rather than individual) empowerment, focusing more specifically on one document produced by a feminist publication in Iran, as a potential space where such empowerment may be developing. To



do so, I adopt the concept of empowerment based on the socio-political theories (Gramsci's (1971) and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001)) which offer a collective and radical prospective on transformational and social aspects of empowerment. The forthcoming section will define the concept of power, power relations between state and civil society, and exercising power through consent (hegemony) and coercion from a Gramscian perspective.

### **Conceptual framework**

I have adopted a Gramscian perspective on civil society and state/civil society relations as the basis of my conceptual framework in this study as, arguably; it captures well the reality of the civil society in the context of this research. My rationale for using Gramsci to understand this particular context (Iran) can be explained in the following ways: first, the relationship between state and civil society in Iran can be said to be one where a hegemonic discourse of the theocratic state is being disseminated and reproduced in civil society as a means of substantiating the power.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, from a feminist perspective, the state/civil society power relationship and the state's hegemonic project in Gramsci's theories, resembles the exercise of the theocratic state's patriarchal hegemony as a means to promote the "Disempowerment of Women" in Iran. Lastly, this can bring an insight to the emancipatory potential of civil society for subjugated social groups including women.

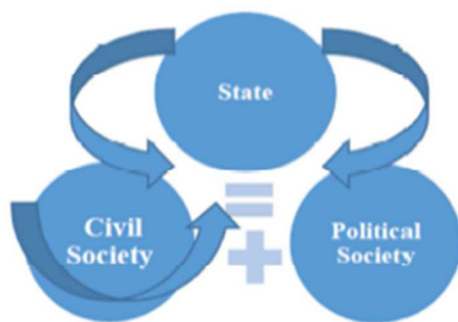
As identified in figure 1 below, for Gramsci, political and civil society are distinct entities but are also dynamically related in constituting the overarching state. In fact, Gramsci identifies the state as an the ensemble of political society and civil society in which the latter is made up of organisms commonly considered as private like families, schools, and unions that are non-coercive. The former is consisted of state institutions such as the army and the central bureaucracy, which play the role of direct command or domination in polity (Gramsci, 1971). In this set up, political society- in which direct domination is exercised- is ascribed to state and hegemony and consent is equated with civil society. Following Gramsci, intellectuals connect these two superstructures. Intellectuals are vertical and horizontal mediators. In this, within both political society (e.g. administrative and public agencies) and civil society (e.g. intersect groups, sects, political parties) intellectuals plays the role of agents of reciprocal communication, thereby, they connect civil society with political society simultaneously.

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<sup>36</sup> Hegemony means the supremacy of one group over the other groups; it is established and substantiated through meaning-making system (discourse) and consent rather than reliance on coercion.

The arrows on the left side of the figure represent the patriarchal hegemony that emerges, disseminated, and reproduced between state and the civil society. In that, the integral state will synchronize subordinate groups' interpretive horizons into their own ideology (Fontana, 2006). This entails the state communicating with the cultural, ideological, religious, educational, and political activities taking place in civil society arena. On the other hand, the arrow on the right side of the figure represents the material/coercive power that is exerted through state institutions including army and the central bureaucracy- in order to substantiate the state's dominance and consolidate the patriarchal hegemony.

Figure 1: Circulation of Hegemony of "Patriarchy" between State and Civil Society (developed by the author based on Gramsci's theories)



By using this framework, I aim at exploring how author(s) within a feminist publication can contribute to the disintegration of hegemony and the generation and exercise of "counter-hegemony" as a means of empowerment.

Civil society, according to Gramsci, is identified as the plurality of ideological and cultural conceptions as well as intellectual and moral systems of knowledge. This is the space whereby the organization of consent or hegemony is established (Nardone, 1971; Bobbio, 1975; Buci-Glucksmann, 1975; Grain, 1975; Adamson, 1987; Germino, 1990; Chen and Arato, 1992; Buttigieg, 1995 cited in Fontana, 2006).

However, in this sphere "the war of position "is actualized. The war of position is characterized by cultural and intellectual conflicts including ideology, religion, value systems, and forms of knowledge. The goal of these competitive conflicts is the construction of social and political reality, which can lead to the generation of power and the organisation of consent (Gramsci 1980, p.1236-1493). These conflicts occur in civil society, which is constituted by a "complex" of multi-layered associations as well as voluntary groups (Fontana, 2006, p. 39). Gramsci defines these conflicts as the battle of hegemony, which is

meant to identify the subordinate social groups in modern society who are capable of challenging the supremacy of the dominant groups intellectually and morally.

Gramsci (1971) identifies the battle of hegemony -within civil society- as a cultural and political transformation process, and assigns a significant role for intellectuals as they are playing vital roles in the terrain of civil society since they are contributing to maintain the existing hegemony or challenge it.

Moreover, he notes that subordinated groups can only become (counter) hegemonic when they attain self-consciousness. This self-consciousness, for Gramsci, entails the synthesis of knowledge of intellectuals and feeling/understanding of people. He contends that such synthesis is the persuasive force for transformation of fragmented subordinated groups into political actors confronting the hegemonic established system and proposing their viable alternative (counterhegemony) to it (Fontana, 2006, 2008). To replace the dominant social order by an alternative subordinate vision of society, as Gramsci notes, the counterhegemonic strategy should be applied. Central to developing counterhegemony is formulation of a vision that is in accordance with subaltern's everyday practices (Haugaard, 2006). Yet, for subalterns to confront hegemony of bourgeois entails transcending beyond the level of class formation, attract the other social groups and classes, and present their interests and demands as universal (Ives, 2004).

While Gramsci views the counter-hegemonic strategy as revolutionary project that resolves the issue of power domination once-and-universal, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) envisage counter hegemonic intervention as a directing force that avoids closure within the social field, thus, to them, domination can be confronted continually.

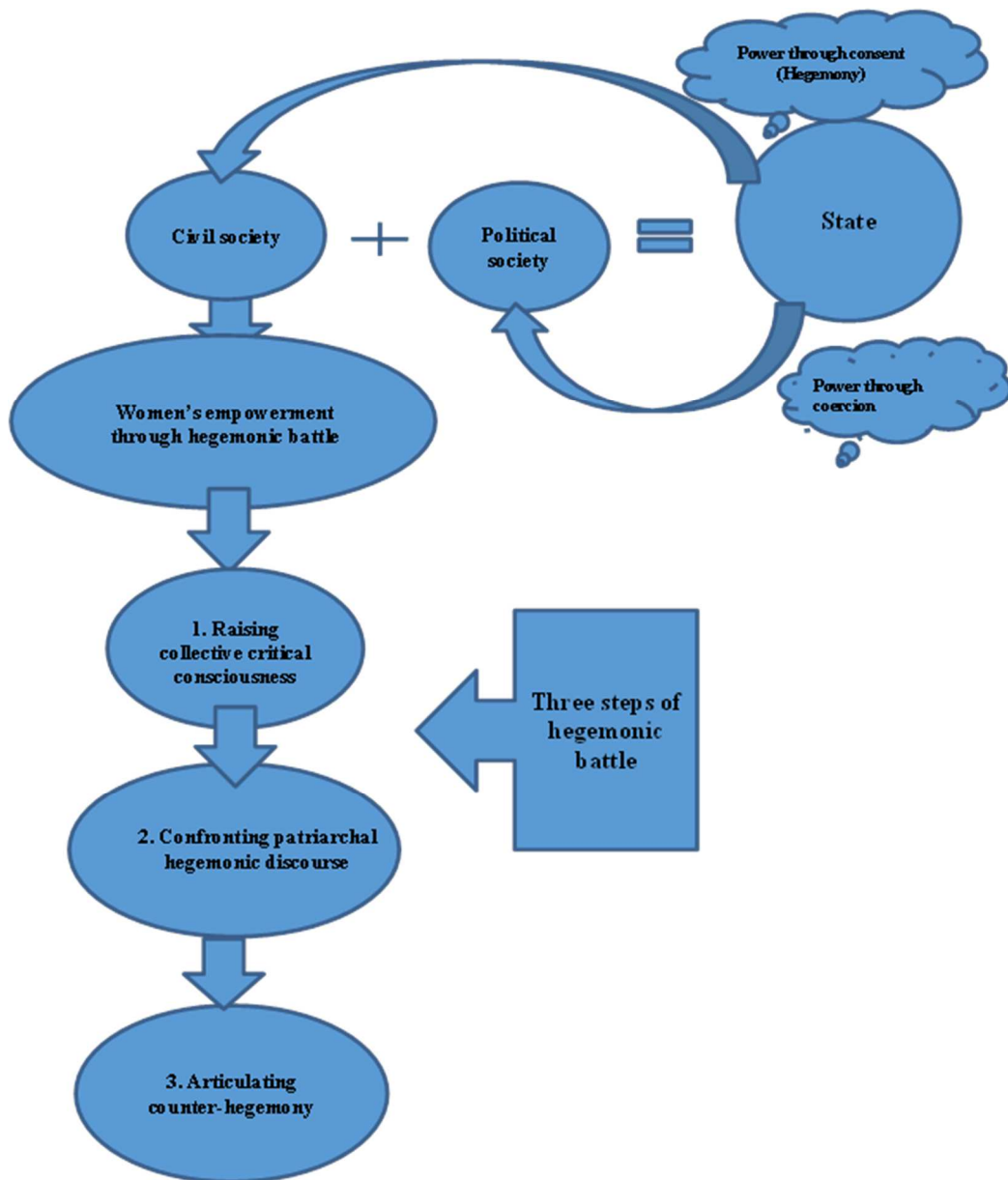
In the same vein, Mouffe (2000) contends that central to articulation of a counterhegemonic strategy is (to operate) from within the logic and ontology of existing hegemony. She adds that the most effective strategy of developing counter-hegemony is radicalization of the logic of key points (quilting points in her own word) of democratic liberalism. She, then, argues that if the Left utilizes existing key points from the existing hegemonic discourse, the radicalized discourse will earn significant support from the existing hegemonic bloc while creating new hegemony. Therefore, it can be argued that there is an implicit claim in this strategy that these key points/signifiers have an essential telos or logic, which can be used to articulate a counterhegemonic strategy (Haugaard, 2006).

Moreover, whilst Gramsci mainly focused on social class in his theories related to

hegemonic battle, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) propose that, “the idea of challenging hegemony can be exercised with regard to women’s empowerment in the contexts where “a feminine pole is subordinated to a masculine pole” (2001: 117-8). In this pursuit, in patriarchal societies, patriarchal hegemony determines the gendered political trends toward suppressive systematic relationships (e.g. legal injustice against women or low/non-political representations of women in the context of Iran). Thus, the pursuit of challenging these patriarchal hegemony and gendered political trends by feminist activists can potentially contribute to realizing feminism as the political frontier. As such, this feminist political frontier may dislocate the sedimented patriarchal system of meaning (hegemony) which can lead to the destabilization of the patriarchal social structure (ibid).

Given the above-mentioned social theories (Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe) on challenging power relations through the transformation of hegemony and the exercise of “counter-hegemony”, I have developed a conceptual framework as a means to understand how author(s) in feminist publications -as a significant element of Iranian feminist civil society- are contributing to empower Iranian women through their publications. This framework outlines the underpinning processes of women’s empowerment, which are in three steps based on Gramsci’s account of hegemonic battle referred to above: raising collective critical consciousness (step 1), confronting patriarchal hegemonic discourse (step 2), and articulation of counterhegemonic discourses (step 3) in order to explore how these steps are apparent in the document (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: The three steps of raising collective critical consciousness, confrontation with the discourse of patriarchal hegemony, and articulation of “counter-hegemony” as a means of empowerment (developed by the author based on Gramsci’s theories on civil society/state and hegemonic battle)



Prior to the commencement of the document analysis where I develop this conceptual framework, I will provide an overview on how Bakhtin's literary theory and its concepts can be integrated with Gramsci's political theory of the hegemonic battle as a means of empowerment. I will also explain how this unity will enable me to investigate the potential alignment between FCS documents and Gramsci's empowerment framework.

### **The dialogism of hegemony: integration of Bakhtin circle's theory of language and Gramsci's political theory**

Many researchers (Williams, 1977; Bennett, 1990 cited in Ives, 2004) recognize the Bakhtin circle as a significant source for Gramscian cultural studies, specifically due to the connection between language, power, and ideology. Bakhtinian concepts allow for an

analysis of how the hegemonic battle may be played out in the discourses of feminist publication. The rationale behind the integration of these two theories is that despite the dissonances between them, these two can be united for the following reasons.

1) While Bakhtin is not a political thinker in the strict sense (Hirkschkop, 1999), he articulated the cultural and aesthetic conditions that have enabling potentiality for emancipation of the subordinated groups.

2) Although Gramsci developed theoretical theories/concepts focused on empowerment of subaltern social groups in order to oppose the dominant hegemonic discourse, these theories have never been reflected in his writing on language and grammar.

Therefore, I have integrated these two perspectives to explore the politics of language and generation of meaning (discourse), within the document produced by feminist publication and is the focus of this paper. Doing so involves using Bakhtin's literary analytical concepts (including heteroglossia, dialogism, and othering) as conceptual tools- in order to analyse the discourses of the document. In so doing, I will investigate how strategies and uses of language that manifest these concepts might help author(s) to dehegemonized the dominant patriarchal hegemony and create an alternative hegemony based on the will of subordinated group (women).

### **The introduction to the analysis**

In the forthcoming part, I analyse a journal article written by a high profile (male) religious scholar and published in a feminist journal called "Women's Strategic Studies". This article presents a discussion on the use of the term *Rejaal* in political decision making about "if women can stand for presidential election".

The analysis of this document follows its original structure in order to retain the argument contained within the whole text throughout. However, I have separated the text into quotes for in depth analysis in order to illustrate how the author constructs a message which can be mapped on to the three steps in -which I have identified based on- Gramsci's perspectives. This in depth analysis also draws on the aforementioned Bakhtinian concepts in order to examine how the text articulates a position within the hegemonic battle. In other words, Bakhtinian literary concepts are the analytical tools with which I investigate whether the discourse produced and communicated in the document is line with Gramsci's perspectives on transformation of power relations through hegemonic battle and enactment of counterhegemony.

I present each quote, identify aspects of it that demonstrate Bakhtinian concepts manifest in the text; define them, and then illustrate how the utilization of these concepts is in alignment with the three steps of Gramsci's empowerment framework.

**Analysis of 'Women's Expediency to Stand for Presidential Election': (Hedayat-niya, 2006; in the journal of Women's Strategic Studies: online Article)**

**The term *Rejaal* in the constitution P.1, p.1:**

The *only* legal reason that *those* who are opposing to the eligibility of women for presidential position raised is the phrase: "religious and political men" in the-article 115- constitution.

They believe that the term *Rejaal* is gender oriented and means men.

We can see here how the authors confront/*stratify* the *authoritative discourse*, which in this case is the specification of 'religious and political men' in article 115 of the constitution.<sup>37</sup> By using terms such as 'the only reason', 'those who are opposing' and 'they believe', the author *others* this *authoritative discourse* - suggesting it is one interpretation or belief regarding the term rather than THE only interpretation possible. This stratification and othering of the authoritative discourse is in alignment with the second step identified in conceptual framework -developed based on Gramsci's perspectives- that is the confrontation of the dominant hegemonic discourse, since it destabilises what is deemed to be 'authority' and thereby opens up space for an alternative message. At the same time, the author draws the readers' attention to the fact that those who argue against women's eligibility for presidential position rely on a single article (115) and this is the only article regarding this issue. Here I connect this strategy to Gramsci's step one i.e. consciousness raising because its point is to highlight the limited evidence that supports an argument against women's eligibility.

In making this interpretation, I argue that the Bakhtinian concept of the 'authoritative discourse' is synonymous to Gramsci's concept of the dominant hegemonic discourse as Bakhtin defines it as this is privileged language that approaches us from the external world; it is distanced, taboo, and permits no play with its framing context. (for example, Sacred Writ). It has great power over us, but only while in power; if ever dethroned it immediately becomes a

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<sup>37</sup> The gender neutrality of the Persian language, as reflected in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, offered much discursive opportunity for women to campaign for equal rights. For instance, eligibility conditions for the country's presidency, such as *rejaal-e mazhabi* (religious personalities) or *faqih-e adel* (just jurist), can apply to both men and women. While in Arabic the word *rajol* was generally accepted as meaning "a man," in Persian, they contended, it referred to (political) "personality" in general, thus arguing that women were also eligible to run for president (Bayat, 2007, p.161)

dead thing, a relic (Bakhtin, 1981, p.424).

Moreover, Bakhtin's concepts of 'othering' and 'stratification' -as manifested in the above analysis- functions as confrontation of the authoritative/hegemonic discourse by the virtue of their definition. Bakhtin defined 'othering' as: othering implies otherness- of place, point of view, possession or person. This is simply something that one has made her/his own, seen or heard from the point of view of an outsider. Based on Bakhtin's perspective, we are all cuioj (other) to one another by definition: each of us has her/his own [svoj i.e. own's own] language, point of view, and conceptual system that to all others is cuioj (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 423).

Similarly, Bakhtin defines 'stratification' as a process in which languages are continually stratifying under pressure of the centrifugal force, whose project everywhere is to challenge fixed definitions. Represented characters in a novel exist in order to find, reject, redefine a stratum of their own; formal authors exist to coordinate these stratifying impulses. Stratification destroys unity but this is not a negative or negating process (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 433).

Above, we observed that stratification and othering were utilized as a strategy to decentralize the unitary of the authoritative/dominate discourse and thereby confront the dominant hegemonic discourse in Gramsci's terms.

### **The embodiment of the term *Rejaal* in men**

In the following sections, the author overviews how the concept of *Rejaal* was embodied as men in the IR constitution.

To some, the term *Rejaal* means men as it stands against (Nesaa') meaning women.

Therefore, from a constitutional perspective, the president should be man and women cannot be president regardless of being qualified in all other required areas.

Here, the author highlights how the lawmakers have justified and objectified their opposition against women's eligibility for presidential position based on their interpretation of the term *Rejaal*. In doing so, the author exposes the authoritative nature of this discourse which prevents any flexibility for amending this law -this is evident in the use of 'the constitution's 'perspective' which signifies authority and the terms 'should be man' and 'women cannot be' which highlight what is and is not possible. However, the authors also use the final phrase "regardless of how qualified women might be" to question this authority since it potentially exposes a scenario of exclusion of women who may be suitable for presidency 'on merit'.



Through these opposing and questioning strategies, the author appears to confront the hegemonic interpretation of term *Rejaal* by outlining its consequences -i.e. that suitably qualified women are excluded. In Gramscian terms, this confrontation of the authoritative discourse involves exposing the ideology of the dominant class that Gramsci defines as hegemony.

In the following example, we can see the authors begins to question the hegemonic/authoritative discourse more explicitly by directly presenting multiple interpretations of the term *Rejaal* (heteroglossia):

According to the members of council of clergy in law making: the first interpretation of *Rejaal* (at the time of developing IR constitution) is offered as well-known scholars and politicians, while article 115 does not necessarily offer this meaning.

This sentence attracts the readers' attention to the fact that how the meaning of *Rejaal* has been shaped and reshaped under different conditions (time/political era). This can be translated to consciousness raising i.e. Gramsci's first step since the author draws the reader's attention to the fact that the current interpretation of *Rejaal* (in article 115) is not the only interpretation. Furthermore, the author, here, employs chronotope in order to demonstrate to the reader that in a different time/space, the term *Rejaal* has been interpreted differently. To Bakhtin chronotope means 'time-space'. Bakhtin defines it as unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 425).

Therefore, they appear to suggest that although the term was initially interpreted as "well-known scholars and politicians", it was subsequently interpreted and materialized as men. Here, the use of chronotope can be considered as confrontation of canonized discourse i.e. the use of *Rejaal* as men. This can be translated to the second step of Gramscian framework that is confrontation of the hegemonic discourse.

The author furthers develops a questioning of the hegemonic interpretation of *Rejaal* in the following example:

This question can be raised then: why the lawmakers did not use the term men to reflect their intention, which is opposing against the eligibility of women for presidential position? Why did they use the ambiguous term (*Rejaal*)?

Consciousness raising (the first stage in Gramsci's framework) is reflected in this paragraph through stratification of the encrusted meaning. In that, the authors are calling the readers'

attention to the ambiguity of the term *Rejaal*. In so doing, the author emphasizes the ‘heteroglot’ atmosphere in which lawmakers used/interpreted *Rejaal* as men. The author, then, notes that the lawmakers did not use the term men itself; instead, they use *Rejaal*, which is- an ambiguous and foreign term (Arabic). By raising questions, the author voices the intentions of the ‘other’ but in a format, which seeks to de-stabilize its authority. Asking ‘why’ makes visible the intended ambiguity of the term and therefore, counters the certainty that the term refers to ‘men only’.

We can observe that ‘othering’ and ‘Heteroglossia’ are used in the above to confront the authoritative/hegemonic meaning (in line with the second step identified in Gramscian framework). Similarly, through generating a matrix of forces and voice (heteroglossia), the author appears to condition and confront a single/dominant conception of the term *Rejaal*. According to Bakhtin (1981), heteroglossia demonstrates the primacy of context over text so that there is no one interpretation that is ‘true’, rather, there are multiple interpretations or meanings that are in constant struggle and which are only fixed within a particular moment in time and space. In this sense, “at any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions- social, historical, meteorological, physiological that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions. All utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263,428). This means that *Rejaal* can only be understood in its particular moment or utterance and must be seen as open to an ideological struggle across time and space. It is this point that the author appears to refer to in his questioning of the term above.

The following example shows us how the hegemonic interpretation of the term *Rejaal* as men has been established/canonized and how the author of the document appears to confront it.

The negotiations of the council of clergies indicate that *Rejaal* was initially defined as men and they (clergies/lawmakers) believed that in Islamic government, women cannot be in the statesmanship position, specifically, at presidential level. However, they present it using a heavier phrase in order to prevent controversy for others.

Here, the author calls our attention (consciousness raising i.e. the first step identified in Gramscian framework) to the fact that the lawmakers used an ennobled discourse in order to canonize the meaning of the term.<sup>38</sup> In here, ennobled discourse is reflected in using

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<sup>38</sup> When discourse is "ennobled" it is elevated, made less accessible, more literary and better ordered. "Ennobled language" always presumes some privilege and exercises some social control (Bakhtin, 1981, p.

Quranic, Arabic, ambiguous term *Rejaal*.

In the above quote, the author refers to ‘how the council of clergies use ‘a heavier phrase’ to firmly establish that *Rejaal* means men and consequently women cannot be in statesmanship position. In this, the reference to ‘prevent controversy for others’ indicates recognition that the council sees its discourse as absolute and completely defined.

Bakhtin (1981) defines canonization as “the tendency in every form to harden its generic skeleton and elevate the existing norms to a model that resists change. Canonization is the process that blurs heteroglossia and facilitates a naive, single-voiced reading (Bakhtin, 1981, p.425). Thus, the canonized meaning bears resemblance to what Gramsci perceives as a dominant hegemonic discourse.

The following quote shows another example of the creation of heteroglot atmosphere and dialogized text -by the author-in order to oppose the authoritative discourse.

In the above quotes, it is perceived that *Rejaal* does not mean men and the lawmakers avoid using men for the sake of the expediency of the regime and its international reputation. They avoid using the term “men” in order to prevent international objection and criticism.

Here, by using a dialogic strategy and raising conditioning voices (Heteroglossia), the author is confronting/conditioning the hegemonic use of term *Rejaal* as men. In so doing, the author presents heteroglot utterances in this paragraph, which are matrix of voices including the voice of the author, the voice of lawmakers and the potential objective voice of the international community. These voices/forces appear to be conditioning each other in that the author brings the lawmakers and international community into a mutual relation where one is seen as addressing the other.

In this sense, the author has created a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) between these forces/voices -which makes the (hegemonic) discourse refracted and distorted, and thereby, mutable (Voloshinov and Bakhtin, 1986). Bakhtin (1981) defines dialogue, as “It is precisely as verbal process that their force is most accurately sensed. A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes "dialogization" when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, and aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.425).

Here, I argue that by creating a dialogized text, the author can confront the hegemonic

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263,427).

understanding of the term *Rejaal*.

The following quote presents how the author decentralizes/confronts the authoritative meaning of the term *Rejaal* as men by more strategic utilization of heteroglossia and a clowning strategy, which in Bakhtinian terms refers to the use of sarcasm and satire.

This is the first and most important legal reason against women's eligibility to be president.

However, the observations indicate that the phrase is not gender oriented. The reason to use this ambiguous phrase is not to prevent the interference of aliens neither does it concern the international reputation. The detailed records of the negotiation in the law-making sessions reflect that the hypothesis of the lack of eligibility of women for the presidential position was not acceptable by considerable number of council of clergies. Consequently, some clergies and law experts voted against using men. Therefore, they resorted to use of the ambiguous term which eventually gained enough votes. There is no clear evidence for the reason they (lawmakers) chose *Rejaal*.

In Gramscian terms, the author here raises consciousness about the advent of the term in the first place. By the juxtaposition of the terms "first, only, and most important" and the subsequent 'however', the author attempts to decentralize the canonized nature of former with the latter.

Subsequently, they use a clowning strategy by using the term 'aliens' as a mythical figure in order to mock the fear demonstrated by those in authority over interference from external parties. Once again, this attempts to 'decentralize' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272-273) and de-homogenize the hegemonic understanding of the term *Rejaal* as men (as an emergent of the authoritative discourse).

They then return to the historical analysis of discourse and continue telling us the story of the negotiation between lawmakers who represented different perspectives on this issue when the law was negotiated (heteroglossia). This story telling is used to explain how the lawmakers resorted to use an ambiguous term, which draws on an ennobled discourse to settle the dispute.

According to the head of the council of clergies, Dr. Beheshti, the article had to be passed by

2/3rd of the votes in order to consolidate its Islamic, dialogic, and religious background but since it did not gain enough votes, it was ratified as open-ended to be expanded and revised in the future. Therefore, the lawmakers who intended to gain the consent of majority of the members used the term, which reflects the eligibility of men while it does not oppose to the eligibility of women. Thus, in the constitution of IR, there is no term and phrase, which reflect women's lack of eligibility for presidential position.

In this paragraph, the interpretation by some lawmakers (*Rejaal* as men) is relativized and de-privileged since the author now explicitly states there are competing definitions and interpretations for the same term from other perspectives (other lawmakers including the head of the council). The author is raising consciousness (step 1) and confronting the hegemonic discourse (step 2) through again dialogizing and creating a heteroglot context in which there is dialogue between different voices, which condition each other, and consequently de-hegemonizing the authoritative discourse. This paragraph reflects a lively and vital discourse since it is dynamic and open to be expanded rather than finished and absolute.

Furthermore, the entire account of the debate of the term *Rejaal* is attributed to Dr. Beheshti who was the head of the council at the time of drafting the constitution. It is worth mentioning that the inclusion of his voice is not only illuminating of the environment of the law making session at the time of drafting the law, but also his own background- as both a PhD graduate of international law in Europe and also as an Islamic scholar. Both of these are equally significant and gives the story authority by attributing it to an insider -hence the position that there existed a variety of perspectives within the council regarding *Rejaal* is given legitimacy by the association with the voice of Dr Beheshti.

One might suggest here that this is articulation of counter-hegemon strategy since in the last line the author directly rebuts the exclusion of women based on the term *Rejaal* (the counter position to the authoritative discourse). This counter-hegemonic statement is the outcome of dialogue that has included the authoritative dominant discourse and thereby shaped within the dominant discourse.

### **Being a male as a required condition in jurisprudence resources**

In the forthcoming section, we will read about how jurisprudence resources in IRI require that those who stand for presidential election are male.

There are two (proposed) reasons behind this (being a male as a required condition in jurisprudence resources):

- In Islam, the eligibility of women for the statesmanship and governance is rejected.
- The presidential position is the statesmanship and governance position. Therefore, women cannot be president.

The reasons against the eligibility of women for statesmanship in Islam:

**Quran:** there is no clear/precise evidence against/for women's governance in Quran.

However, they -those against women's governance- refer to a single verse in Quaran i.e. number 34 in Nesaa' Surah. It states that Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth.

The above excerpt reflects consciousness raising and confronting the hegemonic discourse (the first and second Gramscian steps), since the author is:

1) Penetrating the authoritative discourse through archeologically investigating the basis of the Islamic belief that women are not eligible for the statesmanship and governance. When referencing the Quran, the author states "there is no clear/precise evidence against/for women's governance" and then points to the use of a single verse" which is used by 'those against women's governance'. In doing this, I argue that the author seeks to use the voice of Islam to question the truth' asserted by those in authority regarding the eligibility of women. This involves bringing novel-ness to the authoritative discourse, which I suggest, is reflected in the use of the Quran (as an alternative authority in itself) to decentralize the authoritative discourse. This is in accordance with Mouffe's (2000) proposed counterhegemonic strategy, which operates from within the ontology and ethos of the existing hegemony, to disintegrate the current hegemony, and thereby propose an alternative hegemony.

2) The author again appears to other those who are opposed to the eligibility of women for governance by using "those against women's governance" in the first sentence and "they" in the last sentence, which distances themselves from those scholars who maintain the orthodox (patriarchal) interpretation of this Quranic verse.

In this text, it seems the author is intrinsically challenging or confronting the hegemonic discourse by decentralizing the authoritative discourse from within i.e. by using their own interpretation of Islam and the Quran.

The next two following quotes in the document show again the strategic use of choronotope -by the author- in order to confront the authoritative discourse.

It seems that this verse can be used against the eligibility of women for statesmanship provided that:

1. *Rejaal* and Nesaa mean men and women in general
2. The term "Ghavam" should mean governance and statesmanship.

Scrutinizing the interpretations of this verse indicates that both aforementioned conditions are controversial.

Some experts believe that *Rejaal* means husbands and Nesaa' means a wife.

Then, it does not mean the guardianship of all men for women. In the following part of the verse, we can see

that it refers particularly to husband/wife relationship. Therefore, this verse is related to the relationship of husband/wife not men vs women.

Here, the author indicates a misinterpretation of the term *Rejaal* by those in authority -which they achieve by reference to 'some experts' who hold a different meaning for the term i.e. 'husband'. They then substantiate this position referring to the 'following part of the verse', which actually refers to financial dependence of a wife (see the quote above). The conclusion 'Therefore, this verse...' is a declarative statement, which asserts the correct interpretation (based on authority of Islamic scholarship 'experts') which seeks to re-stabilize the meaning of the term.

In this text, therefore, I argue that the author has made strategic use of chronotope to relativize and confront the authoritative/hegemonic discourse (in line with the second step identified in Gramscian framework). In this sense, this is manifest in the reference to the context (space-time) in which the terms *Rejaal* and *Nesaa* are discussed reflecting different meanings from that of the constitution.

To Bakhtin, "chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 425).

It (this verse) refers to men being responsible for providing living and supporting marital life and they need to meet their (wives) needs. Thus, it is clear that the verse does not precisely refer to men and women. There is no clear reason/clue for superiority of men over women. Moreover, the verse does not indicate governance and guardianship for men over women. Therefore, referring to this verse -as an evidence- for the lack of eligibility in women for presidential position is not complete.

In this quote, the stabilisation of *Rejaal* as meaning husband is used to assert a counter hegemonic position i.e. that the term cannot be used to exclude women from governance. There is also confrontation of the hegemonic discourse where the text references those in authority stating 'referring to this verse' (i.e. those who do so) who adopt an interpretation that 'is not complete'. The author, then, produces a counter-hegemonic discourse in this paragraph by bringing up the Qur'anic context to support their position. This counter-hegemonic strategy uses one authority (religion) to challenge another (the state) but does not suggest a radical shift from governance based on theocracy. The last sentence articulates this counter argument most explicitly.

### ***Hadith* and tradition of the prophet's (and his family) life**

In the following section, the author is examining *ahadith* (the sayings of the Prophet and

Tradition/ Sunnah (the way of Prophet's life) in relation to governance of women in Islam.

In order to refer to *Hadith* for objecting eligibility of women for presidential position, some issues should be taken into consideration.

1. Authenticity of *Hadith*

2. If the *Hadith* refers to the lack of eligibility of women for all the times and all the states

3. *Hadith* can be considered as an advice rather than religious decree.

4. The reasons for arguing against eligibility of women for presidential position

Here, the author appears to be relativizing the authenticity and the significance of the *ahadith* through creating multiple novel conditions for their validation. The author has again made strategic use of chronotope i.e. emphasising the context in which the *ahadith* have been articulated -this is particularly apparent in point two, which refers to time-space explicitly. The author again de-stabilizes the authority of the *Hadith*'s by demoting them to 'advice' rather than 'religious decree' (3) and this is used to question the legitimacy of the conditions used to justify the ineligibility of women to become president (4) by the dominant hegemonic discourse.

In this excerpt, chronotope is employed as a centrifugal force to question the context (2), authenticity (1), reasoning (4) and the level of importance of the *Hadith*(3). Utilizing chronotope as a centrifugal force, the authors appears to decentralize the dominant discourse (here patriarchal use/interpretation of *ahadith*).

In general, although some of the *ahadith* are authentic, we ignore the lack of the reasons in these *ahadith*.

Moreover, there are not applicable in IR for the following reasons:

- Analysis of the objection against women's eligibility for governance

- Clarifying of the position of president in Iran

About the presidential position, there are possibilities based on which conditions and authorities of a president can be defined. Therefore, these possibilities should be considered and mentioned in order to evaluate their applicability for the presidential position in IR (based on the constitution).

In this paragraph, the author appears to confront the hegemonic interpretation of *ahadith* (second Gramscian step) by saying 'we ignore' and that they are 'not applicable to IR'. In this sense, the author again refers to the chronotope (time-space) of the utterance as a strategy to relativize the objection against women's eligibility for presidential election in Iran. In so doing, they firstly, investigate under what conditions and in which contexts women's



eligibility is objected to from an Islamic perspective (consciousness raising, 1<sup>st</sup> Gramscian step). Consequently, they propose a counter-hegemonic position (step 3) by stating ‘there are possibilities’ whereby certain ‘conditions’ might make women eligible and these should be ‘evaluated’ in terms of how applicable they are to the current context. This position challenges the canonized nature of the authoritative discourse and thereby de-stabilizes it in such a way as to construct an alternative possibility.

### **The unconformity of the reasons against governance of women based on *ahadith*:**

The *ahadith* and traditions are not in conformity with the definitions and conditions of presidential position in Iran. The *ahadith* refer to the absolute authority while the presidential position in Iran is not defined/granted absolute authority. It is merely an executive position (political advocacy in the above categories).

It is only advocacy and executive position for the following reasons:

- supreme leader has superiority over president.
- MPs are supervising and can question, interpellate, and even dismiss the president.
- The Judiciary can deprive him of his legal authority and dismiss him
- in the executive arena: he cannot exercise his own will and desire but only the laws passed by legislatives
- in the financial arena: president must spend the budget that is planned by parliament

In the above paragraph, the author questions the use of *ahadith* as support for the ineligibility of women for president since they refer to ‘absolute authority’, which does not apply to the presidential position for several stated reasons. In this sense, the author is stratifying and relativizing one authoritative discourse through his (scholarly) interpretation of the religious text (another authority). As before, this destabilizes the authority and holds up the claim of ineligibility as one perspective amongst others. By comparing the meaning of ‘authority’ in the *ahadith* and in the presidential role in Iran, the author is raising consciousness (Step 1 identified in Gramsci’s framework) since he makes visible the discrepancy between meanings.

We should respond to some questions before moving to conclusion:

Are the *ahadith* against the eligibility of women for statesmanship in all the governing/management positions? At any/all level of authority? If yes, how we have witnessed women in management and leadership positions in different executive fields in state institutions after the Islamic revolution? It includes the military commanders, management of mega organizations. Additionally, women we appointed as ministers. Therefore, given the dominance and guardianship of women over men in those positions, it should

be against Sharia’.

In the above quote, the author appears to raise the readers’ consciousness regarding the fact that women have already been positioned in senior managerial positions in IR (Gramscian first step) for some time. Therefore, by using chronotope (the context of space-time around the utterance), the author raises a rhetorical question that if in the Islamic perspective, the dominance of women over men is not acceptable at any level, how has the IR appointed women as ministers, military commanders, and senior managers? By raising this question the author directly addresses the government/clergy council as the audience and indicates contradiction between the discursive product of ‘ineligibility for president’ and their actions where women have been appointed to positions which hold authority. In other words, they penetrate and de-hegemonize the hegemonic/authoritative discourse (confronting the hegemonic discourse i.e. Gramscian second step) through presenting novel attitudes and conditions to stratify the meaning of *Rejaal* as men and the way it is exercised on the real ground (space-time of Iran). The implication is that there are already forces mobilized against the centralized discourse in IR since women have been already in dominant positions to men in some highly ranked managerial positions.

Conclusion:

- Permit Principal: in which women are eligible to be president. According to this principal, people should not be deprived of any right unless it has been clearly mentioned in the constitution. Since in the current constitution, the presidency of women is not precisely prohibited, therefore, women should be eligible for this position.
- The equality/equity principal: Iranian citizens from all ethnicities are equal before the constitution and issues related to colour, race, language, and gender are not considered as privileges in the constitution.
- The phrase *Rejaal* is not gender-oriented. This phrase confirms the eligibility of men for presidential position, yet, it stays silent about women’s eligibility. Therefore, this phrase cannot be used as an excuse for violating the permit and equality principal and depriving half of population of their rights.
- There is no single verse in Quran against women’s statesmanship and governance.
- The *ahadith* against women’s eligibility are not authentic and if they would be, they are not applicable to/in conformity with executive responsibility of presidential position in Iran since these responsibilities are limited, transient, and technically are not included in the related *ahadith*.

Taken all together, there are no-legal/jurisprudent obstacles to eligibility of women for presidential position.

In the above section, the author wraps up the article by articulating an explicit counterhegemonic statement that ‘women are eligible to be president’ and the constitution

does not deny them this right since that they are not ‘precisely prohibited’. The author utilises terms such as ‘the equality principal’, ‘privileges’ and ‘violation of rights’ to highlight contradictions in the way the constitution is being interpreted since these terms are associated with ‘access for all’ whereas the authoritative discourse would prevent access for women. The author then questions again the use of Islamic texts to substantiate the argument for ineligibility and refers to no ‘legal’ and ‘jurisprudent obstacles’ i.e. he uses alternative discourses to counter the hegemony of the patriarchal discourse in this case. Here, I argue again that this counter-hegemonic strategy operates from inside the dominant power relations rather than seeking a radical transformation of the authoritative discourse.

In the same vein, the articulation of counter-hegemony has been undertaken intrinsically as the pointed issues are all based on unitary and absolute discourse of Quran, *ahadith*, and IR constitution. However, this hegemonic discourse is still dialogized in that multiple voices and audiences are manifest in the text.

### **Conclusion**

Through the above analysis, I have illustrated how the author articulates a counterhegemonic discourse through the decentralization of the Islamic discourse of the dominant group/theocratic state to express an argument that counters the ineligibility of women for presidency. For instance, the author, who is a high profiled (male) religious scholar and equipped with the language of religion and speak from within Islam, utilizes Qur’anic verses and *Hadith* to examine and confront the objection against expediency of women to stand for presidential election. This qualifies as counter hegemonic since although there is reverence to the Islamic discourse, it also demonstrates commitment -to the discourse of the feminist journal in which the document is published through confronting the IR’s orthodox interpretation of the Islamic sources and its related policies.

The use of Bakhtinian analytical tools has demonstrated how this counter-hegemonic discourse is articulated through creating a heteroglot environment in which various voices and forces are conditioning each other. At several points in the above analysis, I noted how the author appeared to disintegrate and dehegemonize the hegemonic use of the term ‘*Rejaal*’ by the regime as a means of excluding women from standing for presidential election.

In addition, the author who is a highly profiled religious scholar, equipped with the language of religion, speaks from within Islam, and utilises Quaranic verses and *Hadith* to examine and confront the objection against expediency of women to stand for presidential election.

In addition, I have shown how the author employs different dialogic strategies including chronotope and heteroglossia to dehegemonize the validity of the *Hadith* and the applicability of *Hadith* or Qur'anic verses in the current social conditions in Iran. Furthermore, a dialogic approach has been utilized to interact with the reader in order to convey the confronting message through using strategies such as othering those who passed the law in the first place and considering their interpretation as one among many voices by conditioning and contrasting their interpretation with multiple other interpretive voices.

This is indicative of what Mouffe (2000) notes as enactment of counterhegemonic strategy since the author disintegrates the hegemonic discourse from within, using its key points and logics, thus, the author proposes an alternative discourse/counter hegemony.

Overall, by the virtue of the above analysis, it can be concluded that the author articulates a discourse that can be aligned with Gramsci's perspectives on hegemonic battle and the its three steps that I identified at the beginning of this paper. I have demonstrated how utilization of chronotope strategy and creation of heteroglot environment is manifest in the document and how this raises awareness about the conditions, validity, and applicability of hegemonic interpretation of *Rejaal* as men (Step 1 - Consciousness raising). Moreover, by utilizing multiple voices (Heteroglossia), the document challenges the monopoly of an authoritative interpretation of *Rejaal*, which can be translated to the second step identified in Gramscian framework i.e. confrontation of hegemonic discourse. Lastly, the document articulates an objection against those who interpreted *Rejaal* as men and exclude women from standing for presidential election by using othering of 'those' who exclude as well decentralizing their discourse. Therefore, in numerous parts of the document, the justification of the patriarchal hegemonic position (that women are ineligible) is rejected since -according to the author- there is no legal and religious reasoning against women's expediency to stand for presidential election. This can be translated as articulation of counterhegemonic discourse that is in alignment with third step identified in Gramscian framework.

My analysis of this document has implications for studies/agendas focused on FCS operating under theocratic states and in particular Iran. Given that the author of this document is a high profile male religious scholar, this paper suggests that the interaction between the women's movement and the project of modern religious thinking may be crucial for furthering the agenda of women's empowerment for two basic reasons.

First, given the fact that many problems concerning equal rights between men and women and the second-class position of women in the family and public sphere have resulted from traditional

perspectives within the framework of religion (Jahanshahrad, 2012), the interaction between women's rights activists and progressive religious scholars equips the women's movement with critical approaches toward religion in favour of women's rights.

A second reason for activists of the women's movement to interact with religious intellectuals is that these intellectuals are one of the avenues through which the women's movement can gain support from the masses to push forward reforms pertaining to women's rights. Through taking a historical perspective towards Islamic texts and religious precepts concerning women's rights, intellectuals and women's rights activists can extract laws and regulations from the Qur'an and *hadith* in favour of equal rights for women. In so doing, they can create a heteroglot environment in which diverse voices/forces condition each other including the dominant voice/discourse, this, consequently, can be culminated in confrontation of the patriarchal dominant discourse and creation of counterhegemonic discourse in order to advance women's empowerment.

A few studies (Afshar, 1998, Mir-Hosseini, 2001, Sedghi, 2007, Jahanshahrad, 2012, Tohidi, 2010) discussed the collaboration of religious scholars and feminist activists and pointed out that their alliance may potentially promote women's condition. However, to my best knowledge of the related literature, this is the first study that examines this collaboration through critically analysing the discourse of a document -written by a religious scholar in favour of women's political rights and published in a feminist journal- employing an analytical framework that is developed based on Western social/political theories.

Lastly, the proposed analytical framework -derived from Gramscian socio-political theory conjoined with Bakhtinian literacy theory- assists me 1) to demonstrate how the intricate use of discourse (specifically religious discourse) can implicitly confront the IR regime's patriarchal hegemonic agenda. Under an authoritative state where confrontation cannot be explicitly expressed, these subtle uses of discourse function as confrontation and may potentially pave the way toward social transformation; 2) to recognize the alignment between the discourse of a progressive religious scholar and that of a feminist publication through critically unpacking voices -within the analysed document- and investigating their relation to women's empowerment. Thus, this paper presents a methodological framework that can be employed to demonstrate the way discourses subtly enact ideologies that confront the patriarchal hegemony of a theocratic state like Iran.

## Paper 2: The contribution of feminist press in promoting women's empowerment in Iran: the perceptions of two influential journalists in Iranian feminist press

### Abstract

This article explores how influential journalists in feminist press, as a key element of feminist civil society (FCS), perceive their role and contribution in promoting women's empowerment in Iran. To meet this end, it draws on a Gramscian perspective on civil society as a potential empowering terrain wherein subordinated social groups- including women- can change the relations of power through three steps: raising critical consciousness, confronting the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group, and articulating counter hegemonic discourse.

This paper presents interview data involving two influential journalists, Sara and Sude. It utilizes Bakhtinian's dialogism<sup>39</sup> as an analytical framework in order to explore how both journalists linguistically articulate the hegemonic battle in Iranian feminist press. The findings indicate that Sara's perceptions of her role and work aligns with Gramsci's hegemonic battle (including articulation of counter-hegemony) in terms of making public demands of the theocratic state. This can be related to the way she positions herself as a mediator/broker between state and society. This is aligned with the mediator role Gramsci considered for *intelectulas*.

By contrast, Sude's perceptions of her role and journalistic activities do not transcend Gramsci's second step (confrontation of the dominant discourse) since she views fundamental social transformations can only be realized within state apparatus. Furthermore, it is also apparent that whilst Sara does articulate a counter hegemonic discourse, this arguably involves the production of an alternative hegemonic discourse rooted in FCS. A process challenged by Sude who critiques FCS intellectuals for creating their own dominant FCS discourse which contradicts a more inclusive discourse where all women's voices can be heard. This paper concludes that recognizing such diverse

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<sup>39</sup> 'Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world whereby everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole-there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue. Therefore, the unitariness is relative to the overpowering force of multi-voices and thus dialogism '(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426).

perspectives is a crucial step in establishing how women's empowerment can be realized in the Iranian feminist press.

**Key words: State/Civil Society, Intellectuals, Expansive Hegemony, Hegemony/Counter-hegemony, Dialogue, Heteroglossia, and othering.**

### **Women, journalism, and women's right activism**

The scale of the challenge experienced by women entering the press industry, as noted by Byerly and Ross (2006), is reflected in the international scholarly literature, which critiques and examines both omission and misrepresentation of women in this realm. In this context, prominent feminist movements have persistently sought greater and more accurate representations of women in the media.

One problem with exclusion and misinterpretation of women is that the 'new' journalism is characterized by the emergence of 'masculine' and 'feminine' styles which can be produced by *either* male or female journalists: 'masculine' styles referring to traditional, serious journalism and feminine styles being market-driven news such as 'human-interest, emotional investment and sensationalism' (van Zoonen 1998. P. 45).

However, as Chambers et al (2004) state, debates regarding women's equality and women's rights have arguably been framed within the above mentioned commodity culture, which is widely perceived to have engendered the trivialization of feminism within the media. This trivialisation of women's issues and the perceived marginalization of women in the news has prompted some feminists to generate alternative means to express their views, through reporting on and promoting women's rights in a political context via activism and campaigning. For instance, the emergence of independent news channels, the suffrage press and women's internet news groups, has arguably equipped women with the opportunity to support women's rights in general, to promote the interests of specific groups of women, and to address women as politically involved audiences for the daily news. Therefore, women's alternative news media have, historically, been seen to deconstruct both mainstream ways of representing women and conventional news values.

In the same vein, the feminist project initiated by Fraser (1990) and Felski (1989), explains women's participation in public spaces including the press and how their interests and demands can be accommodated within these public spaces. Moreover, they have identified the political nature of the private sphere and have exposed the way private issues are often

depoliticized and viewed as domestic rather than as characteristic of patriarchal structures in society. Felski in particular developed an alternative model of a feminist public sphere identified as ‘counter-public’ i.e. an oppositional discursive space for gender politics (1989, p.155–82).

Similarly, Fraser (1992) referred to subaltern counter-publics as ‘parallel discursive arenas wherein members of the subordinated social groups create and circulate counter discourses’ (1992, p. 67) and thereby expand the areas of public discourse by proposing issues that were ignored to be debated publicly. Arguably this notion of counter-public is manifest in alternative mediums such as the feminist press referred to above. It is here where a critical analysis of the dominant ideals and values is proposed from the women’s standpoint as a subordinated group.

Counter-publics, following Fraser, are presented as safe spaces for both *internal* communication within subordinated groups as well as springboards for *external* communicative actions for confronting the dominant public sphere through disseminating oppositional discourses within the broader public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Byerly and Ross, 2006).

The significance of this feminist project to the current paper on Iranian feminist press is twofold. Firstly, I intend to explore whether and how Iranian feminist journalists use press as a counter-public space in order to empower women. Secondly, by investigating the perceptions of journalists regarding the contribution of their work to women’s empowerment, I will examine whether/how such empowerment can be said to align with a process of empowerment such as that outlined by Gramsci’s three steps of hegemonic battle i.e. consciousness raising, collective confrontation of hegemonic patriarchal discourse, and articulation of feminist counter discourse (counterhegemony).

### **Women’s press in Iran**

Civil society in Iran is arguably a space in which participation, open discussion, and critical debates have unprecedentedly taken place, with the independent press as its key space, supported by growing usage and increasing number of Iranian websites (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2001, 2004).

Among the most popular examples of the women’s press are *Zanan* (Women), *Farzaneh* (Wise woman), *Payam-e-Hajar* (Message of Hagar), and *Zan-e-Rouz* (Today’s woman)



(Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004; Jahanshahrad, 2012), *Hoquq-e Zan (women's rights)*, *Neda (Call)*, and *Jens-e Dovvom (the second sex)* (Bayat, 2007, Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

The history of women's publications is not easily separated from this general history of the press in Iran that has experienced periods of substantial development as well as tough control. Equally, the hardships faced by women's press in Iran are not markedly different from those faced by all publications in terms of oppression by political power from the state (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004). Despite (or potentially due to) repression, censorship, economic hardship, and stringent political and social regulations, Iranian women have utilized the press in order to confront gender relations and gender constructions, and to demand for radical rethinking of law, constitution, and policy (ibid).

Changes in the Islamic Republic regime's political processes and debates on home-grown solutions to gender issues have been often associated with the women's press (ibid) as the key forum for gender debates in Iran (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).

Women's magazines, since the early 1990s, have created alternative spaces of expressing and publicizing intellectual debates on women's conditions. (Taheri, 2011). Indeed Kian (2002) notes that women's press has played a crucial role in development of civic practices through creating a context for political interactions between the ruling elite and women.

Independent newspapers/journals, as Khiabany and Sreberny (2004) state, reflect women's demands of society and thereby bring into the public sphere issues, which in a patriarchal society have always been viewed private. In so doing, they have negotiated and contested both gender boundaries and the dichotomy of private and public through providing interface between the private and public spheres.

However, Khiabany and Sreberny (2004) argue that whilst women's press may have contributed 'new' discourses, this 'new' cannot be realized within the current oppressive structure. By contrast, Jahanshahrad (2012) contends that given the official and unofficial barriers to the participation of women in the domain/process of policymaking in societies such as Iran, women can use press as a civil society that can provide them channels through which they can both articulate their own agendas and exercise their socio-political power.

She supports her argument using two main reasons; firstly, even if the women's perspectives cannot be equally mediated in the policy-making process in Iran, the possibilities civil society (press) can provide for them, can enable them to express their experiences and make

demands in the public sphere. In so doing, women can organize (collective) public criticism of the socio-political systems in order to propose their agenda for the advancement of women's conditions.

Secondly, in societies such as Iran where the process of democratization is in its early stages, civil society can support the subordinated groups in order to self-organize into counter-publics, in that, they can challenge (power) domination and propose their own agenda.

This study, through analysis of the interviews with two influential feminist journalists/editors, aims to investigate whether/how Iranian feminists use press as a counter-public space to contribute to women's empowerment. To operationalise or 'see' evidence of empowerment in the interview dialogue, this paper uses Gramsci's three steps of hegemonic battle, which will be illustrated in the following session.

### **Women's empowerment and Gramsci's perspectives on civil society/state and battle of hegemony**

In this paper, it is argued that the project of women's empowerment can be realized through collective solidarity with the domain of civil society and public domain, given the crucial role of civil society and social movements in generating conditions to transform patriarchal social structures and reduce the burden for individuals (Kabeer, 1999, Howell and Mulligan, 2005).

Women's empowerment is a key concept in the development literature and is viewed as the ability of women to control their destiny and to make strategic decisions for their lives. (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002). However, a move towards enhancing decision-making ability must transcend the individual level since, in a context in which cultural values constrain the ability of women to make strategic life decisions, social structural inequalities cannot be resisted by individuals alone.

In this paper, I focus on this notion of collective empowerment, using the case of feminist press in Iran as an example; to investigate whether/how the journalists, who interviewed in study, articulate their contribution to women's empowerment within Iranian feminist press. In so doing, I adopt concept of empowerment based on the socio-political perspectives of Gramsci, which offers a collective, and radical prospective on transformational and social aspects of empowerment within the terrain of civil society.

In demonstrating the dual nature of power, Gramsci identifies "two major superstructure levels" that is 'political society' and 'civil society' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). He views political society as coercive apparatus by which popular masses abide by the mode of production and

the economy of the given time. He contrasts political society with civil society that is the hegemony<sup>40</sup> of a social group disseminated to the entire national society and exercised within so-called private institutions including church, trade unions, school, etc. (Gramsci, 1965).

In a formulation that illustrates his understanding of these super structural levels, he characterized the state "in its integral meaning" as "coercion + hegemony" (Ehrenberg, 1999, p.431). In this set up, the direct domination and the coercive force of institutions of political society (police, army, and central bureaucracy) are reinvigorated by the ideological hegemony that (bourgeoisie) state exercises over national life through the churches, schools, private associations, and other institutions of its civil society (Gramsci, 1971).

For Gramsci, as Fontana (2006) notes, the power of state is exercised through civil society, most specifically through the economic and cultural apparatuses, which are embedded within civil society. Simultaneously, civil society maintains its stability and coherence through the rational domination of the state. In this pursuit, consent or hegemony is generated and organized which is closely related to the mechanisms of production and dissemination of beliefs and knowledge.

The problem, then, is the formation of a worldview and its dissemination through potentially conflicting groups of people in order to create alliances based on the common worldview. A worldview or ideology always posits against various worldviews or system of beliefs. Therefore, these worldviews and ideologies are constantly in conflict, and in this battle, the hegemonic one is the one, which becomes the common sense of people. However, counter conception is constantly articulated in order to confront the prevailing common sense. Thus, "for every hegemony presupposes a counter hegemony" (Fontana, 2006, p. 43).

In Gramsci's view, hegemony is represented in-between a position of conflict and consensus since individuals have a certain level of autonomy yet their relations have been formed by the structural system. This -osculating position between conflict and consent- gives us better understanding of Gramsci's perspective on agency and system in a (counter) hegemonic movement (Haugaard, 2006).

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<sup>40</sup>In the writing about hegemony, Gramsci refers to the ability of dominant class to exercise power by winning the consent of those it subjugates, as an alternative to use of coercion. As a non-coercive form of class rule, hegemony is typically understood as cultural and ideological process that operates through dissemination of the bourgeoisie values and beliefs throughout society.

Relatedly, Gramsci suggests that to be (counter) hegemonic entails to be political both at the level of consciousness and at the level of power (in terms of organization). He adds that subaltern groups can begin the process toward becoming (counter) hegemonic only if they start to know themselves. Gramsci also states that knowing oneself means to be oneself, to be master of oneself, [...] to exist as an element of order-but of one's own order and one's own discipline in striving for an ideal (Gramsci, 1975, p. 75; 1977, p.13 cited in Fontana, 2006).

In addition, he notes that critical self-consciousness takes place [...] through a battle of political "hegemonies and of opposing directions in the ethical and political field in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one's own conception of reality" (Gramsci, 1971, p.333). This hegemonic process, in Gramsci's word, is to give "personality to the amorphous mass element" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 340).

In the same vein, Gramsci adds that a synthesis of the knowledge of intellectual and of feelings (understanding) of people motivates and thereby mobilizes historical and political activity. This synthesis changes a fragmented subordinated group into social actors who are capable of challenging the established social system and creating a viable alternative to it (Fontana, 2006).

In this sense, a (counter) hegemonic movement operates at both internal and external levels and is enacted through three main steps. The internal level entails 1) *critical self-consciousness of subjugated groups* and the formation of self-disciplined social groups, which are constituted by unified political actors who 2) *opposed themselves against the hegemonic system of beliefs* and established social system. Moreover, at the external level, these self-governed social groups, operating in civil society, 3) *disseminate the group's worldview (counter-hegemony)* throughout the society.

Having said that, Gramsci argues that subaltern groups can only become hegemonic if they -transcend beyond the economic struggles of class and- take into account the interests of other social groups, incorporating them into a single vision of society, the universal interests of 'the people' or 'nation' (Ives, 2004).

In the light of above, I will utilize a conceptual framework to analyse interview data based on Gramsci's understanding of civil society/state relations, hegemonic battle, transformation of hegemonic system of beliefs, and articulation of counterhegemonic strategy (outlined above). In so doing, I have summarized the above three steps in the

following way within the conceptual framework: raising collective critical consciousness, collective confrontation of dominant hegemony, and enactment of counterhegemony.

### **Methods and data collection**

Before proceeding to the analysis of the interviews, the following paragraph will briefly explain the methods of this paper.

The interviewees have been both journalists and chief editors of some influential feminist magazines and journals in Iran. Throughout the paper I use the pseudonyms of Sara and Sude to protect the anonymity of the participants so that they or myself do not risk negative consequences as a result of participation in this research. Below I give minimal detail on their work in the feminist press in Iran which, I argue, will help to limit recognition of their identity as best I can. In addition, the research has been conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of my institution ensuring that the safety of the participants and myself are of precedence throughout.

Sara is journalist and chief editor of one of magazines on women's issues and has been active in feminist press for a substantial period of time. Sude has also been active, as a journalist and chief editor of a feminist magazine, for a period of time. Therefore, both participants have been purposefully selected to participate in this research due to their depth of knowledge and their hands-on experience in feminist press -as a key element of FCS. Each interview lasted approximately 120 minutes and was carried out in the setting of mutual convenience -in Iran.

These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by myself as the main researcher. The interviews are aimed at gaining a better understanding of the hegemonic project undertaken by the journalists; the collected data and the analysis are structured around the three main steps of Gramscian hegemonic battle that are raising collective critical consciousness, collective confrontation of dominant patriarchal hegemony, and articulation of counterhegemonic (Gramsci, 1971). Bakhtinian's dialogism, as a conceptual tool, is also utilized in places to explore whether/how the hegemonic project -of Iranian feminist press- is in accordance with Gramscian perspective on hegemonic battle.

In the first part of the following section, I discuss Sara's responses to the main questions of the interview that is followed by Sude's responses to the same questions in the second part.

### **Sara**

### a) Raising critical consciousness

Throughout Sara's interview, there are a number of key examples where I argue that she emphasizes the significance of raising critical consciousness regarding women's empowerment. For instance, she does this explicitly in the following quote:

We raised women's awareness and awaken them about their current social status and about the fact that they believe that they were born to be at home and kitchen and be merely mothers and give birth.

Here we can see words such as 'awareness' and 'awaken' used to expose current conditions which for her, involves defying the hegemonic perception of women as mothers and wives. "Aware" is also referred to in the next quote in relation to the legal entitlements women currently have in Iran which are not explicitly 'used' by her audience.

I believe that our issues are mainly cultural issues. For instance, in the legal realm, although women have few legal entitlements, they are not even aware of those. We recommend them claiming the right for initiating divorce at the time of marriage, though, they refuse. Therefore, although, in Islam, men are legally entitled to initiate divorce, there is also a Note <sup>41</sup> which entitles women to include conditions in the time of marriage but they do not use it.

Here, she identifies 'awareness of the rights and capabilities' as a contributing factor to women's empowerment, however, by using "we" as the subject of the sentence as in 'we recommend them', she highlights her role and that of fellow feminist press journalists as agents in raising critical consciousness and views the reader as the recipient of the intellectual wisdom on empowerment.

The notion of a collective voice is prominent throughout the interview, with the use of 'we' to establish the voice of the magazine (rather its journalists) often positioned against other voices (the state, the audience etc.). For instance, in the following quote:

We have reached almost all our goals. We had feedback from our readers saying that: when you are criticizing a sexist TV series, we would recognize sexism while we were previously watching the series but we were not aware of the sexist messages. Now, after reading your articles, we realized that women are belittled in some series that we used to watch merely to be entertained. In addition, they mentioned that they merely depict women as nagging, useless, clumsy, and homemakers." She also added, "Now, even if the most popular comedians or performers in Iran say a single sexist sentence and it goes viral. It reflects the collective awareness.

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<sup>41</sup> Article 4 of the Marriage and Divorce Act of 1937 and Article 1119 of the Civil code permit the incorporation of marriage stipulations in the marriage document or in other documents, so far as these are not contrary to the law or incompatible with the nature of the contract of marriage.

In this extract, Sara stresses the importance of enabling women to recognize their subjugated status through consciousness raising (note the use of ‘recognizing’ and ‘realizing’ in the quote). She uses multiple voices to demonstrate the impact of this -i.e. the collective voice of the magazine ‘we have reached our goals’ and ‘we realized women are belittled...’ which is substantiated by the voice of ‘our readers’ who are ventriloquated as reporting that ‘they’ can ‘see’ what they were previously not aware of (sexism on TV) after reading ‘your articles’. Therefore, through interanimating these voices, she creates a more dialogic discourse to substantiate the collectivity of the consciousness raising process and its capacity to effect change which is signalled by ‘Now even if...’

In sum, in this section we can see that Sara uses terms such as ‘awareness’, ‘recognizing’ and ‘realizing’ to indicate the raising of consciousness work she does. She also describes a dialogue between her voice as a journalist and her audience to highlight such consciousness raising at work. In the next section, I now move on to highlight how Sara portrays her work as collective confronting the discourse of patriarchal hegemony.

### **b) Confronting the patriarchal hegemonic discourse**

This section will analyse how Sara views the contribution of her activities as a journalist to the development of collective confrontation of patriarchal hegemonic discourse (i.e. second step of Gramscian hegemonic battle).

Reflecting on the relation between her message and that of the state, Sara states:

We also cover all forms of discrimination against women including the discrimination in the process of law-making in the parliament.” For instance, there was a law passed for the press, which states that women cannot have their full pictures on the cover page. The article titled as “The prohibition of the objectification of women’s pictures”. Meaning that if you have a picture of a woman on the cover page, it means you are showing off her beauty in order to sell better. We confronted and contested this article at the time it was passed.

From the above quote, it is perceived that Sara aims at “confronting” and “contesting” the gendered discriminating laws against women. This can be implied through the juxtaposition of ‘you’ and ‘we’ in the quote above. In this, ‘you’ is used to depict what one is expected to do by government law ‘there was a law passed for the ‘press’ whereas ‘we’ is associated with confronting and contesting this law.

Similarly, Sara takes a critical position toward the state’s gender policies when she states that:

The so called amendment of law is also contributing to this problem (discrimination against women). For instance, reducing the number of working hours for women or extending the maternity leave. They might seem in favour of women; however, technically it is harmful for them since the employers are inclined to recruit men who are more efficient (with regard to the number of hours).” Therefore, governments should support women during their pregnancy and maternity leave in order to retain their jobs. Given the increasing trend of divorce in our society, education, skills, and employment are significant factors for women empowerment.

Sara here refers to social structure and more particularly a gendered legal system, which fails to support employment of women; moreover, she mentions the patriarchal social structure in which men are privileged when it comes to recruitment. In so doing, she utilizes a double voiced utterance (Bakhtin, 1981) through the use of the utterances like “so called” amendment of law, “however”, and “technically” which have two voices - that of the state and her own voice which is seeking to question their position.

She is signalling her criticism about the state related system (Judiciary) by pointing to the contradiction(s) in the laws that are supposed to empower women but actually serve male privilege. By virtue of this recognition, Sara indicates her engagement in a public dialogue with them which can be related to the second and third steps of Gramscian’s hegemonic battle (confrontation of patriarchal hegemony and articulating counter-hegemony) respectively since she calls for the government support with this regard (further discussion of this is presented below).

Concerning the socio-political climate wherein these journalists develop public dialogue and demands (step 2 & 3 of hegemonic battle), Sara states that:

Their approach (the presidents in Iran and his ministers and his cabinet) along with that of the parliament will definitely have a significant influence on the process of our work. Depending on the political approach, the environment can be either very liberal or extremely restricted. In the former environment, we can say more easily or even be supported.

She also added that:

“There was a big difference, for instance, in Ahamadinejad era, our magazine was shut and we couldn’t work. We were working on CEDAW<sup>42</sup> and Head of Centre for Women and Family Affairs warned us that CEDAW would not be signed in Iran unless I would be dead. However, raising the same issues with the incumbent Head of Centre for Women and Family Affairs, as she has a positive attitude now, she has a constructive approach and she understands women’s/ our issues.”

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<sup>42</sup> United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women



In the above quotes, Sara emphasizes the significance of an open political climate in order to develop a dialogue and create demands with respect to advancement of women's status. This is signalled by using 'their approach' and 'our work' and 'we can say more easily'. Moreover, she refers to Ahamadinejad who was considered to be very conservative during his presidency, subsequently, she implies that creating dialogue in his era was not possible - evident in "our magazine was shut" and "CEDAW would not be signed in Iran unless I would be dead".

In the second quote, Sara also reflects on creating demands (articulation of counter-hegemony) that have evolved outside of a dominant discourse e.g. CEDAW, which has been developed in and imported from the international organizations, focused on women's issues. Moreover, in the first sentence Sara is othering the "Head of Centre for Women and Family Affairs" through using her official title, whereas, in the following sentence for addressing the person in the same position, she uses the personal pronoun "she" which is followed by 'her constructive approach' which aligns with the pronoun "our issues". Using these 'personalization' and 'othering' strategies serves to imply that confrontation of the hegemonic discourse is possible through a dialogic processes with this person (understanding our issues) but is (or was) far more limited where there is imposition of authority ('we couldn't work' and 'I would be dead').

In response to my question asking if she is conscious of using any particular strategies or language to communicate their message, Sara refers to an article related to unwritten marriage that they had published in the magazine stating that:

We applied a double-edged sword strategy to get it published. In doing so, we raised this question that in the case that women and men choose to live together -out of wedlock- to reduce the expenses of getting married and knowing each other perfectly before marriage- whether this benefits them or not? And we considered both cons and pros of this issue.

She also added that:

It is worth mentioning that in order to keep the safe margin we had deliberately interviewed the girls who stated that the guys who used to live with them were defrauding them and breaking their hearts. By doing so, we wanted to say that- we were trying to reflect the negative consequences of unwritten marriage. We were basically reporting without bias." Lastly, she said, "I am revising the articles to spot the sensitive issues as I precisely know the sensitive issues.

In the first quote, confrontation of a dominant hegemonic discourse (step 2) -about cohabitation of youth in Iran- is indicated through Sara's use of 'Raised the question'.

Moreover, the phrase “we want to say that-we were trying to reflect the negative consequences of unwritten marriage” is implicitly connected to ‘in order to keep the safe margin’ - i.e. a cautiousness about saving the magazine from being shut. Therefore, I argue that she utilizes ‘neutrality’ in order to confront the hegemonic discourse rather than challenge and threaten.

Furthermore, when she writes the stories of ‘girls who have experienced unwritten marriage, she recognizes how she uses multiple voices (Heteroglossia) as a strategy to produce confrontation not as challenge to the dominant discourse, but as a dialogic conversation with it.

### **c) Articulating counterhegemony**

The previous section highlighted Sara’s perception of her journalistic activities as a form of collective confrontation of the patriarchal hegemonic discourse. This section will explore how Sara perceives the role of her magazine in articulating counter-hegemonic discourse.

When Sara is asked to share her strategies in taking (sensitive) gender issues into the public arena, she states that:

After 30 years, I know these men and what they are/are not sensitive about. I carry out the final edit in order to keep the magazine being published.

In the above quote, Sara appears to be othering the press auditors in (post-revolutionary) Iran by saying that: “...I know these Men and what they are/are not sensitive about.” In so doing, she implicitly signals that their magazine content should be developed in compliance with the discourse of IR state. Her use of ‘I’ positions herself in a pivotal brokering role whereby she mediates between ‘these men’ and their sensitivity and the content of the magazine. Her reference to ‘after 30 years’ suggests this brokering position is derived from her personal history which gives her the authority to mediate in this way. Given the assumed role of their magazine as the evidence and driver of change -with regard to women’s status- the above brokering strategy is seen as a contributing factor to the articulation of counter-hegemony.

Moreover, the quote below also signals Sara’s belief that her magazine articulates counter hegemonic discourse. When asked about her perception regarding the relationship between civil society and state, Sara says:

I am optimistic about the future of this relationship. The state apparatus has been formed through this society/people and they did not come from elsewhere. Therefore, I believe that we should develop dialogue

with them to ensure them that we are not aiming at destroying families or questioning Islam. We are people/kids of this country and all we want is reforming the women's issues. For instance, it has come in the law that the statesmanship is a husband feature! This, now-a-days, with the enormous number of male drug addicts, murderers, and pickpockets, we can say that not all men can be the head of the family. At least, we can leave the legal case with judge to make the judgement about it. The same comes true with giving custody, let the Judges decide whether a mum is more eligible or a dad.

Here, Sara refers to 'we should develop dialogue with them' and states that: "we need to ensure them that we are not aiming at destroying families or questioning Islam." This articulates a counter-hegemony that operates within the hegemonic discourse of the fundamentalists in power and ensures them that their activities are not aimed at overthrowing their Islamic agenda.

However, in the same sentence she uses "them" to refer to the fundamentalist dominant group in power. In so doing, she again utilizes Bakhtinian strategy of "othering"<sup>43</sup> to differentiate her position ('we') from that of the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group. Lastly, she brings the context in to the discussion, to tackle the laws which are discriminating against women in the case of custody and statesmanship of husbands. Hence, she is questioning statesmanship of the husband in the family -in general- through raising the example of ineligible husbands. In the context of the example she made, the statesmanship status of the husband can be reconsidered and even declared void. It also should be mentioned that she does not question whether men and women are equal before the law (concerning child custody after divorce); rather, she raises the case of indecent men and makes demands for judgment about the eligibility of the guardian of the children after divorce. This is an evidence of articulation of counter-hegemony within the dominant discourse because she does not challenge gender inequality within the law, rather; she raises the exceptional cases of the indecent husbands.

However, this articulation of counter hegemony does not only refer to legal changes in dialogue with the state/political regime, she also refers to change in relation to women's roles in Iranian society. When asked how the magazine reflects the main gender issues, Sara states that:

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<sup>43</sup> This implies otherness- of place, point of view, possession or person. It does not imply any necessary estrangement or exoticism; it is simply that which someone has made their own, seen or heard from the point of view of an outsider.

We introduce women entrepreneur and their experiences. Encourage them to be socially active along with having their roles as mothers and wives.

In one sense, Sara is confronting the hegemonic representation of women as housewives/mothers through her extension of women's roles to include successful 'women entrepreneurs' who are 'socially active'. In so doing, she defies one normative role for women by stating alternative/multiple roles, which can then be brought into dialogue. However, at the same time she is writing in compliance with the values of the dominant group (the patriarchal hegemonic structure) since she does not dismiss the familial roles of women, rather, she suggests these multiple roles can be managed 'along with their roles as mothers and wives'.

In a similar line, when she was asked about how she perceives her message in relation to the message of the state, Sara replied that:

What we were expecting from the government has never been realized. I strongly believe that the regime (in post-revolution era), their media, the legislature, and even Iranian men are highly influenced by women's movement in different realms including press, media, and cinema, and CSOs. If you have witnessed any change or promotion made in women's status – from the top (at the policy making level), they are all, definitely, the consequences of demands which had been put forward from the bottom (grassroots women movement). More specifically in the third world societies! If there was any change made, it was influenced by the demands of women in different CSOs, universities, and all women movements.

Sara's emphasis on the creation of dialogue and articulation of demands within the realm of FCS -in the above quote- arguably, is related to the second and the third steps of the Gramscian hegemonic battle i.e. collective confrontation of patriarchal hegemony and articulation of counter-hegemony. In this, although by using phrase 'has never been realized', she confronts the hegemonic discourse that the state is driver of change or progress. The third step is also referenced by the terms such as 'influenced by' and 'witnessed any change' and 'the consequences of demands' which signal causality and change in women's status as linked to the grassroots women' movement. This indicates counter hegemony in that raising women's status challenges the patriarchal hierarchy embedded in the structure of state and society in Iran.

### **Articulation of an alternative dominant hegemonic discourse within Iranian feminist press**

In articulating evidence of counter-hegemony, it is also apparent that Sara may be developing an alternative dominant hegemonic discourse. For instance, in response to the question of how empowerment is defined, Sara states that:

We raised women's awareness and awaken them about their current social status and about the fact that they believe that they were born to be at home and kitchen and be merely mothers and give birth.

In the quote above, Sara uses "we" as the subject of the sentence and associates this with 'raising awareness' (step 1). However, she juxtaposes this with 'they' which this time refers to other women who need awakening. Her use of 'we' here therefore, refers to intellectuals in the realm of feminist journalism to whom she attributes an enlightening and empowering role. In this sense, although she is confronting the states' dominant hegemony, she develops a potential alternative dominant hegemony in the terrain of FCS whereby another group (intellectual women) hold power over others who need enlightening. This alternative dominant hegemony has been developed through the enactment of an alternative power imbalance - this time between 'we' and 'them' rather than the state and 'us'.

Overall, this section has explored how Sara perceives the impact of her magazine on promoting women's empowerment and how she positions her role (as a social actor in FCS) in relation to the state. I argue here that Sara views herself as a moderator between subordinated groups (women) and elites (state). In this, she appears to express herself as an activist who gets engaged in dialogue with the state - making demands for furthering women's status. In this sense, she views the state/civil society relationship as interactive and is optimistic that this dialogue will contribute to substantial changes with regard to gender equality.

Turning back to Gramsci's hegemonic battle, my analysis of Sara's interview data appear to speak to the three steps of Gramsci's hegemonic battle in which there is potential with regard to changing the relations of power. She portrays her magazine as a platform where all the three steps are actualized since she states that collective consciousness raising, creating public dialogue and debates with state, and making demands are all realized in her magazine. In the same vein and with regard to the first step of Gramsci's hegemonic battle, through defying a hegemonic perception of women as mothers and wives, she perceives herself as having an enlightening role in raising women's collective critical consciousness. Here, she appears to view readers as the recipients of the intellectual wisdom or empowerment that her magazine constructs.

My analysis also indicates how Sara emphasizes collective consciousness raising and uses multiple voices to demonstrate the impact of this. Concerning the second step of Gramsci's hegemonic battle, she aims at confronting and contesting discriminatory policies through making dialogue with state. This implies that despite the suppressed status of civil society in Iran and in spite the fact that social actors(including Sara) within Iranian CSOs are obliged to be active within the rigid legal framework of the regime (Kamrava, 2001; Tohidi, 2010; Moghadam, 2013), they are contrasting with the hegemonic discourse. With regard to the articulation of counter hegemony, the counterhegemonic discourse produced by Sara, although constantly dialogic, oscillates between dislocating the discourse of state and being constructed within the discourse of the state. This suggests the struggle which arises from the structural contradictions in which she is operating. Additionally, my analysis suggests that she develops an alternative hegemonic discourse within FCS which enacts a new dichotomy between intellectuals (within FCS) and other women (in addition to the dichotomy of state vs civil society).

### **Sude**

In contrast to Sara's interview, my analysis of the interview with Sude did not indicate evidence of the full implementation of Gramscian hegemonic battle (particularly step 3 - articulation of a counter hegemonic discourse). As I will show below, she expresses conflict and contradiction by recognizing the role activists (like Sara) have played in creating public dialogue which produces change(s) with regard to Iranian women's social status but also distances herself from such a role by positioning herself as a 'neutral journalist'. Whilst this may seem more limiting, Sude also offers critique of the role of intellectuals in FCS and as such provides a useful counter narrative to that of Sara above (if we accept that an alternative dominant hegemonic (intellectuals') discourse is at work). In this next section, I present my analysis of Sude's responses to the interview questions in order to illustrate this counter narrative. In the account below, I do not present all three steps of Gramsci's hegemonic battle in Sude's case but focus on the third step (articulation of counter hegemony) to highlight the distinction between her case and that of Sara above. This does not mean that steps 1 and 2 are not apparent in her data, rather, there is evidence of both in some of the data relating to step 3 (as shown below), thus, it is the articulation of counter hegemony (step 3) which differentiates these two cases.

### **Articulating counter-hegemony**

In the quote below, Sude depicts women's activism as a continuum with radical activists on either side and moderate activists falling in between. The radical activists at each end of this continuum are either conservative and religious or secular/liberal. Although she believes that promotion of women's status entails the existence of both radical and moderate groups, she highlights that the moderate group is the only one that can advance women's status in Iran.

The moderate group presents a different interpretation of women's issues that is moderate and in some cases closer to traditional and religious women. They also focus on family issues and in some cases, they prioritize family rather than the social role of women, however, they do it without undermining women. This is their discourse and they distance themselves from the radical women's movement since if they approach the radical movements, in the current context of our country, they cannot technically/executively function.

In the above quote, Sude implicitly recognizes the constructive impact of creating counter hegemony within the dominant discourse as she gives status to moderate women's activists - who work within the state apparatus. These are juxtaposed with 'radical women's movements' that cannot 'function' in this socio-political context. This juxtaposition suggests that it is the discourse of moderate activists that can only be influential since they articulate their discourse within the framework of state's discourse. However, crucially (and in contrast to Sara) she does not identify herself in this role - as an activist - rather she uses 'they' and 'their' repeatedly to distance herself from such a role; instead she constructs her own position as that of a neutral journalist.

This position is outlined in the quote below:

There is no direction toward any specific approach or ideology. Journalist is a neutral reporter; otherwise, they would be social activists. However, when I found that a policy and its implementation would violate some groups' rights, I would criticize it.

In the above quote, Sude implicitly states that she may unbiasedly confront/address the discrimination in policy making in her work. However, by emphasizing that she is not a social activist, she is othering social activists and distances herself from them and thereby resisting her role in the articulation of counter hegemonic discourses.

In the same vein, in response to a question, which asked if Sude is conscious of using any particular strategies or language to communicate their message, Sude replies that:

In the professional journalism, we are not seeking to communicate a certain message to the audience. Our job is to observe and report unbiasedly and unexaggeratedly. We are functioning as a tribune to get the voice (of voiceless) heard.

In the above quote, Sude again highlights the role of a professional journalist as a neutral reporter who provides a platform wherein all voices can be heard. Yet despite limiting herself to a neutral position, who may merely ‘criticize’ the implementation of policy if necessary (criticize = confrontation of patriarchal hegemonic discourse), Sude recognize (in the following quote) that the changes achieved are a result of the activities of women’s right activists who have sought change through creating dialogue (note the emphasis on dialogue here which is similar to Sara’s perspective which I have linked to confrontation of dominant hegemony – step 2 in Gramsci’s framework):

Although considerable changes -with regard to furthering gender equality- have recently taken place, these changes are not the government’s achievement; rather, they are the achievements of women’s activists/ FCS. The women who are seeking to assert/ claim women’s right in state, city council, and FCS. They earned their rights through negotiations/dialogue and this is not the attitude toward women’s social role from the top.

Negotiations/dialogue is the only way to gain the aim.

Here, Sude refers to the changes made with regard to the promotion of women’s status and she associates these changes to the pressure and demands made by women’s right activists that is reflected in the terms like “assert”, “claim”, and “earn”. However, again such activists are expressed as ‘The women...’ and ‘women activists’ rather than ‘I’ and ‘we’ which suggests a further distancing of herself from those who have produced such changes.

The distancing that Sude articulates from social activists of FCS is further evidenced in the way she describes her magazine’s confrontation of patriarchal hegemonic notions.

In the quote below, she describes how her magazine discussed the controversial issue of ‘nemesis’ but not as a means to produce change, only to state that it is the responsibility of those in power to make change:

We did focus on nemesis<sup>44</sup>; there are also religious obstacles/ limitations (on making decisions) with regard to nemesis and people cannot make decision accordingly and this falls in the realm of religion. Therefore, it is related/referred to the judiciary and they should solve the problem. The society where religion and traditions are determinative will resist against some changes.

In this quote, she highlights resistance to the articulation of counter-hegemony by limiting her own position to one of merely bringing an issue to the table (step one in the conceptual framework, consciousness raising). In the first sentence, she argues that ‘we’ merely reflect on nemesis and the gender discriminating laws related to it and that making changes with

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<sup>44</sup> "Nemesis" or retributive justice is synonym to Qiṣāṣ that is an Islamic term meaning "retaliation in kind" or "revenge", "eye for an eye".



regard to such laws should be deferred to the state related system(s) including judiciary. In addition, she associates the possibility (or lack of) for amendment of gender discriminatory laws (nemesis) to the religious discourse, which is presented as the driving factor in shaping and consolidation patriarchal hegemony. In this way, despite her previous position, she questions the role of FCS as the agent of change and the mediator between state and people. Further contradictions arise in Sude's account when she discusses whether and when we see a female presidential candidate:

We do not know how long it would take to change these situations; this is a very key issue and highly depends on governance structure from the top and changing it in/by civil society, at the existing time, is not possible. They (social actors in FCS) can merely make the demands; however, since decision making on this issue is governance-related and is taking place in other structures in which people do not have any role/contribution, this is not easily achievable.

Here, once more, in contrast to her previous description of the changes made by FCS for women, Sude disparages the role of civil society in making change in policy with regard to political presentation of women and therefore she undervalues the role of creating dialogues and demands. She also adds that:

This change should be applied on the interpretation of the law i.e. governance-related and more particularly in law-making organizations. The regime should make the decision to have the female president and they do not have such a decision at the moment.

As such, it seems that whilst she recognizes that FCS can produce some change, she also identifies that this depends on the domain of activity. She distinguishes some FCS activities, which have potential to culminate in social changes, from those domains, which are governance-related (highly rooted in religion) and could only be amended through state related organizations and government bodies.

This perspective on the limitations of FCS and others who wish to achieve change for women in Iran is also reflected in the following quotes where she discusses collaboration between open-minded clergies and the FCS for reinterpretation of Islamic text in order to re-interpret laws. She states that:

As soon as the influential structures in decision making in Iran are the traditional clergies, the liberal/open-minded clergies have no impact. It is not important that whether they are clergies or not, it is important that those whose domain is the decision-making in the judiciary system view the open-minded clergies as strayed (deviated from Islam). Therefore, they have no impact as they are also categorized as open-minded and elites.

In the above quote, Sude signals that creating dialogue and re-interpretation of Islamic text within the current social context by liberal clergies cannot have an impact on furthering women's status in Iran. She positions liberal clergy as perceived as 'deviated from Islam' by those in power (othered by the state) and therefore, they are outside of the 'influential structures in decision making'. They have limited power because their domain is not part of the 'judiciary system' and therefore cannot achieve change.

Likewise, she adds that:

Had the same open-minded clergy been in the parliament drafting the law and it would be passed in the parliament, it may be considered influential provided that the law will be implemented. The society where religion and traditions are determinative will resist against some changes.

Here, she denies the influence of open-minded clergies who are not involved in state organisations and she argues that changes can only be actualized within the state apparatus (passing law in parliament, might be considered influential). However, she also identifies the struggle for such change to be realised since she notes that religious and traditional norms resist changes and are therefore, the impediments to the implementation of the laws.

### **Expansive hegemony**

So far, I have highlighted that according to my analysis, Sara appears to articulate a counterhegemonic discourse, whereas, Sude does not do so. My analysis indicates that Sude, limits the possibility to produce change through FCS activism to certain domains. By articulating that real changes for women in Iran can only be made by those in power and by distancing her own role from the work of FCS activists, Sude argues that journalism is a matter of reporting and observing events rather than producing radical change. In the following section, I discuss how Sude takes this argument forward by critiquing the status of 'intellectuals' who exclude more marginalized voices. In so doing, I will highlight how Sude perceives the role of her journalistic activities in promoting an inclusive discourse, which is designed to recognize all women's voices including that of marginalized ones. This inclusive discourse appears to be an agenda toward what Gramsci refers to as Expansive Hegemony.

In the quote below, Sude stresses that the feminist press should strive to cover the issues faced by marginalized and disadvantaged women in Iran. She states that:

The social activists in the realm of women (women's movement) are from the urban area. Urban women are basically making demands about women's rights and they present the problems and make the demands which

are catered and related to urban women. Therefore, women who are living in the marginalized or/ and rural area -and are quite big population- their demands are not raised or comparatively much less heard.

Here, once again Sude considers social activists as others. These social activists are positioned as middle class (urban) and exclusive i.e. addressing middle class problems. According to Sude, women who live in rural areas do not have their demands heard – therefore, their voice is considered subordinated to women living in urban areas. Here I argue that Sude perceives ‘middle class’ women living in urban contexts as creating their own intellectual/middle class hegemony where they disregard rural and marginalized women’s voice and demands.

This argument can be further explored if we consider how Sude defines women’s empowerment.

An empowered woman can manage herself and be able to face life by herself if it comes up. A woman who is using her education or her skills to manage her life is an empowered woman. An empowered woman is aware of her rights, not to be subject to oppression, and be able to make demands about her rights in any positions. Most importantly, she should be able to manage her life and add something to her/ her fellows’ everyday life.

In the above paragraph, Sude is using the term ‘empowered women’ as the subject of the sentences rather than prescribing “how women can be empowered” from an intellectual’s perspective. This is in accordance with Kabeer’s (2001) definition of empowerment that states: if women are not the agents of change (in their lives) and are merely the recipients, we would not consider it as empowerment. Sude affords agency here to the individual rather than a collective group – which contrasts with the notion of collective empowerment put forward by some within FCS. For example, Sara views herself and others as intellectuals who must enlighten women – here Sude emphasises the individual as an agent of change and therefore, there is no clear role for intellectuals or collective groups. As such, I suggest that in this quote, it can be perceived that Sude resists not only the states hegemonic discourse but also, the intellectualists’ hegemony within the terrain of civil society.

My analysis here indicates that Sude perceives herself as journalist and she is othering the social activists in the realm of FCS who she censures for excluding marginalized and lower-class women. In so doing, she is confronting the hegemonic discourse of the intellectuals within FCS, as well as the orthodoxy that intellectuals as a collective group can give subjugated people agency. Alternatively, by making the voices of all women heard, she is contributing to the formation of an inclusive discourse.

Such an inclusive discourse is crucial step towards the production of an expansive hegemony, which according to Gramsci, is inclusive of diverse classes and ideologies, can create alliance between subordinated groups, and oppose the dominant hegemonies. Indeed, Gramsci identifies expansive hegemony (Gramsci, 1971,132-133; Mouffe, 1979, p. 183; Torfing, 1999, p. 111) as a hegemony in which the subordinates (working class) present their interests as universal interests of ‘the people’ or ‘nation’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 181, Ives, 2004).

## **Discussion**

This section will discuss three interconnected and mutually reinforcing themes, emerging from the above analysis, in order to address the main aim of this study i.e. to explore “the articulated contribution of feminist press to women’s empowerment”. These themes are 1) how journalists view the relationship between their discourse to that of the regime, 2) how they see state-FCS relationship, 3) whether/or not they articulate a counterhegemony.

### **Journalists’ perspectives of their discourse in relation to the discourse of the state**

In the above analysis, I have argued that Sara perceives herself as an activist, gets engaged in dialogue with the state political/ legal actors and structures, and articulates counterhegemonic discourse by making demands for furthering women’s status. The social status of the women, in the above examples, are perceived to have been advanced and this is attributed to the way the social actors in FCS are positioning themselves in relation to the state. Arguably, this positioning is rooted in their perspective on the relation of state and civil society. Therefore, Sara appears to view this relation optimistically and argues that they have created public dialogue and debate -within the terrain of civil society- with the state, which has culminated in substantial changes in women’s social status in Iran. Sude, on the other hand, positions herself as an ethical journalist according to my analysis. Moreover, while she asserts that all advancement of women’s status have been championed and formed by women’s right activists and in grassroots movements, she argues that some social/legal changes should be only made within the state sphere. This implies that she views the state as a separate sphere from civil society whereas Sara sees both as interconnected. Additionally, in accord with Gramsci, Sara views intellectuals as the mediator between state and civil society.

### **Comparative analysis of the journalists ‘perception of FCS/ state relationship**

There are implications from the above analysis in terms of how we understand the relationship between state and FCS in Iran. Sara considers civil society as a (counter) public

space wherein subordinated groups are supported. This is evident in her definition of empowerment and how women can be empowered by the interventions of social actors within FCS and more specifically feminist press. She also refers to the FCS agenda as not aimed at overthrowing the regime; rather, its aim is to challenge the dominant hegemony through a hegemonic battle that is a cultural battle undertaken by intellectuals in the terrain of civil society (Gramsci, 1971). Sara, in accordance with Gramsci, views political society and civil society as parts of the integral of state. This is reflected in her words when she states, “state has been formed from people of this country and we (social actors in FCS) are also kids/members of this society”.

Sude, on the other hand, does not appear to recognize FCS as official associations and/or organizations; rather, she refers to women’s rights activism as fragmented and informally constituted. However, she mentions that despite the suppression they face by the government, they are still active. Importantly, Sude identifies moderate women’s activists as key actors in civil society and stresses their prioritization of family issues in the realm of civil society, which implies two points. Firstly, that such moderate social actors articulate their discourse within the framework of state’s discourse -wherein women are assigned the family-related roles as wives and more mothers. This can be interpreted as social actors applying a viable strategy in struggling to advance women’s empowerment in the socio-political environment they are operating. Moreover, in virtue of creating counter-hegemony within the dominant patriarchal hegemony, moderate women activists are viewed by Sude as confronting patriarchal hegemony by considering both social and familial roles for women. This is in line with what Kandiyoti identifies as women’s using communication to bargain with patriarchy and “strategizing within a set of concrete constraints” (1988, p. 274).

In general, concerning the state/civil society relation, while Sara is positive about the future of state/civil society relationship and is overemphasizing the significance of creating dialogue and making demands in FCS, Sude views this relationship more pessimistically and believes that some changes should be applied from the government status/judiciary and FCS is not powerful enough-in decision making positions- to make fundamental changes happen.

### **The role of the journalists’ publication in promoting women’s empowerment**

This section discusses how these journalists perceive the impact of their publications with regard to promoting women’s empowerment and how it can be attributed to their position in relation to the state. Both interviewees hold the view that civil society in Iran is perceived

negatively by the government and this has led to the suppression of civil society in Iran. Moreover, they describe how social actors in civil society have to operate moderately and in conformity with the values and principals of the conservative ruling regime. As noted above, this reflects that they are applying a counter hegemonic strategy enacted within the discourse of patriarchal hegemony, so that they may be able to function executively and advance the status of women in Iran.

It is significant to note here, that these journalists are producing their documents and making their demands within the discourse of the dominant group (state). Hence, they do not object to the importance of family roles for women instead they extend such roles to include social activism. This reminds us of the Gramscian understanding of state as the ensemble of civil society and political society as well as the way he envisages intellectuals as the moderators between the two societies. As such, intellectuals act as mediators between the subordinate groups and the elites (Gramsci 1971, p. 12). Relatedly, it is evident that the social actors use feminist press as a (counter) public space in which they bring topics deemed as private/domestic from a patriarchal perspective- in to a public space. In so doing, they can be seen to expand current discursive views regarding social roles of women -beside the familial ones- and thus promote women's status.

Having said that, the issues that both interviewees address are different and reflect to the differential positioning of themselves as social actors in relation to the state. While Sara views her role as focused on creating public dialogue with political society and legal structure, Sude stresses the importance of neutral observation and reporting of patriarchal social norms and practices as well as developing an inclusive discourse in which all women's voice and concerns can be heard. For example, in relation to discrimination against women with regard to recruitment, Sude addresses the patriarchal hegemony inherent within socio-cultural norms which she argues are biased against women in Iranian society when it comes to recruitment of either a man or woman. Sara, on the other hand, creates public dialogues/demands about the amendment of the laws recently passed – with regard to women's working hours- which according to Sara disadvantage women.

These different perspectives can also demonstrate how they view their role in advancing women's status. As such, Sara appears to articulate an intellectual's language that reflects a kind of top down approach toward awakening women by the intellectuals. This is evident where she views her role/her colleague's role as enlightening and awakening with regard to

women's empowerment. On the other hand, Sude views individuals as agents of change hence she does not consider clear role for intellectuals or collective groups in relation to advancing women's empowerment.

Reflecting on the interviews, I argue that Sara views her magazine as a platform wherein all the three steps from Gramsci's hegemonic battle (outlined earlier) are actualized since she states that collective awareness raising (step one), creating public dialogue and debates with state (step two), and making demands (step three) -all- have been realized in her magazine. On the other hand, although Sude emphasizes that her magazine is focused on collective consciousness raising with regard to patriarchal social norms (step one), she undermines the impact of creating public dialogue (step two) and making demands (step three) by arguing that some fundamental transformations can only be applied from the top (i.e. through the state's apparatus).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has investigated the perspectives of two journalists active in the feminist press in Iran, who are viewed as social actors operating within FCS, to promote women's empowerment.

Analysing the interview data with both Sara and Sude, using a framework that draws on Gramsci's account of the hegemonic battle, I conclude that although both journalists describe their work as raising consciousness and confronting a patriarchal hegemony operating within Iran in their publications, only Sara articulates the creation of a counterhegemonic discourse through creating public dialogue and debates and making demands – in their magazine as counter public space- for promoting women's empowerment.

This can be related to their perspective on state/civil society relations since Sara argues that intellectuals must not only enlighten women about their rights but also must be dialogic and make demands for constructive changes to the socio-political and legal status of women. This reflects Kabeer's concept of collective empowerment and structural transformation (Kabeer, 2001). This is also in accord with Gramsci's view of intellectuals as the mediator between state and civil society (1971) and Fraser's understanding of feminist press as counter public space wherein women can articulate counterhegemonic discursive views aligned with women's interests, views, and everyday practices.

Additionally, while Sara views state and civil society as elements of one ensemble, Sude envisages state as the main decision making actor and detached from society, Therefore, Sara is optimistic about furthering women's rights through creating public dialogues and making demands whereas Sude argues that some fundamental changes must be constructed in the governmental organizations including judiciary.

This paper has also explored how both journalists position themselves in relation to the state and how this relates to the change they can make with regard to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. In this sense, there is some evidence here to indicate that some journalists in Iranian feminist press believe that they can (in some circumstances) provide a forum for creating public debates/dialogue with the state and make demands about constructive changes to the socio-political and legal status of women in order to advance status of women in public and private realms.

Lastly, this study has also highlighted how some journalists (like Sara)-in feminist press- are viewed as addressing only the modern middle and urban classes of society. Jahanshahrad (2012) produced similar findings and has argued that this has caused not only a gap between journalists in the Iranian feminist press but it has also created a gap between some journalists and their audiences, particularly those from disadvantaged and less educated groups. In accordance with the Gramscian concept of expansive hegemony, this paper argues that social actors in FCS, aiming at advancing women's right; need to develop expansive counter-hegemony comprised of all women's voices and in compliance with their interests and everyday life practices.

### **Implications**

In the literature related to Iranian feminist/women's press, a few studies have identified the press as a key element of civil society in Iran (Khiabany, 2008, Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004, Jahanshahrad, 2012). Nonetheless, to my best knowledge, this is the first study that has investigated and analysed feminist journalists' perceptions/accounts of their work to illuminate the operation, opportunities and obstacles of Iranian feminist press in striving for empowering women. This has demonstrated how these journalists/writers use the feminist press as a counter public space to make public dialogue and demands in order to advance women's rights.

The findings in this study, in accordance with Hoodfar and Sadeghi (2009) and Kian (1997), highlight how Iranian FCS/women's social movement is socially stratified. However,



despite the ideological incongruity among social actors in FCS (such as Sara and Sude), I contend that they are pragmatically closely allied since they abide by a common goal in confronting the patriarchal hegemony as well as striving to promote Iranian women's social conditions. Thus, I argue that operating effectively, in what Fraser identified as counter public space -within feminist press in Iran- requires organizing opposing camps since they can articulate multiple discursive views that are conditioning each other as well as other discourses including the dominant patriarchal hegemony. Moreover, moderate social actors can insure their political legitimacy through criticizing the radical actors that, in turn, can further reinforce the voice of the radical actors.

Additionally, whilst mainstream theories of civil society mainly concentrate on state/civil society relations (Howell, 2007, Howell and Mulligan, 2005, Hagemann, 2008), this study explored and demonstrated the issues of hierarchy and power relations within the terrain of FCS as well as power relation between the articulated ideologies by feminist press and the IR regime's ideologies.

In this sense, this study transcends beyond the orthodox focus on public/private dichotomy in the mainstream civil society related theories and agenda. Thereby, through illustrating hierarchal power relations within the domain of feminist civil society (feminist press), I inquire into the debates that depict civil society as the terrain of the benign, virtuous and harmonious, contradictory to the venal and oppressive state.

Lastly, this paper has illuminated how these journalists/writers created a counter public space within feminist press through bringing the issues, which in patriarchal society of Iran-considered domestic and private, into the public domain of press and thereby challenged the orthodox public/private dichotomy. Positioning feminist press as a counter public space contradicts with both orthodox civil society theories and agenda that is exclusive to women's participation and with most noticeable perspectives in the related literature to women's social movement in Middle Eastern states in which these movements associated to Islamist/nationalist movements. This paper, then, portrays a new image of feminist civil society in which social actors create counter public space in struggling for tackling the hegemonic patriarchal social structure under theocratic states in Middle East.

Overall, this study has contextualized a Gramscian perspective on civil society and hegemonic battle in order to capture how feminist civil society operates in Iran. This has brought a novel and indigenized insight of civil society under a non-Western/non-democratic

state -which in turns- contradicts with the orthodox theories and agenda of civil society that characterize a democratic and Western context as a prerequisite for operation of civil society.

## Paper 3: Iranian women filmmakers' perceived contribution to women's empowerment

### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to investigate how Iranian women filmmakers report on their role and contribution to women's empowerment within feminist cinema as an emergent element of feminist civil society. It explores the opportunities and obstacles experienced by these filmmakers and the coping/thriving strategies they apply for operating within the terrain of feminist cinema and within the broader socio-political climate in which they are operating. Using Gramsci's concept of battle of hegemony, coupled with Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on (counter)hegemonic interventions, as a conceptual/analytical framework, this study investigates whether the filmmakers' reported operation are in alignment with the emancipatory potential of Gramsci's battle of hegemonies articulated within the civil society arena.

The analysis suggests that the hegemonic battle articulated by these filmmakers is nuanced and complex and transcends beyond that originally conceived by Gramsci. Although their perceptions suggest an awareness of their work in collective consciousness raising and confronting the dominant hegemony, they view their counterhegemonic discourse/films (the 3rd step in Gramsci's conceptual framework) as collective and contingent. In this sense, in contrast to Gramsci's perspective on the articulation of counter-hegemony which although is unified, is still and solid; the filmmakers view the counterhegemonic discourse they produce through their films is as collective and contingent (in line with Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on (counter)hegemonic interventions). As such, they articulate three main coping/thriving strategies -interactive, agile, and viable - to produce this collective and contingent counterhegemonic discourse.

### **Introduction**

The significance of women's issues in some Iranian films, many of them made by women filmmakers, has contributed to eminent interest in researching the role of gender in Iranian cinema (Zeydabadi-nejad, 2010).

This body of research has so far paid attention to historical analyses of pre-post revolution Iranian feminist cinema in relation to: the representation of women either visually or in relation to the actors involved in filmmaking processes (Naficy, 2012, Serban and

Grigoriu, 2014), the notion of family/women as the nation (Butler, 2002), and the veil-driven politicization of Iranian cinema (Naficy, 2012). However, these studies either exclusively focus on textual analysis of women's films<sup>45</sup> or they only briefly mention the perspective of the creators as well as the spectators of feminist cinema (Zeydabadi-nejad, 2010). Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, very little attention has been paid to sociological and political analyses of Iranian women's films employing theories that consider the role cinema plays in broader processes of social transformation. Lastly, to my best knowledge of the related literature, no study, so far explores the enactment of cinema as civil society in Iran.

This paper, therefore, intends to open up discussion on sociological and political analysis of feminist cinema -in post-revolutionary Iran- by focusing on how the leading women filmmakers articulate their contribution to the promotion of women's empowerment. This study employs social/political theories (built upon Gramsci's theoretical framework) - which consider the transformation of power relations through articulation of the hegemonic battle within the realm of civil society- in order to explore how this applies to Iranian feminist cinema. In so doing, I analyze how Iranian filmmakers understand the role of their work in promoting women's empowerment in Iran.

Furthermore, given the fact that among international gender in/equality related indexes, legal injustices against women and women's political underrepresentation are the two lowest indices in Iran<sup>46</sup>, I have focused this study on filmmakers who have made films on these two issues. To date there is no other research on Iranian feminist films that has investigated these themes, yet I argue they are key sites for feminist cinema in terms of producing challenge and change to patriarchal structures in Iran. Thus, this study aims at answering three main questions that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing as follows: How do Iranian women filmmakers articulate their contribution to women's empowerment? How do they report their opportunities and obstacles? And what are their navigating strategies within the socio-political environment that they are operating?

The forthcoming section will present the conceptual framework of this study.

### **Conceptual framework**

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<sup>45</sup> Women's film defined as films that are about women and made by women filmmakers (Zeydabadi-nejad, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> UNDP, 2014c; WEF 2014; OECD, 2014a, World Bank, 2013 (please, see context chapter).

This paper draws on a wider research project, which has employed a conceptual framework using Gramsci's notion of battle of hegemony (1971, 1980) hand in hand with Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on (counter) hegemonic interventions (2001). The rationale for using these two socio-political theories to capture state/civil society relations in Iran that can be explained in the following ways.

First, the relationship between state and civil society in Iran that can be seen as one where a hegemonic discourse of the theocratic state is being reproduced and mediated through civil society as a means of maintaining the power. Secondly, from a feminist perspective, the state/civil society power relationship in this conceptual framework resembles the exercise of the IR theocratic state's patriarchal hegemony as an instrument to further the "Disempowerment of Women". Lastly, it is important to point out that the work of feminist cinema-as an element of FCS in Iran- can potentially offer insights into a broader phenomenon of women's empowerment and how this may be mobilized through civil society.

Therefore, in accordance with Mouffe (2006), I argue that media (here, cinema) is a public space in which hegemony can be reproduced, confronted, and counterhegemonic strategies can be articulated. Thus, feminist cinema can be a key site in which dissensus voice against patriarchal hegemony can be expressed and alternative hegemonies can be pushed forward.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, since Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe's theories allow us to explore empowerment as enacted through the articulation of counterhegemonic discourses -I contend that this is a useful toolbox to unpack the work of feminist filmmakers.

Thus, my contention is that Gramsci's theory provides the theoretical tools to unpack issues of power relations between state and civil society as well as empowerment potential of terrain of civil society in this particular context. However, one should consider that there is a big leap between the ideological and class-based hegemonic battle that Gramsci proposed in 1920s and the diversity of ideologies among social actors (here, filmmakers) within the Iranian women's movement (Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009) in contemporary Iran. This study, therefore, unifies Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on (counter) hegemonic interventions with a Gramscian theoretical framework on hegemonic battle and transformation of power relations in order to include a more pragmatic and contingent (and less ideologically

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<sup>47</sup> Please, see Carpentier and Cammaerts (2006) in reference list. This paper is based on an interview with Mouffe.

oriented) perspective regarding the battle of hegemonies and counterhegemonic interventions.

In capturing power relations and power dynamics between state and civil society, Gramsci presents his views on state as an integral state which is ensemble of 'dictatorship + hegemony,' and as 'political society + civil society' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 239). In this set up, he proposes two closely related notions of state: one broad and the other one is narrow. The narrow as he titled as political society constitute juridical, military, and administrative organizations of governmental apparatus, which are known as guarantor of order, peace, and security. This narrow state is opposed to civil society, however, the two together (political society and civil society) constitute what he calls as integrals state (Fontana, 2006, 2008).

In this dyadic understanding of state, he depicts state as the embodiment of cultural/intellectual life reinforced by coercion. As such, coercion and force, which are specific to political society, are minimized and, correspondingly, hegemony and consent, which are specific to civil society, are generated through dissemination of cultural/moral and intellectual principles of state within the terrain of civil society in order to sustain and legitimate the power of state (Green, 2011).<sup>48</sup>

Civil society, as Gramsci (1971) identifies, is the space in which hegemony or consent emerges, socially and politically identified, and actualized. For Gramsci, civil society is the space in which a continual process of and dialectic between conflict and consent, dissent and community, are conducted.

He characterized civil society as a complex of multi-layered associations and voluntary groups -with plurality of cultural/ideological conceptions and intellectual/moral systems of knowledge (Gramsci, 1971; Fontana, 2010; Murphy, 2001)- which include families, media, schools, universities and voluntary associations (Edward, 2004).

Civil society is a terrain in which War of Position takes place, War of Position refers to a cultural and intellectual battle, which involves religion, ideology, value systems, and forms of knowledge, which is multi-dimensional and pervades across various political and social levels (Fontana, 2010).

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<sup>48</sup> Hegemony refers to the way dominant groups exercise power through gaining the consent of subjugated group, as an alternative to exercise of coercion.

This is here, within this battle of hegemonies, that subordinated groups can challenge the supremacy of dominant groups through the process of becoming hegemonic. Gramsci argues that for subordinated group (subaltern in his own term) to become hegemonic, the first stage is to know themselves through developing a 'critical understanding of self' (Gramsci 1971, p. 333) , at the internal level, by raising critical self-consciousness and by organizing themselves as self-governed political actors opposed hegemonic system of belief. Furthermore, at the external level, these political groups/actors generate and disseminate and their alternative conception of the world (counter-hegemony) -which is in accordance with the social practices of subordinated groups- throughout the society (Fontana, 2006, 2008).

However, since in the battle of hegemonies within the sphere of civil society, counter-conceptions are constantly articulated in order to confront the hegemonic conception, every hegemony presupposes a counterhegemony (ibid).

Therefore, Gramsci, as Mouffes (2006) reports , states that central for the subordinate groups (subaltern in his own term) to become (counter) hegemonic is to take into account the interests of other social groups, incorporating them into a single vision of society, and present their interests as universal interests of 'the people' or 'nation' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 181) or what is known as expansive hegemony (Gramsci, 1971,132-133; Mouffe, 1979, p. 183; Torfing, 1999, p. 111).

### **Laclau and Mouffe's perspective on (counter)hegemonic interventions**

Drawing on Gramsci's concept of battle of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) developed their perspectives on counterhegemonic interventions. In so doing, they advanced Gramsci's concept of battle of hegemony at two levels a) hegemony as unified ideology and b) social class essentialism (Rear, 2013; Haugaard, 2006).

Unlike Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) contend that articulation of hegemonic struggles take place within various domains of social life rather than within a single field of class relations. This view of hegemonic battles may involve struggles over a various range of social relations including gender relation.

Furthermore, for Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is derived from discourse and is not linked to ideological truth claims (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Haugaard, 2006) in which they see hegemonies are discursively constructed rather than materially real.

In addition, they maintain that hegemonic interventions require a social field entwined by multiplicity of competing discourses (Torfing, 1999), which can be continually created by opposing political projects (Rear, 2013), that can make hegemonic closure impossible (Mouffe, 2000, 2006).

In this sense, hegemonic discourse structured based on certain meanings which potentially excludes other meanings, this exclusion can be viewed as exercise of power (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000) and can be continually resisted by the excluded meanings (Ryan, 2006, Newman, 2006). This can create intrinsic contingency within the field of multiple competing discourses of political projects that attempt to achieve dominance (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Laclau, 1996).

Thus, as Mouffe puts it, ‘every hegemonic order is susceptible of being confronted by counterhegemonic practices which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony’ (2008, p. 4) and, consequently, no discourse is capable of being completely hegemonized (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000).

Unlike Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe do not view the counterhegemonic interventions as a revolutionary project, which solves the problem of domination once-and-for-all; rather, they depict counterhegemonic interventions as pluralist, continual, and contingent project (Haugaard, 2006).

Thus, they propose articulation of counterhegemonic project by political actors, who although united by what they oppose, yet maintain their differences, and they are not unified and privileged actors (such as subalterns in Gramsci’s counterhegemonic strategy) (Norval, 2000).

Given the above theoretic on challenging power relations through the transformation of hegemony and the exercise of “counter-hegemony”, this paper employs a conceptual framework which outlines three underpinning processes of women’s empowerment through drawing on Gramsci’s battle of hegemonies (1971): raising collective critical consciousness, confronting patriarchal hegemonic discourse, and enactment of counter hegemonic discourses. It does this to explore if/how these steps are apparent in the perceptions of the film makers but also to examine if their articulated discourse goes beyond these three steps in ways that might speak to the position of Laclau and Mouffe (i.e. by investigating the contingent and plural nature of discourses which are counterhegemonic).



Overall, the implication of this conceptual framework to the study of feminist cinema is that cinema can be argued to play a crucial role in empowerment for women since it provides a space where existing (hegemonic) meanings are contested and re-negotiated. This is in accordance with Hansen (1991), who argues that cinema offers the potential for re-organizing public experience and public space, especially for those social groups such as women whose official forces previously ignored. In this, feminist cinema can use this public space in order to appeal to audiences and to create alternative meanings (counter hegemony) in accordance to the audiences' interest and their everyday social practices.

### **The rationale behind the choice of feminist cinema**

Patriarchal social structure in post-revolutionary Iran, as Sedghi (2007) argues, is justified and reinforced based on Islamic resources in order to legitimize and consolidate the state's power and identity as: Islamic and anti-imperialist. Similarly, it is presumed that so long as Iranian (Muslim) women believe and embrace this patriarchal social structure as an accurate reflection of Islam, they are likely to remain subordinated consensually. Therefore, confronting this ideology is highly significant since this patriarchal social structure is established and consolidated as long as women believe and accept these ideologies/structures as natural and inevitable (Hall, 1997b).

This paper focuses on feminist cinema as an emergent part of Iranian feminist civil society. In this context, feminist cinema has been shown to be raising critical consciousness regarding the perception of subordination as natural and inevitable (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010; Naficy, 2012). Moreover, many feminist filmmakers are also recognized as creating powerful counterhegemonic fiction films and documentaries that critique the tenets both of cinema and of the state (Naficy, 2012). As such, feminist cinema is a particularly important space that is relevant to the women's movement in Iran since owing to the scrutiny of the state, many feel it is difficult to create civil society organizations whose aims could be considered politically sensitive. In this regard, movies can play a role in developing and sustaining discourse that challenge the dominant discourse (Whiteman 2004). In addition, raising reflexive engagement with women's issues -through women's cinema- in order for women to understand injustice as systematic is recognized as significant in advancing women's empowerment (Zeydabadi-nejad 2010).

### **Methods and data collection**

In this study, the data is resourced from interviews that were conducted with four leading women film makers in Iran. The interviewees are all internationally praised film makers whose films have common themes of social injustice and inequality, discrimination and injustice against women, breaking traditional/conventional norms about women, women's social positions and rights in Iranian patriarchal society, and political representation of women in Iranian public space. I have selected these participants purposefully based on their knowledge and hands-on experience in film making with respect to two main themes i.e. the legal injustice against Iranian women and the low political representation of Iranian women. In compliance with ethical framework of this study, I have used pseudonyms to refer to participants and I have redacted the names of films they refer to and any other identifying information (as far as is possible).

To address the research questions outlined earlier, I have applied an abductive research approach (Bryman and Bell, 2015) which begins with a thematic analysis of the collected data and proceeds to map this onto the conceptual framework outlined above. Subsequently, I will return to the raw data to investigate whether the data is in accordance with the themes and the conceptual framework (Yin, 2003). I have utilized thematic analysis in order to a) capture the range of understandings that the filmmakers articulate in relation to the role their films play in promoting women's empowerment and b) explore how these understandings fit with the conceptual account of how empowerment and transformation of power relations occurs. In doing so, I draw on the conceptual framework described above, and look for points of departure between the themes and the theory to generate new insights into how counterhegemony is articulated in the eyes of feminist filmmakers.

### **Analysis of the interviews**

In the forthcoming section, I present the thematic analysis that I draw upon Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis approach.

In order to analyse the data, I pursued the steps of inductive thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), as described below.

To conduct the analysis, I produced initial codes from the data, focusing on issues that concerned women's empowerment (mainly regarding legal injustice and political representation).

Gramscian conceptual framework sensitize my mind and allowed me to approach the data with specific questions that I wanted to code. But it was only after initial coding and collating the coded data that I allocated the relevant codes to the themes identified by conceptual framework.

Here, repetition of codes are important since according to Bryman (2012), when searching for themes, one of the most common criteria for establishing that a pattern within the data warrants being considered a theme is the repetition of the topics. However, repetition per se is an insufficient criterion for something to warrant being labelled a theme.

Most importantly, I paid attention to the relevance of the codes to research questions or research focus in this paper. At this stage, some 'miscellaneous' themes were also identified that did not readily fit into the main themes. In the next step, the collated extracts for each theme were read and considered whether they appear to form a coherent pattern. Afterwards, I generated the final thematic map of the analysis and related the analysis back to the research questions and conceptual framework.

This analysis has generated themes in two main areas. The first group of themes relate to the filmmakers' positionality, which identifies how they understand their role and the role of their work in promoting women empowerment in Iran.

The second group of the themes captures how filmmakers view their operation and navigation strategies in championing women's empowerment and in the facing socio-political obstacles. In the next section, I present evidence of each of these thematic areas before moving on to make links with the conceptual framework I have outlined above.

### **Filmmakers' positionality**

As might be expected, the filmmakers spoke about themselves as social activists who make use of cinema as a cultural instrument. In this sense and in the absence of an open political climate for the operationalization of civil society in Iran, they strive to make social changes in favor of marginalized and disempowered social groups (including women) through creating public dialogue and demands. In the following section, we will see quotes that speak to three sub-themes, which I argue, construct and produce the filmmakers' subjective sense of their positionality in Iranian feminist cinema.

#### **a) The film makers' perceived positionality and contribution(s) to women's empowerment**

In this theme, the data indicates a common perception amongst the filmmakers that filmmaking and social activism go hand in hand in their work. For instance, in the following sentence, when Azar was asked about her definition of feminist civil society, she states her position in the following quotes:

The majority of my activities, those influential ones, I am borrowing from my status as a film maker to operate as a social activist [...] I think that being in a position which earns me a platform/voice in society - where many people, groups, and ideologies do not have a platform/voice- my film making and being social activist are not mutually exclusive [...] for the same reason, anything which would be an obstacle to my communication with society, I would not opt for it (referring to distancing herself from being known as feminist).

Being flexible and adaptive, Azar identifies herself as a social activist first and a film maker second and she has done this carefully to maximize effect and avoid negative connotations that come with some identities (like the label of feminist) so that her relation with her audience will be sustained.

Another theme identified was that the filmmakers positioned themselves as role models. For instance, Atena identifies herself as a role model, along with two other participants in this study:

Ava and Azar have already made some films before me. The social behavior of three of us [leading filmmakers] was so good, and the films we made were so good that families started to accept their girls study cinema. How many women have we in the film industry? It is because we are their role models and we are doing well and having something (worthy) to say.

Thus, we may make the conclusion that this group of filmmakers see themselves as social activists and talk of using cinema as a tool to convey their messages in order to achieve change through giving voice to invisible ideologies (Azar) and by including others within the realm of cinema.

#### **b1) Filmmaker's use of their work to criticize the regime's patriarchal ideology and policies**

In this section, I discuss how the participants refer frequently to social issues that are presented by patriarchal perspectives, which operate through government institutions including the educational and legal system.

For instance, in the below quote, Azar not only criticizes the misogynist ideologies of the IR state but also highlights how her work confronts them.

As a woman, an Iranian, a filmmaker, I also spend enormous energy on eliminating some misunderstandings and having an influence in order to change dogmatic perspectives toward women from -part of- the ruling group.

Other examples come in the quotes below, where Atena, refers to her film XXX and identifies its focus as the laws related to the custody of the children and mothers' rights as she says: <sup>49</sup>

An innocent mother who is a teacher losing her love (husband) and she is grieving. Why do we deprive her of her mother's right? According to what basis? The conditions that they determined for her, what for? Those threats and limitations! Why? Let her raise her children, she loves them.

She continues talking about the same film as:

With these noises, the society would ask why a woman who is an engineer is not given her child? There is no one who is more eligible than the mother.

Here, we can notice that Atena uses an *interactive strategy* to challenge what she perceives are oppressive laws, which uphold patriarchal relations (regarding custody of children in the event of a husband's death). She uses pronouns (we) and the imperative (let her...) in order to demonstrate her argument (captured in the film) which speaks for 'oppressed women' as a subordinate group. The interactive strategy, here, refers to the engagement of the voice of audience within the construction of Atena's discourse so that the audience is viewed as collaborating in confrontation of unequal power relation (here, legal injustice against women). Furthermore, she creates a counter hegemonic position (Gramsci's third step) - against the patriarchal hegemony of the legal system in the last sentence (on the behalf of society) arguing that mothers are eligible guardians of their children.

A similar example is evident in the interview with Neda who criticizes what she perceives to be gender discriminatory laws:

The law is patriarchal. Men have written the law and no woman was involved in it to defend themselves. It is a long way before we reach equality in law both in writing/making law and its implementation. When I made (XXX), I focused on the case of a woman who is helpless and was subjected to rape and no one is there to help her. There, she defends herself and kills a person. Law states that if it would occur; she will be exempted from the punishment (will be exonerated) but it won't happen.

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<sup>49</sup> Sharia law considers fathers and paternal grandfathers to be the legal custodians of children in case of divorce or a husband's death.

Here again we have an explicit confrontation of the patriarchal structure and its power in authoring and implementing the law. She suggests her film, confronts this situation using an example of a female victim who is able to ‘kill’ her oppressor with protection from the law (potential counter hegemony). Yet, her use of ‘but it won’t happen’ recognizes the challenge in implementing the existing law. This can be viewed as employing a *viable strategy* to create a viable alternative discourse in relation to the implementation of the existing law. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) suggest that social actors in a (transformative) social movement may articulate a viable strategy where they are not merely subversive of certain social orders, but rather, intend to provide an alternative discourse to the dominant hegemonic discourse, which can be an alternative link to a viable project for social change.

Atena, similarly, discuss the message of one of her films and its capacity to implement social changes, as follows:

The state thinks traditionally, and they failed practically. We warned them that you cannot, change it (the current law of custody). Now, judge(s) are making decisions (the law has been amended).

Taken together with the quote above, Atena articulates here how her film has challenged the state’s gender discriminatory laws. This is reflected in saying “we warned them” which again suggests an *interactive strategy* (outlined above), a collective ‘we’ which is opposed to ‘them’. She, then, refers to the change in the law and so she appears to associate this amendment with a *collective counter hegemony* articulated through this use of “we”.

In view of the analysis that relates to the theme of this section, I conclude that the filmmakers view their work as critical of IR regime’s patriarchal policies/perspectives. The confrontation of these filmmakers is reflected both within their films and their activities as social activists. In one sense, this confrontation can be translated as the second step in Gramsci’s framework on the articulation of hegemonic battle in that it confronts the patriarchal structures at work in prospect of empowering subordinated groups. On some occasions, this confrontation also leads to some articulation of counter hegemonic ideologies (e.g. women are eligible guardian for their children and the change Atena mentioned in the custody law). The evidence here also suggests the use of interactive and viable strategies in order to confront the hegemonic social order(s) and to articulate potential counterhegemonic discourse. I will discuss the significance of my interpretation shortly.

## **b2) Criticizing restrictions on the operation of FCS**

In the above section, I highlight how the filmmakers describe how their work confronts and criticizes patriarchal policy of the IR state. In this section, I discuss how the filmmakers identify feminist civil society as a public space for doing so and thereby promoting women's social status in the context of Iran.

The first example is from Atena who states that:

Unfortunately, we have to advance women's empowerment via these small NGOs since there is no national determination that state would invest in this regard. However, they (NGOs) can empower limited number of women. We, in the cultural realm, though, are raising the problems and raising consciousness for millions of people. We are raising the issues and awareness, and the related organizations take action accordingly.

In the above quote, after criticizing the limited accountability of the state -with regard to promoting women's empowerment, Atena highlights the significant role of the cultural realm of feminist civil society in empowering women, which she juxtaposes with the more restricted number of beneficiaries of the women's Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). Here, again she demonstrates how filmmakers employ an interactive strategy by articulating how 'we' in cinema reach 'millions of people', this stresses the interactive and collective features of cultural sites of FCS.

In the same vein, Azar discusses the limited number of organizations focused on gender issues in Iran, saying:

The lack of possibility for consciousness raising. The obstacles and limitations for the activities of women's organizations and for the presentation of (creating dialogue about) women's issues is the main gender issue.

This makes the role of cinema more significant.

Here, she implies that the obstacles and restrictions on the operation of the women's organizations have led to women's activists *employing an agile strategy*. In this, they resort to cinema as a potential space for creating dialogue about women's demands in the given suppressive context. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) endorse the notion of an *agile strategy* as employed by social actors in a social movement in order to realize successful social changes. This refers to strategies that are compatible with social realities and are therefore capable of move dynamically with such realities.

In both of the above quotes, the filmmakers consider feminist civil society -either in the cultural realm or in women's NGOs- as a public emancipatory terrain for women. However, they are critical of the regime's oppressive policies toward FCS. This -according to the filmmakers- may make feminist media/cinema responsible for women's empowerment.

### **c) Positioning feminist media /cinema against the state-regulated organizations**

Furthering the criticism of gender discrimination by the IR state, the filmmakers point out that although feminist cinema/press can operate in supporting women's empowerment through creating awareness and fostering knowledge, this positions them against state organizations (like the education system) that do not appear to have such an agenda.

For instance, Azar, in this regard, states that:

Cinema is one of the most significant means -along with press- that could raise awareness as a source of education and knowledge. Given that in the context like Iran, the education system does not cover many issues. Many areas are considered taboo by education system in Iran including women's studies.

In the above quote, this critique is reflected in her comparison between -what she perceives to be- a biased state-ruled education system and cinema and press as a potential source of awareness raising.

Atena, similarly, mentions that:

We should fundamentally analyze -the root of patriarchal practices- for people and TV can actually do it well but the state does not let them. TV does not do it and won't let us do this either. TV is actually acting in reverse (discriminating against women) as a traditional system is controlling it.

Here, Atena criticizes the patriarchal hegemonic discourse of Iranian TV. The use of the pronouns "we" vs "they and them" can also be indicative of her intention to create a kind of *collective confrontation* in that she positions feminist cinema against the state regulated media/TV (by saying "won't let us do this either").

The quotes in this section reflect how filmmakers position themselves in relation to the state-oriented cultural institutions and view themselves as championing women's empowerment in the absence of accountable state-run organizations. We can see evidence of Gramsci's framework in the way that they articulate the role cinema plays in consciousness raising and confronting dominant patriarchal values. They also position cinema as central to the hegemonic battle because of the limitations of other platforms such as television, NGOs and the education system. By critiquing these platforms, I argue that they are confronting institutional practices which manifest and produce the hegemonic discourses.

### **2. The filmmakers' perception about their operation**

So far, we have observed that in the absence of any accountable state run cultural institute for supporting women's empowerment and due to the regimes apparent suppressive policies



toward women's organization, the filmmakers view themselves as social activists using cinema for promoting women's empowerment. This section reflects on how the filmmakers view their works at an operational level and how they talk about their navigating strategies in relation to the socio-political conditions in which they are operating. These are captured in the following themes:

### **Critical self-reflection**

This relates to the filmmakers' intention of persuading the audience to develop self-reflection regarding the naturalized suppressed status of women as well as reminding them of their agency in subverting or consolidating the patriarchal system. For instance, Azar, with this regard, states:

When you start from a right perspective, considering the conditions of women, and tell women that the primary part/role is our responsibility, we are who are teaching our sons. When we make the discrimination between boys and girls, as a woman, we are paying -for it- somewhere else. Making influence gradually -and step by step- naturally - would get some way towards a society that will embrace feminism.

Here, Azar is incorporating her audience(s) within the construction of her statement by inviting them to reflect on themselves and their everyday practices ('the primary role is our responsibility' and 'we make the discrimination' etc.). Thus, this engagement of the audiences can be described as an *interactive strategy* and she uses this to raise *collective awareness*. Then, she is also addressing patriarchal hegemonic culture through inviting her audience to adopt a reflective interpretation of our every day practices as women ('as a woman, we are paying for it somewhere else'), which may lead to the creation of conducive conditions for welcoming feminism. This can be translated to Gramsci's concept of critical self-reflection as the stepping stone prior to collective consciousness raising in which individuals come to realize their (consensual) subjugated status.

In another example, in response to a question regarding the main gender issues reflected in her works, Atena, states that:

The main issue is that we start treating our children differently, based on their gender, from their birth day. We train them (girls) [...] to be grieving, and to be sexual partners from a very young age since we have a negative attitude towards women in our society.

By the repeated use of pronoun "we", Atena, engages the audience in the construction of her works. Therefore, this can count as an *interactive strategy*, which in this case is employed to state her intention to create a *collective* and reflective approach for tackling patriarchal

practices in Iran. As far as such son-biased practices enact subjugated positions for women (and girls), I argue that this challenge is directed towards hegemonic and neutralized perceptions of women and Atena does this through encouraging the audience reflect on their everyday practices.

Similarly, Ava describes her filmmaking in the following way:

I scrutinize people as a psychologist and try to find something (capability) that they can move using that. I would find it and put it in front of them to make them aware of their capabilities. Then they just see themselves and start moving. We can advance empowerment through raising awareness and educating people. This awareness comes true through self-reflection.

In this quote, like the other participants above, Ava applies an *interactive strategy* to both depict the image of her audience and address them as a social subject so that they can relate to the characters (by using “put in front of them” and “aware of their capabilities and self-reflection”). Hence, she describes using this strategy to mobilize change (‘they see themselves and start moving’) and as such, articulates the function of her work in empowering women.

The above quotes highlight how the filmmakers speak of incorporating their audience within the construction of their films in order to persuade them to critically reflect on their everyday practices and their contribution to dis/empowerment. This can be linked to Gramscian concepts of self-reflection and collective consciousness raising which is the first step on Gramsci’s conceptual framework on battle of hegemony. Thus, it seems the filmmakers believe they utilize *interactive strategy* in their work in order to facilitate consciousness raising with their audience.

### **Negotiation/interaction**

Earlier, we observed how the filmmakers’ critiqued the national education system in Iran. Here, I firstly present evidence, which details how they intend to operationalize an alternative way forward through what they deem to be an interactive process in order to raise collective awareness and create public demands. Secondly, I demonstrate how the participants describe the interactions between themselves as the creators of the films, the public audience, and government bodies and how these interactions can contribute to women’s empowerment. This emphasis on the interaction is in alignment with Hall’s (1997) position on film as an ideological construct which may produce or contest hegemony in

negotiation/interaction with producers, films, and audiences (here, both public audience and the government bodies).

**a) Interaction for consciousness raising/ education**

In this section, we will observe how the filmmakers envisage -their roles in- educating/awareness raising as a significant contributing factor to women's empowerment. This is manifested in ideas such as education is a tool for empowering women as well as there is a need to educate to change the view of the state. Note this theme is different from the previous discussion of the education system as an institution in Iran. This subtheme is reflected in the filmmakers' use of key terms including learning, consciousness raising, getting familiar, teaching etc.

Ava, with this regard, argues that:

The stepping stone for women's empowerment is firstly education since our women are often unaware of their social rights, their basic needs, the rights they should have but they are now deprived of.

The above quote highlights how Ava perceives the significance of education in enlightening women of their rights/needs and sensitizing them to their alternative/absent rights.

In the same vein, Azar speaks about her key message in her films as:

I will summarize -my messages are all- in consciousness raising. All my works were focused on it in different ways so that it (consciousness raising) will lead to encouraging the sense of making demands and getting familiar with rights (people's right).

Here, Azar intends to create awareness about people's rights (aligned with the first step identified in Gramscian framework). Furthermore, her reference to encouraging the sense of making demands' could be seen as articulating counter hegemony in that such demands are not recognized or legitimized for women in the patriarchal normative hegemonic social structure of Iran. The connection between step 1 and step 3 is also apparent here as she views consciousness raising as a stepping-stone for persuading her audience to make demands.

In another quote, Azar stresses addressing and educating government bodies:

I will change the ideology of the ruling group as much as I can. Since these MPs are the decision makers, I sent it [her film] to them as they do not see! They do not have any understanding (of women's issues). You can make influence on them; you can make them to be moderate. Again, its impact will affect people.

Here, she discusses her intention to enlighten the regime about women's issues through employing interactive strategies. This is apparent when she identifies the 'ruling group' and

'MPs' as a potential audience and describes sending her work to this audience. She argues that this can change the perspective of government bodies who do not have an understanding and may potentially contribute to the social transformation (its impact will affect people). Again, we can see here evidence of consciousness raising (enlightening the ruling group).

In another quote, Neda also explains how she addresses government bodies as an audience in prospect of amending laws that discriminate women.

Many of these films have been shown in the parliament. There, I learned that they do not know about what is going on! One of highly ranked officials in military asked me to show XXX for their staff, as we cannot go to the jail, we don't know what is happening there.

Neda continues that:

Therefore, it was crystal clear to me that if they (law makers) learn about what is going on in the prisons and how the wardens/ jail officers act, then, certainly law would add a note and state that she (the victim) should defend herself.

In the above quotes, Neda also applies an interactive strategy by addressing policy makers. Hence, she describes how she aims to raise awareness about prison conditions that can lead to the amendment of gender unjust laws so that women have the right to defend themselves. Arguably, this is an articulation of a counterhegemonic strategy -through consciousness raising- that can lead to a change (the law would 'add a note'). Here, the theme of educating the audience is seen in raising critical consciousness with this audience which is construed as leading to change in what women are legally able to do (defend themselves).

Another example regarding the role of cinema in addressing their audience in order to educate them comes from Atena, who states that:

If we want to focus on women's empowerment or consciousness raising, we should first remove the stupid perception from their brain as many of them accepted that they are the second gender.

Atena, in the above quote views consciousness raising as challenging the hegemonic understanding of women as the second gender (constructed as 'removing' the 'second gender' notion). This is presented as the prerequisite to women's empowerment and as such, their films have an important function to challenge deeply entrenched assumptions and beliefs held by women themselves.

Under this sub-theme, I have illustrated how the filmmakers perceive their role in consciousness/awareness raising with both the state and society. Therefore, the filmmakers'

comments suggest that they believe, through educating both state bodies and society, they can change the patriarchal culture through encouraging women to reflect on their consensual subjugated status and enlightening government bodies regarding women's status.

**b) Interaction for creating public demands**

In this section, I highlight how the filmmakers discussed their interactions with both their audience and the state in order to contest dominant patriarchal discourses/practices and create a counterhegemonic discourse.

With this regard, Ava talks about XXX<sup>50</sup> as follows:

What I am talking about is coming from a position of confidence i.e. they are plenty of people who are hurt and destroyed (physically and mentally) and are all behind me. Then I can take action for you and this boosts my confidence to go forward and say my words. You (addressing the official bodies) cannot ignore them as I have it all documented. I just want these people's voice to be heard.

In the above quote, Ava uses an interactive strategy by positioning her audience as social/actual subjects in her work (I can take an action for "you"). Moreover, we can see the *interactive relation* in this quote as she describes how, as a producer, she relies on the story of the audience so that not only she can make their voice heard but also use their stories in dialogue with government bodies - in order to convince them of the production of her film (as in "you cannot ignore them").

In the following quotes, the participants highlight their interaction with government bodies more explicitly. For instance, Azar states that:

It (her film) was –organically- distributed among people and I even sent it to some MPs (whom I was respecting). From a political perspective they banned the film, however, one of my main aims was to make an influence on the ruling group. I am not afraid of sitting and having a dialogue with the most conservative groups and I made great influence.

Azar also adds that:

In reality, I was wishing to address the entire people but XXX and the influence it has made on moderate people amongst the ruling group is very important for me as it has an impact on their perspectives and their policies. When you make an influence on them, you are advancing the improvement of the society

In the above quotes, Azar views her influence on government -both through her *interactive* strategies within her films and the public dialogue she creates, which she argues, may lead

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<sup>50</sup> This film is about legal injustice against a young lady who committed a murder trying to protect a child from sexual abuse.

to advancement of the society. Interactive strategies can be seen where she refers to ‘having a dialogue with the most conservative groups’ and also ‘moderate people amongst the ruling group’. Both of these audiences are linked to making ‘great influence’ and ‘the improvement of society’.

In the same line, she adds that:

Ms. Molaaverdi -that is in the film- is a very enlightened religious feminist. I know her before being the vice president and she was in the film. I have sent many copies of this film, about 500 copies, to people around

Ms. Molaaverdi.

Here, Azar’s comment suggests she applies an *agile strategy* of recruiting specific audiences/allies (Ms Molaaverdi, a government body, and ‘a very enlightened religious feminist’) and taking actions, which can maximize the influence of her, message (sending 500 copies).

Another example of how the filmmakers spoke of their interaction with key audiences is apparent where Neda, describes how she intends to create dialogue with government officials:

When I made XXX, I was genuinely hoping that they (government officials) watch it and learn that what is going on. Many of these films have been shown in the parliament. We make films for the state and all people to see what is going on. [...] this film says that if you see one in this situation (a victim of the rape), make the right/informed verdict. Moreover, all the witnesses -including neighbors and police- are confirming that she was victim of a rape; they should be taken into consideration.

In the above quote, Neda describes how her film interacts with the legal system and government officials and in doing so demands proper enforcement of the law. She does this by applying a *viable strategy*. In so doing, she also explains how the film reminds the legal system (as the audience) to take in to consideration witnesses who confirm a person as a ‘victim of rape’ -the implication being that such witnesses are often either overlooked and not considered, which allows the system to ignore or dismiss the rights of victims. This can be translated as creating a *viable strategy* since she in addressing this audience she critiques the law using its own conditions (witnesses who confirm evidence) to highlight the lack of enforcement.

This interaction is further apparent where Neda adds that:

Also, I include (in the film) a case that a lady killed a security officer. This case went internationally viral and the UN addressed this case. I have seen Kofi Annan's letter with regard to this lady that urged for a right (just) trial. She eventually was exonerated.

Here, we can notice how Neda describes her audience in terms of a multi-partner-dialogue between the film, the UN Secretary-General, and the IR state. Neda, moreover, explains how this dialogue produced a counter hegemonic response (exoneration) since her film engaged the international human rights organizations.

Another key audience that the filmmakers discussed was that of male members of Iranian society. Indeed, Atena identified engaging with this audience as the greatest achievement of her filmmaking:

In the comments I received from my audience, young guys told me that we will not to be like the male oppressor actors in your film.

Here, the reference to 'comments received' indicates the evidence she has that her films have engaged with 'young guys' as an audience who also share her aim of confronting patriarchal practices. She gives voice to their comments through the use of 'we' in 'we will not be like...' and thus this audience becomes aligned with the filmmakers in opposing 'male oppressors' as depicted in the films.

Ava similarly states that:

At the public showing in the south of Iran, the majority of the audiences were women and they confessed that we are happy that you made this film as it will tell our men what we want. We cannot do it ourselves - if we say, we will be in trouble.

Here, the use of "you" and "tell our men" are also indicative of an *interactive* relation between the film, producer, and the audiences (women and men). Ava, then, reflects on the articulation of the confrontation and demands the audience (women) places on her films in relation to their partners (men audience). Therefore, by employing this *interactive strategy*, Ava communicates the audiences' demands and indicates a key function for her films is to support women in mobilizing 'what we want' which they cannot do alone.

This section has discussed how the film directors create an *interactive* relation with their audience and how they portray their employment of interactive, viable and agile strategies in order to create dialogue with the state, the UN, and with male members of Iranian society since, arguably, they are key audiences in communicating and mobilizing counterhegemonic strategies.

### **Creating collective confrontation of the dominant hegemony**

In this section, I outline how in creating an *interactive* relation with audience, the filmmakers appear to see themselves and their audience as developing a *collective* confrontation -to the gendered discriminatory social structure- mediated by their films. For instance, Atena views the presence of women in the audience as significant when she states:

We do not have a properly organized feminist organization in Iran. In such circumstances, the inner feeling of all women is to protest individually. When you go to the cinema (to see my film), you see 400 out of 500 hundred seats are occupied by women as they come to identify themselves somewhere and they watch each film 3-4 times.

Neda, similarly, says that:

For this film, women were really defending and applauding this film. Universities showed this film, even though they were not allowed to, they did it. A friend of mine said that “after my students watched your film in my class, I noticed that some of my students (men) were crying. They said that they could relate to the story of the film as (they said that) this is the story of our life and family relationships.

The above quotes are indicative of *collective confrontation* since the filmmakers perceive that their audiences are *active* in relation to their films (Ang, 1996) through providing anecdotes of audience response. The filmmakers report how the audience relate themselves to the characters and their support for the films publicly through their pervasive presence despite the fact that the films faced obstacles (e.g. a lack of permit for public show). Thus, although some identify an active audience through differentiating between the notions of “using and interpreting media” and being a “powerful” audience (Ang (1996) cited in McKinley, 2011, p. 47), I argue that due to the above noted public support, the audience are reported as collaborating within the construction/showing of these films and therefore are also viewed as part of the confrontation.

The filmmakers also described their audience as participants/collaborators in the creation of collective protest. For instance, in the following quote, Atena describes how she engages her audience within the construction of her films:

You will never see a woman in my film weeping, but it may make you cry as you feel for the characters. The helplessness of these women pains you as you go and see yourself. [...]The first thing is that you will feel that you are important. Women who are going to see my films will be pleased as they can see someone made a film about their issues and they think about their problems/faults.

Ava, in the same regard, says that:



People say that I can hear my own voice in your work. They trust you as they know that you are screaming on their behalf from your own throat.

The above quotes, all, indicate that the filmmakers perceive that the audiences develop a sense of shared sympathy with the helpless women characters in the film. This can be translated to the concept of pleasure which Ang defines as “fantasy of powerless inscribed in the tragic structure of feeling (1996, p. 132). Although Ang positions this pleasure against feminist “fantasy of protest and liberation”, I -in conformity with McKinley (2011)- argue that this pleasure has been considered as both active and disempowered; simultaneously a form of resistance and form of subjection; both stemming from collective/shared experience that can be the springboard for action, and working to perpetuate oppressive social structure.

With the same regard, in the example below, Ava views the support of the audience -in relation to her film(s) as transcending beyond the collective pleasure/protest identified above. Instead, she reflects on the development of a new dialogue/confrontation within society. This is reflected in her following quote:

Since I have made XXX, it led to a new movement and space wherein you can talk about something that is a great taboo. The taboo had not been raised up until then and people (victim of rape) were reflected and seen there. It has won the best film from people’s perspective.

Here, she emphasizes a *collective dialogue/protest* developing from her film (‘a new movement where you can talk’) and that this challenges a hegemonic discourse (‘something that is great taboo’). Being selected as the best film from the audiences’ perspective and being a pioneer in breaking taboos, as perceived by Ava, can be viewed as the articulation of a *collective confrontation*.

Along similar lines, in the following quote, Azar argues for the need to adapt and produce conducive social conditions in order to communicate her message:

There is a dreadful perception/image of women’s right activists among women from lower -than middle-class. That is why I evade being called a feminist as these people believe my words, and because they have the wrong perception of feminism. They make taboo of what I am and never listen to me. However, when they were told that Azar made this film about women’s rights, although the film was not permitted to be publicly shown, it was spread in the other towns and was played for the communities in mosques.

The above quote can indicate Azar’s recognition of the need for conducive social conditions for her film being capable of contributing to *collective confrontation* of the dominant hegemony. In this, the disassociation with the identity of ‘feminist’ in this statement

indicates her recognition that ,since ‘they’ (the audience) have ‘the wrong perception of feminism’, she needs to use the alternative terms such as ‘women’s right’ as a *viable alternative* (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) *in accordance with* audiences’ perspectives -in order to engage her audience. She refers to this engagement and support from her audiences, when she speaks of how her film was shown in towns and mosques despite the lack of an official permit for public showing, which can be translated as *collective confrontation* of the dominant hegemony.

This section reflects on the intention of the filmmakers to interact with their audience as an active collaborator within the construction of their films. This was evident in the filmmakers’ observation of the audiences ‘shared sympathy/understanding with the characters and their considerable presence and support. The active role of the audience -in breaking taboos, creating new public dialogues, and participation in unpermitted public shows- have been used to highlight how the filmmakers view the development of *collective confrontation* of oppressive social forces as an outcome of their work.

### **Adjustability**

This section, investigates how the filmmakers negotiate different political obstacles and the strategies they adopt to do so. In this sense, I highlight their adjustability and their choice of coping/thriving strategies within the socio-political context they are making films.

For instance, in discussing the past challenges, Azar states that:

The House of cinema was shut for two years, which was the consequence of Mr. Ahmadinejad’s perspectives and policies.<sup>51</sup> That made us pay a very heavy price, it took lots of our energy (lots), and eventually led to protests and sit down(s). It was a very tough area and after Rouhani came, HoC was (re)opened.

It is evident in the above quote that Azar (along with her colleagues) views her work as confronting a fundamentalist president’s policies through ‘protests and sit downs’. These actions can be interpreted as employing an *agile strategy* in relation to the social realities of the era.

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<sup>51</sup> This era is commonly recognized as holding the most conservative and oppressive position on gender roles (Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009). Moreover, CSOs experienced their worst period in post- revolution history (Tohidi, 2009, Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010, Jahanshahrad, 2012). This includes a huge clampdown on press (Mir-Hosseini, 2002) and restrictive policies on femisit cinema (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010).

In the following examples, the women film directors reflect on their resistance against obstacles created by the IR regime -toward filmmakers- and their challenges and coping strategies to secure the production permit and communicate their message.

Atena, for instance, states that:

For my first film, I was insulted to the extent that I should have stopped working but I did not care. Despite all the discriminations against women directors, I was genuinely struggling for few years to gain the permit.

Neda, in the same regard, states that:

Everyone told me “it is impossible that they allow you to make this film”. It was all about my resistance and resilience. They were hindering me every day but despite all these, you believe that if you could get the voice of these women (in prison) heard, there absolutely will be a consequence (change), henceforth, changes happened. I don’t say that these changes happened mainly due to my film, but it has made its effects. They saw what was going on (in film XXX) and they did not make the verdicts without knowing the situations.

In the above quotes, they both highlight their resistance against the state’s policies (e.g. ‘insult’ and ‘they were hindering me every day’). Moreover, Neda reports her *interaction* (through the film) with the government bodies (‘saw what was going on’). She then relates this *interaction* to her ‘resistance and resilience’, which enabled her to ‘get the voice of these women heard’ that led to the realization of change (‘change happened’). I argue that their resistance is the evidence of employing an agile strategy within their given socio-political context.

Ava provides another example when she states that:

This (hundreds of pages of people’s true stories) makes me push it forward. It is a burden on my shoulder as people came and got things off their chest for me. They banned this film but I sent it again. I presented the (people’s) stories and asked who is going to be responsive for our children suffering? Eventually, the opportunity has been made to show this film publicly.

Here, she reports multi-layered *interactive* relations -between people and herself (‘get thing off their chest for me’) and she and the state (‘presented the people’s stories’ and ‘our children...’). She relates this *interactive* relations to hers resistance against the state’s ban on the film which led to gaining the permit for public show ‘opportunity has been made to show this film publicly’. I argue that her resistance can be seen as an *agile strategy* she adopted -to communicate her/people’s message- in her given context.

Likewise, Atena states that:

The film was banned for an entire year. When the director general has been changed, he could communicate well with the film. We always find some space to sneak in.

Here, Atena describes tough obstacles about the ban of one of her films. The reference to 'finding a small space to sneak in' can be viewed as an *agile strategy* to secure the production permit.

In the quote below, Azar also relates a story of how her work that has been confronted:

The obstacles were not affecting the process of my work (film making). When I could, I have made films, and in some eras, I was not able to work like in Ahmadinejad's era. It was not only the obstacles... as I was not accepting the conditions, I did not want to apply for a permit to legitimize them. Thus, in that period I did not do any cinema-related activities.

Here, it is evident -in the last two sentences- that she utilizes avoidance of filmmaking as a confronting strategy. Thus, this avoidance can be viewed as an *agile strategy* used -at the time- to confront the conservative regime since she argues that applying for a permit would count as legitimization of the conservative president in that particular political climate.

All the above comments indicate that how the film directors have used *agile strategies* (sneak in, protest, or avoidance) -in their work.

In the following quotes, they tell us about how they were *agile* in using a (relatively) open political climate -in the Reform Era/ during the tenure of president Khatami- to convey their message. For instance, Azar, introducing the key messages in one of her films, states that:

XXX is also (made) about, at a certain point, all women's rights activists, with different perspectives, based on the necessity of raising women's issues, and based on using the short time prior to election when there would be an open climate, they formed a coalition. I am so happy that I made that film and I got that certain time (coalition period) captured. The main aim then was to capture one historical point that can make influence in the future studies and understanding of the history."

She continues that:

This film -toward the end - reflects a historical record that states about women's demands and desires, what are their perspective of the women s' right activists -both secular and Islamist activists, and what level of awareness have the activists gained (about women's demands)?

Azar here captures how she used an interaction of *multiple voices* (varied women's rights activists) within the film, which could only be done in a particular historical moment: during a short pre-election period (due to exceptionally open political climate prior to elections). She also states that-in her film- she utilized this *interactive strategy* for articulating demands

*collectively* where various groups of women were then able to present their demands. Additionally, she employed an *agile* strategy to achieve this (evident in the use of “short time prior to the election” and “historical point”).

Neda also tells how she was *agile* in using a transient time to make an impact in the enforcement of a verdict (death penalty) as she states: <sup>52</sup>

I gave the film to the secretary of minister of judiciary. They watched it and on (the following) Wednesday they ordered to stop the execution.

Aiming at making an impact on (preventing) the execution, she also describes how she was *agile* in interacting with the legal system/bodies within her given context.

This section demonstrates how the filmmakers describe their work and their strategies as adaptive to the socio-political reality of Iran. They discuss the interactive and agile strategies that they employed to articulate their counterhegemonic discourse and communicate it.

### **Creating alternative representation of women**

In this section, the filmmakers talk about how they have transcended beyond IR state’s negative stereotypical representation of women and created an alternative representation of women -what I refer to as a counter-hegemonic representation.

For instance, in the underneath quote, Azar explains how she articulates counter-hegemonic image of women in her film:

In many cases -in producing films- the confrontation with state will happen. For example, when I produced the “May Lady”, the message conveyed was that a woman is not a mother, woman is a human. No one dares to take off the crown of motherhood from the head of a woman, to them woman means mother.

The above quote shows that she is confronting a stereotypical representation of women by trans-coding<sup>53</sup> the image of women as mother with a boarder picture of women as human.

Atena, in the same regard, states that:

Eli, in the movie, got married to flee from the family house. In her marriage, her needs as a woman are neglected. Therefore, she resorts to another woman’s husband. This is the first time it happens in the cinema in Iran. I do not penalize (blame) this woman.

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<sup>52</sup> This film is made based on cases of women victims of rape who murdered their alleged rapists and although based on the law they are entitled to defend themselves, yet, they are struggling with implementation of the law.

<sup>53</sup> Converting (language or information) from one form of coded representation to another.

The above quote is indicative of creating an alternative representation of woman since she demonstrates Elsa's socially/legally prohibited behaviour (resorting to another woman's husband) for the first time in the Cinema. By saying "her needs are neglected" and "therefore", she describes how she intends to avoid blaming Elsa and therefore, is suggesting her articulation of *a viable* counter-hegemonic image as a counter image to the oppressed position of wife whose needs are neglected- yet, remained faithful.

Similarly, Azar adds that:

I want them to see that Sh.L (a leading secular feminist) or an Islamic feminist who is talking about her own right is not an unethical monster. This is the influence I was trying to make which was disseminating awareness.

Here, she perceives her role as disseminating awareness through trans-coding the stereotypically negative representation of feminists by stating that "is not unethical monster" and "they are talking about her (their) own right". In depicting this *viable alternative image for varied feminist*, she appears to produce a *collective* feminist counter hegemonic image.

Creating an alternative representation to that of the IR regime can be translated to Gramsci's third step i.e. articulation of counter hegemony. In compliance with Hall (1997), I argue that representation is a key site in hegemonic struggle, since the power of definition is a major source of hegemony. In the same vein, these filmmakers create new *viable definitions* through depicting alternative representations of women.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has investigated how Iranian feminist filmmakers view their contribution to women's empowerment and how they articulate their opportunities/obstacles as well as their coping/thriving strategies.

In addressing the first part of this aim, it appears that the filmmakers in Iranian feminist cinema perceive that they are operating as feminist political frontier using cinema as a public political space. In this pursuit, they identify themselves as social activists in promoting women's empowerment in the absence of women's organizations and an accountable state and they appear to publicly confront the regime's patriarchal policies in the terrain of feminist cinema. Moreover, these film makers report that they raise awareness about the suppressed status of Iranian women (Gramsci's 1<sup>st</sup> step), create collective confrontation of

patriarchal dominant hegemony/culture (Gramsci's 2<sup>nd</sup> step), and articulate counterhegemonic image/meaning (in their films).

Therefore, in mapping the perceived counterhegemonic discourse/project of feminist filmmakers on to the three steps of Gramsci's conceptual framework, it appears that they are operating in nuanced and complex ways, which transcends beyond how Gramsci originally conceived of them. In this, these filmmakers view their articulated discourse as plural/collective composed of all women's voices. This discourse also appears to be contingent and be produced in accordance with the the socio-political climate in Iran. In this sense, in contrast to Gramsci's perspective on the articulation of counter-hegemony which although is unified, is still and solid; the counterhegemonic discourse produced in Iranian feminist cinema is collective and contingent. Thus, the counterhegemonic discourse articulated by these filmmakers is in conformity with Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on (counter)hegemonic interventions which argues for a more continual, plural, and contingent processes of articulation of (counter)hegemony. In view of the analysis, we can conclude that producing collective and contingent counterhegemonic discourse entails these filmmakers adopting *interactive, agile, and viable* strategies.

Overall, the fluctuating socio-political climate in Iran, the heavy-handed policing strategies of state toward feminist cinema, and social stratum regarding class and religious orientation among Iranian society may have led to articulation of "collective and contingent" counterhegemonic films within Iranian feminist cinema.

This study demonstrates how filmmakers in Iranian feminist cinema -as an emergent element of civil society- view their role and contribution to women's empowerment. In this sense, this study presents a novel image of civil society and its related hegemonic battles that are operating within a cultural realm- cinema. Moreover, by demonstrating the articulated contribution of feminist cinema to promotion of women's empowerment, this study contradicts the conventional understanding of civil society as a public arena governed by men and excluding women and family (Schwabland et al, 2016; Howell, 2007, Howell and Mulligan 2005; Hagemann, 2008). This paper has also represented a fresh image of civil society operating under a theocratic state; therefore, it contextualizes the concept of feminist civil society, its operation, opportunities and obstacles, and its navigating strategies within a theocratic state. Finally, this paper contextualized Western social/political theories within a Middle Eastern context and more specifically within a theocratic/authoritarian state.

## Chapter 7: Discussion and conclusion

### 7.1 What is this project about?

This study aimed at investigating (i) how social actors in Iranian feminist civil society (FCS) are supporting women's empowerment through the discourse of their publications, and films, (ii) how these social actors *perceive* the potential role of their work in promoting women's empowerment. (Paper 2 and 3), (iii) what are the ideologies that are communicated (or perceived as communicated) through the discourse of FCS work (paper 1) and How can these ideologies be analysed using Gramscian theory on battle of hegemony?, (iv) how the ideologies in the discourse of FCS works are shaped and mediated by the socio-political context in which they are produced and the strategies these social actors report employing to operate in their given socio-political context (paper 3). Finally, I also intend to establish and discuss the implications of such findings for our understanding of the relationship between civil society and state in Iran.

To reach the aims and objectives of this study, multiple cases of various realms of FCS in Iran have been studied in order to gain a better understanding of the role of FCS in mobilising women's empowerment in Iran. The collected data that informed this study were one document (a journal article in paper #1) and six semi-structured interviews (in paper#2 and # 3). This chapter brings together the findings of each paper in order to outline the overall contribution of this research to our existing understandings of the relationship between feminist civil society and its role in promoting women's empowerment in Iran. It will then be followed by critical reflections on the research process, conclusion, and implications for the future research.

Contributions and results of each paper -in a narrative format- will follow in the forthcoming section.

### 7.2 Key findings and contribution to knowledge of individual papers

Paper 1: This study proposed an analytical framework which is used to theoretically conceptualize the hegemonic project undertaken by authors In the Iranian feminist publication as an element of feminist civil society in Iran. This framework draws on a Gramscian perspective on civil society as a potential empowering sphere in which subordinated social groups- including women- can transform the power relations through raising collective critical consciousness, confronting the hegemonic discourse of the



dominant group, and articulating counter hegemonic discourse (Gramsci, 1971). Moreover, It adopts Bakhtinian “Dialogism” as a conceptual tool to investigate how documents - produced by feminist publication- communicate their ideological positions in order to foster women’s empowerment and whether/how they articulate a hegemonic project in accordance with the Gramscian perspective on transformation of power relations through hegemonic battle. The usefulness of this formwork was mainly demonstrated through analysis of one key publication which discusses the use of the term *Rejaal* in political decision making around “if women can stand for presidential election”.

This paper concludes that the authors in Iranian feminist publication<sup>54</sup>, as a key element of FCS in Iran, are engaged in articulation of counterhegemonic discourse within the Islamic discourse of the theocratic state. However, through using a Gramscian-Bakhtinian analytical framework to analyse the above-mentioned document, I demonstrated that the author is able to confront the predominant discourses regarding gender power relations in Iran. In this sense, I have shown how the document creates a heteroglot environment in which diverse voices/forces condition each other including the dominant discourse, which, consequently, can culminate in decentralization/confrontation of the dominant discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, Gramsci, 1971). Therefore, these findings assist me to develop my position with regard to the contextualization of Gramscian hegemonic battle in the context where Iranian FCS is operationalizing. In that, the author -who is a religious scholar writing in favour of women’s political rights, produces a counterhegemonic discourse through deconstructing the existing patriarchal hegemony and reinterpreting the focal points (Mouffe, 2000) of the current hegemonic gender-bias articles in the IR constitution. This approach to articulation of counterhegemony goes beyond what Gramsci originally perceived as the ideologically oriented replacement of an existing hegemony that is universal.

Additionally, paper 1 contends that the dialogue/interaction between FCS and progressive religious scholars equips social actors in FCS with critical approaches toward religion that can be actualized in favour of women’s rights. This is significant given that many problems concerning gender equality in the family and public sphere have been associated to traditional perspectives regarding religion (Afshar, 1998, Mir-Hosseini, 2001, Sedghi, 2007, Jahanshahrad, 2012). This suggests that progressive religious scholars may be one of the

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<sup>54</sup> here, the author is a high profiled (male) religious scholar who writes in women’s publications

avenues through which social actors in FCS can gain support from the masses and state to advance reforms pertaining to women's rights.

This interaction between the agenda of progressive religious scholars and that of women's activists- has been broadly endorsed in a few studies in the research literature (Jahanshahrad, 2012; Tohidi, 2010). However, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to utilise an analytical framework derived from Gramscian socio-political theory coupled with Bakhtinian literacy theory to show how this interaction is manifest in the discourse of documents written by progressive religious scholar-who is collaborating with women's publication and writing in favour of women's political rights.

Finally, the proposed analytical framework assists me a) to show how the subtle and intricate uses of discourse (a religious discourse specifically) implicitly challenges the dominant hegemonic agenda of the state. In the context where confrontation cannot be openly expressed, these subtle uses allow for challenge and may potentially culminate in social change; b) to identify the alignment between the ideology of a progressive religious thinker and that of feminist press/publication by critically unpacking the voices/discourses -in the analysed document- and their relation to women empowerment. Therefore, Paper 1 offers a methodological framework, which can be used to demonstrate the way discourses subtly enact/mobilise ideologies that challenge the dominant hegemony of a theocratic state like Iran.

Paper 2: In this paper, I have presented an analysis of interviews with two influential authors/journalist within feminist press in Iran. This paper explores how these feminist journalists/writers perceive their role and contribution to women's empowerment through creating public debates/dialogue and making demands in public space in Iran. Through the use of Gramsci's theoretical perspectives -on hegemonic battle within civil society- as an analytic framework, it also considers how this role and contribution can be viewed to as enacting the underpinning processes of a hegemonic battle i.e. raising critical consciousness, confronting the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group, and articulating counter hegemonic discourse (Gramsci, 1971).

Thus, I have explored whether the dialogue and demands that feminist press articulates and communicates are in accordance with the Gramscian perspective on the exercise of hegemonic battle, which is aimed at transforming power relations and empowering subordinated groups.

In this sense, although I have not employed Bakhtinian literary concepts, as an analytical tool, I utilized Bakhtin's dialogism as an epistemological approach for exploring whether/how these two journalists view their hegemonic project and its contribution to women's empowerment. More importantly, I use dialogism in order to compare their accounts on their articulated discourse and hegemonic project. This is reflected in their account about the use of different voices/discourses in dialogue with their audience, the state bodies, and myself throughout the interviews.

Paper 2 presents interview data with two leading feminist journalists in Iran. The findings of the second paper indicate that there is potential alignment between how Sara views her contribution to women's empowerment and Gramsci's hegemonic battle through all the three steps. This includes the articulation of counter-hegemony in terms of making public demands of the theocratic state. By contrast, Sude's perceptions of her role and journalistic activities do not transcend Gramsci's second step (confrontation of the dominant discourse) in this respect. Furthermore, it also appears that whilst Sara does articulate a counter hegemonic discourse, this actually involves the production of an alternative intellectualist hegemonic discourse rooted in of FCS. A process confronted by Sude who critiques elites/intellectuals (such as Sara) for creating their own dominant FCS discourse which contradicts a more inclusive discourse where all women's voices can be heard. The paper hence contends that recognizing such diverse perspectives is a crucial step in establishing how women's empowerment can be realized in the Iranian feminist press. Thus, the critical investigation of how these feminist writers/journalists report their contribution to women's empowerment, gives an indication of the internal power relations within the feminist press in Iran.

Taken all together, this study confirms the findings of Hoodfar and Sadeghi (2009) and Kian (1997) by highlighting how the Iranian women's movement/FCS is socially stratified. Yet despite the ideological differences between social actors in FCS (such as Sara and Sude), I also argue they are practically closely allied since they share a common goal in tackling the dominant patriarchal hegemony and striving to advance Iranian women's social status. I then argue that being effective within what Fraser (1992) calls a counter public space within the feminist press -in Iran entails occupying opposing camps since they can produce multiple discursive perspectives which are conditioning each other as well as the dominant hegemonic view. Moreover, the moderate/non-dialogic social actors will insure their political legitimacy through criticizing the radical/dialogic actors, which will in turn further intensify the voice of the dialogic actors.

In the literature related to civil society in Iran, the press has been identified as a significant element of civil society (Khiabany, 2008, Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004, Jahanshahrad, 2012). However, to my best knowledge of related literature, this is the first research that has investigated the feminist press in terms of exploring how its social actors report their potential contribution to women's empowerment.

In this sense, this research transcends the orthodox public/private dichotomy in the mainstream civil society theories/agenda, rather, this study delves into issues of power and subordination within the realm of civil society. In this, whilst mainstream civil society theories are mainly focused on the state/civil society relations (Howell, 2007, Howell and Mulligan, 2005, Hagemann, 2008), this study delves into how power relations streaming between the spheres. The findings as outlined above not only demonstrate the power relation between the articulated ideologies by feminist press and the states ideologies but also shows the hierarchal power relations within the feminist press.

Thereby, through demonstrating hierarchal power relations within the realm of feminist civil society (feminist press), I examine the debates that portray civil society as the realm of the benign, virtuous and harmonious, in contrast to the venal, oppressive state.

So far, some studies identified the press as a significant part of civil society in Iran (Khiabany, 2008, Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004) and some highlights its contribution to democratization (Jahanshahrad, 2012). However, to my best knowledge, this is the first study that analyses the perspective of feminist editors, writers, and journalists to unpack the operation, opportunities and obstacles of Iranian feminist press in struggling for empowering women. This has unraveled how these social actors in feminist press using use FCS as a counter public space to make public dialogue and demands in order to promote women's rights.

Thus, the findings of this paper present the feminist press as a 'case' that represents feminist civil society. In this sense, Paper 2 demonstrates how women create a public space within feminist press in order to promote women's empowerment. This positioning of FCS -as a public space- contrasts both with orthodox theories of civil society that exclude women's participation and membership (see the overview of the gap on the gender and civil society in Chapter 5) and with predominant perspectives on the related literature to women's movements in Middle Eastern countries that mainly associate women's social movement to Islamist/national movements (see the overview of women's social movements in Middle

East in chapter 2). Thus, this presents a new image of feminist civil society operating in the public space, which recognizes how social actors are challenging the hegemonic patriarchal social structure under theocratic state in Middle East.

Lastly, this study reviewed the mainstream approaches in literature on civil society and critiqued their underestimation of the significance of the gender dimension as well as other differences and respective meanings -including religion, race and ethnicity- and the creation of asymmetries and hierarchies in the concrete historical practice of specific civil societies. Furthermore, this section stressed the need to focus on cultural dimensions of the project of civil society (please, see page 99-103).

Consequently, this study has contextualized Gramscian perspective on civil society and cultural hegemony to capture the operation of feminist civil society in Iran. The findings of this study reveal that the reported hegemonic project of feminist press in Iran is in accordance with Gramsci's three steps of hegemonic battle in transformation of power relations. This has brought a novel and contextualized insight of civil society under a non-Western/ non-democratic state -which in turns- contradicts the orthodox civil society theories and agenda that identifies a democratic and Western context as a prerequisite for operation of civil society (see the overview of the contemporary understandings of the concept of civil society in Chapter 2).

Paper# 3: this paper investigated how Iranian women filmmakers report on their role and contribution to women's empowerment within feminist cinema as an emergent element of feminist civil society. It explores the opportunities and obstacles experienced by these filmmakers and the coping/thriving strategies they apply for operating/navigating within the terrain of feminist cinema. Using Gramsci's concept of hegemonic battle, coupled with Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on counterhegemonic interventions, as a conceptual/analytical framework, this paper investigated if and how the filmmakers' reported operation are in alignment with the emancipatory potential of Gramsci's hegemonic battle articulated within the civil society arena.

My analysis of interviews with four filmmakers suggested that the hegemonic battle articulated by these filmmakers is nuanced and complex and transcends that originally conceived by Gramsci. Although their perceptions suggest an awareness of their work in consciousness raising and confronting the dominant hegemony, the way they articulate their counterhegemonic discourse/films (Gramsci's the 3rd step) refers to actualization in the

amendment of the law, making impact in the enforcement of the law, and observing the transformation of the patriarchal hegemonic culture through interaction with their audience. They also view their discourse/films as collective and contingent. In this, these filmmakers view their articulated discourse as inclusive/collective composed of all women's voices. This discourse also appears to be contingent and produced in accordance with the socio-political climate in Iran.

In this sense, in contrast to Gramsci's perspective on the articulation of counter-hegemony which although is united, is still and solid, the filmmakers view the counterhegemonic discourse they produce through their films as collective and contingent (in line with Laclau and Mouffe's views on counterhegemonic interventions). As such, they articulate three main coping/thriving strategies -interactive, agile, and viable- to produce this collective and contingent counterhegemonic discourse.

This study, then, addresses a gap in the literature on *engendering civil society* and *theorizing gender relations* -which pervades through the spheres of state, civil society, and the household. This gap relates to predominant civil society theories overemphasize the dichotomy of public/private, mainly focus on relation between state and civil society, and consider family as a boundary maker between public/private spheres (Schwabenland et al, 2016; Howell, 2007; Howell and Mulligan, 2005; Hagemann, 2008). Moreover, Howell and Mulligan (2005) and Hagemann et al (2008) state that Feminist theorists evade regenerating civil society theories from a feminist perspective on the ground that the original concept of civil society has been shaped based on the public/private dichotomy (see section titled: the gap on gender and civil society in chapter 5). Therefore, arguably the theories of civil society were not shaped from a gender lens and consequently neglect the gender relations streaming between the spheres of family, civil society, and state (Schwabenland et al, 2016; Howell, 2007, Howell and Mulligan 2005; Hagemann, 2008).

In this sense, by adopting Gramscian framework on civil society and state, this research moved beyond the boundaries between family, civil society, and the state. In this pursuit, I explored that how socio-political factors can influence the operation (inclusion) of feminist civil society (FCS) in the public space in Iran and how the social actors within FCS report their operation/navigation within various socio-political climates. Additionally, by looking at the strategies these social actors employ, I investigated how they are exercising their agency to engage, operate, and challenge the gender power relations- within feminist civil

society.

So far, some studies have investigated how the political climate may shape and moderate the strategies applied by women's right activists in Iran (Moghadam and Gheytonchi, 2010). However, to my best knowledge, this is the first study which investigated strategic choices made by social actors within Iranian FCS through theoretical analysis of how the social actors perceive their operating strategies within their given socio-political context.

Moreover, contextualization of Gramsci's socio-political theories within a Middle Eastern context and more specifically in a theocratic state has entailed expanding the theoretical framework in order to retain the rigor of such a framework as an analytical tool to investigate Iranian context. This expansion has been more specifically applied to the final stage of Gramscian hegemonic project i.e. articulation of counter-hegemony. Therefore, establishing a conceptual framework, which is comprised of Gramsci's and Laclau and Mouffe's theories and its adoption in the peculiar context of this research, can be considered as what this study can add to the above noted related literature for understanding similar context(s) in the future researches.

Although there is eminent interest in researching the role of gender in Iranian cinema (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010), the studies carried out that focus on Iranian women's cinema either exclusively focus on textual analysis of women's films<sup>55</sup> or they only briefly mention the perspective of the creators as well as the spectators of the feminist cinema (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010). Furthermore, very little attention has been paid to sociological and political analyses of Iranian women's films employing social theories that consider the role cinema plays in broader processes of social transformation. Lastly, my literature review has revealed that there are no studies which explore the enactment of cinema as civil society in Iran.

In addition to the contribution to knowledge made by each paper, there are a number of contributions that this thesis makes as a whole, when all three papers are taken in to consideration.

### 7.3 General contributions and impacts of this study

The overall contributions of this study will be at three main levels: Methodological, theoretical, and empirical.

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<sup>55</sup> Women's film defined as films are about women and made by women filmmakers (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010).

### 7.3.1 Methodological contribution

At a methodological level, this thesis has integrated socio-political theories (Gramsci/ Laclau and Mouffe), relevant to exploring civil society and hegemonic interventions, and the literary/linguistic theories of Bakhtinain circle, in order to analyze the discourses/voices of social actors as they articulate their contribution to women's empowerment in Iran. To the best of my knowledge, this kind of conceptual framework has not been utilized previously in studies that focus on civil society studies in contexts like Iran. The rationale for the synthesis of the above-mentioned theories will be identified in the following paragraph.

Although Gramsci developed theoretical concepts focused on empowerment of subaltern social groups in order to oppose the dominant hegemonic discourse, these theories have never been reflected in his writing on language and grammar –which is necessary if we are to explore the perceptions and voices of social actors operating within FCS. Therefore, linguistic analysis using theories such as Bakhtin need to be adapted and operationalized in order to explore language/discourse, as is the case in this study (Paper 1 and to some extent in Paper 2). It is in this sense, that this thesis offers a methodological contribution to knowledge -i.e. it begins a debate on how this kind of analytical framework can offer tools to explore the perceptions of social actors and their hegemonic project.

In addition, as Wackwitz and Rakow, (2007) suggested, feminist cultural film studies have been under-theorized. In this sense, feminist cultural film studies have not paid enough attention to social/political theories in order to analyse films, rather, they heavily rely on feminist film theories including Mulvey's theories (1975) on male gaze and visual pleasure. This study (Paper 3) developed a thematic analysis based on the conceptual framework that is composed of synthesis of Gramsci's and Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on counter hegemonic interventions and empowerment. This theoretically oriented thematic analysis can add an analytical perspective to the feminist cultural film studies literature.

### 7.3.2 Theoretical contribution

To the best of my knowledge, feminist civil society and its contributions to women's empowerment in countries with a theocratic state have been under-researched (please, see the overview of Middle Eastern women's social movement in chapter 4). Therefore, this research addresses a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between theocratic states and feminist civil society as well as potential contribution(s) of FCS to women's empowerment in the countries with theocratic regimes. In a similar vein, contextualization



of western socio-political theories (Gramscian and post-Gramscian theories) within a Middle Eastern context and more specifically a theocratic state is fairly novel.

The study presents a critical investigation of the activities of Feminist Civil Society in supporting women's empowerment in Iran, and as a component of the transnational feminist movement. In this sense, this study portrays a picture of feminist transformational politics in a theocratic context in which social actors use FCS as a public space to champion women's empowerment.

Although there is an immense literature focused on the contribution of development NGOs to women's empowerment in terms of providing resources and opportunities for marginalized and disadvantaged women (see the section on women's empowerment in Paper 1). There is a dearth of research on the contribution of women's cultural movements within the terrain of civil society to the social empowerment of women (please, see the overview of Middle Eastern women's social movement in chapter 3). The three papers in this thesis address this gap by exploring the perceptions and work of social actors across a range of groups -the document of a progressive religious scholar published by a feminist publication, the perceptions of feminist journalists and the perceptions of feminist filmmakers. Together this demonstrates commonalities between these social actors who have each demonstrated how they challenge the status quo in order to bring about change within civil society that is subject to the constraints of the theocratic state. So whilst there are few studies that have focused on the contribution of the (feminist) press to democratization (Khiabany, 2008, Jahanshahrad, 2012), no research has yet sought to investigate the contribution of social actors across such a range of activities. In general, identifying cinema and press as active elements of civil society is also rather novel in the related literature.

In making this contribution, and in accordance with Kabeer (1999), I argue that social actors in Iranian FCS are striving to empower women with an intrinsic and collective approach. In this, they transcend beyond empowering women individually by merely providing resources including education, healthcare etc.; rather, they are addressing the collective sociopolitical transformational women's empowerment. Their activities -in all realms within FCS- are also aimed at giving voice to and empowering all Iranian women regardless of their social classes and ethnicities due to the wide range of their audiences. This is aligned with Gramsci's concept of expansive hegemony which is inclusive of interests of other social groups, incorporating them into a single vision of society, and present their interests as universal

interests of ‘the people’ or ‘nation’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 181). In this sense, these social actors champion against gendered social injustices that Iranian women, irrespective of their social economic class, are experiencing. These include the right of custody for their children, entitlement to prosecute a perpetrator (particularly a male family member), and the equal blood money (*diyah*) in a case of a murder.

As outlined in Chapter 5, this study reviewed mainstream western approaches on civil society and disregarded approaches which are not useful in unpacking the socio-political environment in today’s Iran (see chapter 5). Instead, this study has adopted and contextualized a Gramscian concept of civil society to unpack FCS’ operations, opportunities and obstacles, and its navigating strategies within a theocratic state. Mindful of Gramsci’s focus on subaltern/bourgeoise power dynamics, unlike Marx, he did not merely focus on economic relations and the means of production. Rather, he moved beyond such relations and focused on cultural interventions within the realm of civil society including family, schools, and media. In this sense, the issue at stake is not necessarily one of socio-economic class in the strictest sense but rather a broader struggle over who owns the field of cultural production. This was the focal point for this study and hence I was able to apply Gramsci’s notions of hegemonic battle to understanding patriarchal hegemony in the cultural realm.

In this sense, I have highlighted how, in Iran, the struggle of the oppressed is permeated by theocratic patriarchal power relations which stratify in relation to gender and its various intersectionalities. For example, it is no coincidence that those women who occupy senior political roles in the Iranian state come from specific class backgrounds. Indeed, I have been mindful of my own position and class/gendered background in designing this research (see Chapter 6, positionality and reflexivity) and this is central to the emergent findings i.e. in the way I have exemplified the transformative empowerment of the social actor’s discourses and the possibility for change. Further reflection on how my own background has shaped the research is outlined in section 7.4 on critical reflections.

### 7.3.3 Empirical contributions/impact

Predominant civil society theorists (Hegel, Gellner, de Tocqueville, Marx, and Habermas) overrate the dichotomy of public/private, mainly focus on relation between state and civil society, and view family as a residual boundary maker between public/private spheres. Feminist theorists, moreover, evade regenerating civil society theories from a feminist perspective on the ground that the original concept of civil society has been shaped based on

the public/private dichotomy (see section titled: The gap on gender and civil society in Chapter 5). Therefore, arguably the theories of civil society were not shaped from a gender lens and consequently neglect the gender relations streaming between the spheres of family, civil society, and state (Schwabensland et al, 2016; Howell, 2007, Howell and Mulligan 2005; Hagemann, 2008).

I argue that the findings of this study seek to address this issue since the social actors in FCS use the public space within FCS to confront patriarchal hegemonic social structures and articulate a counterhegemonic discourse. Moreover, I have demonstrated that their articulated counterhegemonic discourses, in certain cases, have been shaped within the framework of the state's discourses. In this sense, in virtue of creating this counter-hegemony, the social actors who have participated in this study sometimes position women as managing multiple roles -domestic and activist; they bring both family issues and family laws into the discourse of their documents and films, and create a heteroglot representation of women. Thus, I argue that their articulated counterhegemonic discourse tackles the private/public dichotomy of civil society (that excludes family/family relation from public/civil society) and constructs an inclusive sphere of civil society, which considers the fluidity, and interconnectedness of gender relations among the above-mentioned spheres.

Dialogue and reflective questions during the interviews as well as the potential reflection, dialogue, and collaborations, which were followed by interviews, may have an impact on the improvement of the activities of the social actors in the FCS under this study in the following ways:

By alerting us to the potential danger of the establishment of the alternative dominant counter-hegemony within the domain of FCS, the findings of this study have implications for social actors operating in FCS. They suggest the need for social activists and researchers to reflect on their discourses/voices and consider if and how these operate inclusive discourse-wherein all women of different classes and ethnicities have voice and agency.

In the same vein, this research indicates that the articulated interactive and inclusive nature of FCS can further enhance the contribution of FCS. In this, (in paper 2&3) we have observed that how exercising multipronged strategies led to the formation of interactive and collective FCS, which according to related literature, culminated in the establishment of one of the most dynamic and hard-to-suppress women's movements in the MENA region (Najmabadi, 1998; Mir-Hosseini, 2001; Hoodfar and Sadeqhi, 2009). This has been specifically

highlighted in relation to Iranian feminist cinema and the three strategies that the feminist filmmakers reported employing in order to continue operating within the given socio-political environment and to support women's empowerment (in paper 3). Thus, the nuanced understanding of the operation, opportunities, obstacles, and the coping/thriving strategies of these filmmakers can help unpack such filmmakers' reported contribution to transnational feminist social movement within cinema.

#### 7.4 Critical reflection

In reflecting on my PhD journey, I have observed how my positionality - as a social activist and a member of civil society organisations - has affected my research (for further details on my research positionality, please see the Introduction and Methodology chapters).

As I noted in the Introduction to this thesis, amongst wide range of institutes and realm of activities that are associated with FCS in Iran, I have opted for focusing on the cultural areas of feminist civil society. These include feminist press/publications and feminist cinema and more specifically those that have produced works with a focus on legal injustice against women and the low political presentation of women in Iran.

This choice has been made based on some reasons that are mainly related to my previous experience as a social activist, my research history, and my personal experience.

To start with, as I noted in the Introduction, I have conducted research about women's NGOs whose interventions are mainly focused on supporting marginalized and disadvantaged women. The findings of my research demonstrated that these NGOs are striving to support a limited number of disadvantaged beneficiaries. Moreover, the results show that although they could provide resources such as education, health services, and job opportunities; they did not aim and were not able to intervene with regard to the transformation of patriarchal social structure such as gender-biased laws and political presentation of women.

Therefore, I have switched my focus of study into a more socially transformational approach to confronting gender inequality and promotion of women's empowerment. In this pursuit, as noted above, I focus on feminist cinema and feminist press/publication since - I perceived that they have larger audience from different social classes, and have a more radical, intrinsic, and transformational approach to challenging gender inequality and mobilising women's empowerment.

Reflecting on this focus, now, I can see the advantages and limitations of my approach regarding the scope of my PhD research. Firstly, I need to mention the limited timeframe and scope of the PhD. In this, I was initially over ambitious and planned to involve a wide range of FCS including the above-mentioned NGOs, I later learned that this was not feasible given the limited time and scope of my PhD studies.

Secondly, I should mention that the focal point of this thesis is related to my personal experience and attitude. In this, despite experiencing gender inequality in Iranian patriarchal society, I identify myself as a relatively empowered woman and I associate this with the influence of feminist cultural products including films, magazines, and books. Thus, I narrowed the initially broad focus of FCS into the cultural realm of civil society since I believe that not only can they reach a larger audience but also due to their elite status, they can interact with the state and other elite groups to facilitate change. Having said that, this approach can be problematic since a large magazine circulation or a large audience for a film does not mean that people of all social classes from all over Iran can have access to this material.

Additionally, reflecting on the dynamics, interactions, and the language of the communication throughout conducting this research, I found that the actors taking part in this research -including myself- could be considered as privileged intellectuals. Additionally, the document analysed in this research is not necessarily comprehensive for a layperson and it can be considered niche as well. Moreover, although the academic outcome of this research can contribute to the related literature and advancement of FCS activities and their influence in future, it may not be accessible and comprehensive to the general public in Iran.

Therefore, I may adopt a different approach in future research, employing an inductive and bottom-up perspective. In so doing, I may commence the potential research by collecting qualitative data through a participatory approach or informal interviews with random participants with focusing on “*whether and how* they identify themselves empowered women”. This would enable me to generate different findings which may counter my understanding of feminist cinema and press/publication as a terrain whereby hegemonic battles take place in order to foster women’s empowerment. For instance, these interviews with random citizens may reveal that they depict a pessimist image of any potential contributions of such sites to promotion of women’s empowerment in Iran.

So far, I have demonstrated how my positionality and personal experience have influenced the research approach and strategies. I move on to present my reflections on how conducting this study has affected my worldview and research approach.

In this sense, I started with some presumptions based on my personal beliefs and a relatively narrow review of related literature. Similar to scholars with the same focus of research, I under-rated the theocratic nature of Islamic Republic regime and how its gender policies are shaped and interwoven with Sharia' law. Thus, I did not view Islamic feminism among the range of diverse Iranian feminist strands, or as an influential strand in terms of mobilising gender equality for two main reasons. First and foremost, Islam cannot be presented as the only signifier in gender relations and gender policies in Iran. Second, overrating Islamic feminism as a sole influential agenda in fostering women's empowerment is reducing the diverse Iranian culture and feminist activism and agenda into a single drive.

However, while reviewing the literature and conducting fieldwork, I came to the understanding that Islamic feminism and the reinterpretation of Islamic texts from a feminist perspective in accordance with today's social practices of Iranian women can be tabled as a feminist exigency in fostering women's empowerment since Islam has been undoubtedly an aspect of Iranian culture for over 12 centuries. Nevertheless, since Islamic feminists neither have a monopoly on Iranian women's right activism nor they are the only influential actors in promoting gender equality in Iran, I have decided to dedicate one of the three papers in this research to explore the collaboration of Islamic scholars and feminist publication and its potential contribution to promoting women's empowerment. This was not planned in the original proposal of this thesis and the idea has been developed whilst reviewing the related literature.

Furthermore, I also over-rated the significance of a democratic environment as a key contributing factor to hindering or facilitating the operation of Iranian CSO's. However, through this PhD journey, and more specifically through fieldwork and writing Paper 3, I learned that in an undemocratic and unpredictable Iranian political environment, there are numerous dilemmas and thereby unlimited strategic choices available to social activists. In this sense, I learned that the social actors in Iranian FCS faced with state suppressive policies operate in a state of flux and adopt diverse tactics to address a wide audience and create dialogue with and make demands from the state. Moreover, as highlighted in Paper 3, these social actors did not solely address the state, rather, they also strengthened their social base

by appealing directly to the people. Thus, despite some acclaimed scholars (like Bayat and Kamrava) who undermine the contribution of Iranian CSOs to social development, in accordance with Karl Marx, I believe that “in our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary”. In this sense, during this research journey, I learned that facing repressive policies in a non-democratic political environment, the social actors in Iranian FCS adopted more contingent, ephemeral, and pragmatic strategies in order to mobilise women’s empowerment.

Finally, and on a personal level, reflecting on my notes, writings, and even reading strategies, I can observe the transition from a radical, rigid, and relatively judgmental mind-set and writing style into a more moderate, critical, and softer toned approach to research.

## 7.5 Conclusion

This study has investigated the potential contribution of Iranian feminist civil society to women’s empowerment through a lens, which seeks to explicitly identify the hegemonic project that is articulated in their discourses. This includes analysis of how various social actors within FCS report the contribution of their work to women’s empowerment. Subsequently, the potential implications of the above findings with regard to understanding state/civil society relations have been discussed.

In addressing the research questions, this study applied Gramsci’s theories on power relations between state and civil society and the empowerment of subjugated social groups through articulating a hegemonic battle within the realm of civil society. This hegemonic battle is outlined in three steps i.e. collective consciousness raising, confrontation of dominant hegemonic discourse, and articulation of counterhegemonic discourse. This study has contextualized Gramsci’s framework through employing his framework to investigate the articulated contribution of FCS to women’s empowerment and to explore the implied understanding of state/FCS relations in Iran.

This research outlines the socially stratified nature of Iranian feminist civil society. The social actors within FCS adopt heterogeneous -and sometimes opposing- approaches/practices in communicating their ideologies as well as positioning their discourse in relation to the discourse of state. Moderate social actors and those who are in interaction with progressive religious scholars appear to present themselves as either (i) engaged in a hegemonic project whereby they create their counterhegemonic discourse within the dominant patriarchal discourse or (ii) engaged in activities that have not

transcended beyond creating public dialogue (second step i.e. confrontation of dominant hegemony) that avoids making demands of the theocratic state (the third step).

On the contrary, dialogic/radical social actors in the realm of feminist cinema and (some active in the feminist press) articulate a hegemonic project in alignment with Gramsci's framework (including articulation of counterhegemonic discourse). In this, some filmmakers in Iranian feminist cinema appear to view their work -based on my analysis-as transcending beyond the third step. This is reflected in how they describe the way they have mobilized themselves as a feminist political frontier in a public space in order to support women's empowerment. They also reported their discourse/films as contingent and collective. In this sense, in contrast to Gramsci's perspective on the articulation of counter-hegemony which although is united, is still and solid; the filmmakers consider the counterhegemonic discourse they produce through their films is collective and contingent (aligned with Laclau and Mouffe's perspectives on counterhegemonic interventions).

This research has also revealed that although one might imagine that the ideologies and activities of progressive religious scholars seem to be diametrically in contradiction to those of the social actors in FCS, there is in fact some alignment which may be utilised to enhance Iranian women's rights. This can have implications for the women's movement in the contexts with a similar socio-cultural structure and under similar suppressive conditions. This is in alignment with the objective of a collective case study i.e. investigating a number of cases in order to capture a general condition or phenomenon. The results of this instrumental type of study can be extended to several other cases bearing similar conditions (Stake, 2003). In the same vein, Yin (2003) characterizes collective case studies within category of the multiple-case, which concentrates on the consistency of the collected findings from various cases that enables the researcher to make a generalization from the findings at the conceptual level.

In light of all above, I argue that despite social stratification and ideological distinction/contradiction among the social actors in FCS and within their discourses, they are sharing a common goal of tackling patriarchal social structures and promoting women's empowerment in Iran. Thus, positioning themselves in opposite camps can facilitate the operation of the women's movement in the political space of Iran for the two following reasons.



Firstly, given the oppressive approach of the theocratic state towards civil society in Iran, the articulation of a counterhegemonic discourse within the existing hegemonic discourse (Mouffe, 2000) by those moderate in FCS can be considered a viable strategy to navigate in public space. Such moderate social actors are cautious of their operation since they perceive that if they had opted for articulation of a radical counterhegemonic discourse, their interventions would be excluded from the outset.

Moreover, these purportedly opposing camps can be mutually beneficial, in order to avoid two possible extremes: first, the possibility of articulation of the alternative dominant discourse within the feminist civil society which might lead to the tyranny of feminist intellectuals and exclusion of the marginalized/disadvantaged women's voice within the discourse of FCS; and second, the narrow and highly controlled margin of action for civil society by the state, in which pluralism and criticism will never flourish. In that sense, so long as the moderate social actors criticize the radical/dialogic ones in prospect of gaining legitimacy from state, this in turn, can escalate the discourse of dialogic social actors that includes the demands they made from the theocratic state.

#### 7.6 Implications for future research

This research has contextualized Gramsci's theory of power relations between state and civil society to demonstrate the hegemonic project articulated in Iranian FCS and its contribution to women's empowerment and to unpack the implications of this reported project for describing the FCS/state relationship in Iran. This study has also proposed analytical frameworks/tools based on the synthesis of Gramsci's theories/concepts with Laclau and Mouffe's (2001), and Bakhtin's (1981). Undoubtedly, there are many other possible avenues for theoretical explorations and possible synthesis with different approaches and in other contexts.

The conclusion in this study has been made based on the analysis of the collected data (interviews and documents) which are selected based on the aims and objectives of this study. However, due to the focus and scope of this research, limited numbers of participants and documents have been selected; however, the samples appeared to be credible representation of the FCS discourse.

In the same vein, in the second paper, although the data from interviews conducted with two influential feminist journalists in Iran -with regard to their perception of their roles in women empowerment- was analysed, the analysis of the content of their work was missed out and

so does the feedback/voice of their readers. These are two valuable sources of data, which can inform future studies. Moreover, future work could explore how the perceptions of social actors regarding their contribution to women's empowerment -is manifest in their documented work (films/press etc.). This would be a new research project that would entail further use of the developed conceptual framework in this study to analyse new data.

Paper 3 has proposed a thematic analysis based on the synthesis of Gramsci's theoretical framework on hegemonic battle and few concepts from feminist cultural film study. In the latter theory –similar to the other approaches related to cultural study of films- the context, content, and the audience need to be taken into account (Hall, 1997). However, this study is confined to the socio-political context in which the films are produced and the perception of the filmmakers in relation to their contribution to women's empowerment. Therefore, although the voice of limited numbers of the audiences is projected in couple of quotes by filmmakers, the role of audience is missing in this research which can be explored in the future researches. Moreover, this study applied thematic analysis of the interviews with the filmmakers and missed out the textual and visual analysis of the actual content of the films that will be remained for the future studies.

Lastly, the Gramscian-Bakhtinian analytical framework can be applied in future studies aiming at employing Gramsci's perspective on state/civil society relations and cultural hegemonic battle for transformation of power relations. This can be a significant contribution given the widespread use of Gramscian perspectives -including those on civil society/state relations and cultural hegemony- in variety of disciplines in the realm of social science.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Percentage of women in Iranian Parliament (1963-2008)

Percentage of women in Iranian parliament, 1963-2008.

HOMA HOODFAR & SHADI SADR			
TABLE 1. Percentage of women in Iranian parliament, 1963–2008			
Parliament	Elected from Tehran	Elected from other provinces	As percentage of all MPs
<b>1963: women gain electoral rights</b>			
1963–67	3	4	3.5
1963–71	3	7	3.5
1971–76	3	14	6.5
1976–79	3	15	7.0
<b>1979: establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran</b>			
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&Sadr (2010)

Appendix 2: Social and gender indicators, Muslim-majority countries

Moghadam (2013, p. 7)

	Total Population (millions)	GDP (\$US, billions)	Mean Age of Marriage (females, years)	Fertility Rate	Female Share, Paid Labor Force (%)	Female Share, Parliamentary Seats (%)	Year Women Received Vote
Eastern Europe							
Albania	3.14	5.66	23	1.9	33	16	1920
Central Asia/ Caucasus							
Azerbaijan	8.68	18.50	23	2.1	44	11	1918
Kazakhstan	15.67	37.27	23	2.3	50	18	1924, 1993
Kyrgyzstan	5.28	1.98	22	2.5	51	26	1918
Tajikistan	6.84	1.67	21	3.4	37	20	1924
Uzbekistan <sup>a</sup>	28.56	39.33	20	2.5	48	22	1938
South Asia							
Afghanistan <sup>b</sup>	34.39	17.24	18	6.3	16	27.5	1963
Bangladesh	160.00	73.94	19	2.3	20	19	1935, 1972
Pakistan	166.11	108.00	23	4.0	13	22	1956
Sub-Saharan Africa							
Chad	10.91	3.02	18	6.2	6	5	1958
Mali	12.71	3.74	18	5.5	35	10	1956
Nigeria	151.21	74.18	21	5.3	21	7	1958
Senegal	12.21	6.55	21	5.0	11	23	1945
Southeast Asia							
Indonesia	227.35	247.23	23	2.2	32	18	1945, 2003
Malaysia	27.01	139.16	25	2.6	39	10	1957
Middle East & North Africa							
Algeria	34.37	75.28	29	2.4	13	8	1962
Bahrain	.78	13.16	26	2.3	10	3	2002
Egypt	81.53	145.59	23	2.9	19	2	1956
Iran	71.96	151.80	24	1.8	16	3	1963
Iraq <sup>c</sup>	32.9	115.4		4.5	13	25	1980
Jordan	5.91	14.62	25	3.1	16	6.4	1974
Kuwait	2.73	61.4	27	2.2	23	8	2005
Lebanon	4.19	24.38	27	1.9	14	3	1952
Libya <sup>c</sup>	6.4	62.3		2.4	—	8	1964
Morocco	31.61	55.16	26	2.4	21	10	1959
Oman	2.79	27.20	25	3.1	22	0	1994, 2003
Qatar	1.28	29.27	26	2.4	13	0	2003
Saudi Arabia	24.65	252.63	25	3.3	15	0	—
Syria	20.58	27.37	25	3.3	16	12	1949, 1953
Turkey	73.91	376.87	23	2.1	22	9	1930
Tunisia	10.33	28.34	27	1.9	25	28	1959
UAE	4.48	113.77	24	1.9	20	23	2006
Yemen	22.92	12.86	22	5.2	6	0	1967, 1970

Sources: Compiled from World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2010*, country profiles <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-2011/#=> and from UNDP, UNIFEM, and World Bank sources (see below), accessed March 2011.

Notes: a. Data for Uzbekistan from <http://www.undp.uz/en/mdgs/?goal=3>. b. data for Afghanistan from <http://afghanistan.unifem.org/media/pubs/factsheet/10/marriage.html>; [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org); c. data for Iraq and Libya from World Development Indicators, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>; [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2011\\_EN\\_Tables.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_EN_Tables.pdf).



Appendix 3: International conventions signed by selected MENA countries, years of ratification

(Moghadam, 2013, p. 13).

Convention	Algeria	Morocco	Tunisia	Egypt	Jordan	Iran
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979 (with or without reservations)	1996	1993	1985	1981	1992	—
Optional Protocol, 1999	1996		1996			
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995	Adopted <sup>a</sup>	Adopted <sup>a</sup>	Adopted <sup>a</sup>	Adopted <sup>a</sup>	Adopted <sup>a</sup>	Adopted <sup>a</sup>
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1966	1989 <sup>a</sup>	1979	1969	1982	1975	1975
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966	1989	1979	1969	1982	1975	1975
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and Their Families, 1990	2005	2003	—	1993	—	—
UNESCO Convention: Discrimination in education, 1960	1968	1968	1969	1962	1976	1968
ILO Convention 111: Discrimination in employment/occupation, 1958	1969	1963	1959	1960	1963	1964
ILO Convention 100: Equal remuneration for men and women for equal work, 1951	1962	1979	1968	1960	1966	1972
ILO Conventions 87 & 98: Freedom of association and right to organize, 1948	1962	—	1957	1957, 1954	1968	—
ILO Convention 182: Worst forms of child labor	2001	2001	2000	2002	2000	2002
ILO Convention 183: Maternity protection, 2000	—	—	—	—	—	—

Sources: Compiled from "A Summary of United Nations Agreements on Human Rights," <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/undocs.html>; and the International Labour Organization NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11001:0::NO::>, accessed December 2012.

Note: a. Made general and interpretative statements or expressed reservations.

Appendix 4: Political systems and women's representation in MENA

Middle East and North Africa	Type of Political System	Year Women Received Vote	Female Share of Parliamentary Seats (%)				
			2000	2005	2010	2011-2012	
Algeria	Republic, multiparty	1962	3.4	6.2	8	31.6	
Bahrain	Monarchy, ethnic-based	2002	NFP	0	3	10	
Egypt	Republic	1956	2.0	2.9	2	2	
Iran	Islamic republic/theocracy	1963	3.4	4.1	3	3	
Iraq	Republic, under occupation	—	6.4	NFP	25	25	
Jordan	Monarchy	1974	0	5.5	6.4	10.8	
Kuwait	Monarchy	2005	0	0	8	6.3	
Lebanon	Republic, multiparty, confessional	1952	2.3	2.3	3	3	
Morocco	Monarchy, multiparty	1959	0.6	10.8	10	17	
Oman	Monarchy	1994, 2003	0	2.4	0	1	
Qatar	Monarchy	2003	0	NFP	0	0	
Saudi Arabia	Monarchy	—	0	0	0	0	
Syria	Republic, single party, secular	1949, 1953	10.4	12	12	12	
Tunisia	Republic, multiparty	1959	11.5	22.8	28	27	
Turkey	Republic, multiparty	1930	4.2	4.4	9	14	
UAE	Monarchy	2006	0	0	23	17.5	
Yemen	Republic, tribal	1967, 1970	0.7	0.3	0	0	

Sources: World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2011*; Interparliamentary Union: <http://www.ipu.org/wmm-e/classif-arc.htm>.  
 Note: NFP means "no functioning parliament."

## Appendix 5: The translation of the document analysed in Paper 1

### **Women's Expediency for Presidential Position: (Hedayat-nia, 2006; in Women's Strategic Studies Publication: online Article)**

#### **The term *Rejaal* in the constitution:**

The *only* legal reason that *those* who are opposing to the eligibility of women for presidential position raised is the phrase: "religious and political men" in the-article 115- constitution. They believe that the term *rejaal* is gender oriented and means men.

#### **a. The embodiment of the term *Rejaal* in men**

To some, the term *Rejaal* means men as it stands against (Nesaa') meaning women. Therefore, from the perspective of the Constitution, the President should be a man, and women cannot be the President regardless of being qualified in all other required areas.

This term has a *precise* meaning and we know that words are used based on their literal meaning and if the figurative meaning was concerned, it would be required to indicate an evidence. Therefore, the lawmakers meant "men" by *Rejaal* and if they meant well-known and prominent religious scholars and politicians, they should present the evidence.

#### **Author's note:**

This question can be raised then: why did the lawmakers not use the term 'men' to reflect their intention which is opposed to the eligibility of women for the position of President? Why did they use the ambiguous term?

According to the members of the Council of Clergy in law-making:

The first perception of *Rejaal* is well-known scholars and politicians while in article 115, it does not mean so (a clergy member of council of lawmaking said).

The negotiations of the council of clergies indicate that *Rejaal* was initially defined as men and they (clergies/lawmakers) believed that in Islamic government, women cannot be in the statesmanship position, specifically, at presidential level. However, they present it using a more sophisticated phrase in order to prevent controversy for others.

**Interpretation of the author:** in the above quotes, it is perceived that *Rejaal* does not mean men and the lawmakers avoid using men for the sake of the expedience of the regime and its

international reputation. Basically, they avoid using the term “men” in order to prevent international objection and criticism.

**Analysis of the author:**

This is the first and most important legal reason against women’s eligibility to be president. However, the observations indicate that the phrase is not gender oriented. The reason to use this ambiguous phrase is not to prevent the interference of aliens neither does it concern the international reputation. At least, it is the main reason. The detailed records of the negotiation in the law-making sessions reflect that the hypothesis of the lack of eligibility of women for the presidential position was not acceptable to a considerable number of council of clergies. Consequently, some clergies and law experts voted against using men. Therefore, they resorted to the use of the ambiguous term which eventually gained enough votes. There is no clear evidence for the reason they (lawmakers) chose *Rejaal*.

According to the Head of the Council of Clergies, Dr. Beheshti, the article had to be passed by 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the votes in order to consolidate its Islamic, dialogic, and religious background but since it did not gain enough votes, it was ratified as open-ended to be expanded and revised in the future. If God will, it will gain 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of votes in future. Therefore, the law makers who intended to gain the consent of the majority of the members used the term which reflects the eligibility of men while it does not oppose the eligibility of women. Thus, in the Constitution of Islamic Republic there is no term or phrase which reflects women’s lack of eligibility for the presidential position.

**b. Being a male as a required condition in jurisprudence resources:**

There are two reasons behind this:

- In Islam, the eligibility of women for the statesmanship and governance is objected.
- The presidential position is the statesmanship and governance position. Therefore, women cannot be President.

The reasons against the eligibility of women for statesmanship in Islam:

**Quran:** there is no clear/precise evidence against/for women’s governance in the Quran. However, they – those against women’s governance- refer to a single verse in Quran i.e. number 34 in Nesaa’ Surah. It states: “Men are guardians for women since God has prioritized some to others and they spent from their properties.”

### **Analysis of the authors:**

It seems that this verse can be used against the eligibility of women for statesmanship provided that:

1. *Rejaal* and *Nesaa* mean men and women in general
2. The term “Ghavam” should mean governance and statesmanship.

Scrutinizing the interpretations of this verse indicates that both aforementioned conditions are controversial. Some experts believe that *Rejaal* means husbands and *Nesaa* means a wife. Then, it does not mean the guardianship of all men for women. In the following part of the verse, we can see that it refers particularly to the husband/wife relationship. Therefore, this verse is related to the relationship of husband/wife not men vs women.

It refers to men being responsible for providing a living and supporting marital life and they need to meet their (wives’) needs. Thus, it is clear that the verse does not precisely refer to men and women. There is no clear reason/clue for superiority of men over women. Moreover, the verse does not indicate governance and guardianship for men over women. Therefore, referring to this verse as evidence for the lack of eligibility in women for presidential position is not complete.

### ***Hadith* and tradition of the prophet’s (and his family) life:**

In order to refer to *Hadith* for objecting eligibility of women for the presidential position, some issues should be taken into consideration.

1. Authenticity of *Hadith*
2. If the *Hadith* refers to the lack of eligibility of women for all the times and all the states
3. *Hadith* can be considered as advice rather than a religious decree.
4. The reasons for arguing against eligibility of women for presidential position

**The author’s note:** in general, although some of the *ahadith* are authentic, we ignore the lack of the reasons in these *ahadith*. Moreover, there are not applicable in Islamic Republic for the following reasons:

- Analysis of the objection against women’s eligibility for governance
- Clarifying of the position of president in Iran

About the presidential position, there are possibilities based on which conditions and authorities of a President can be defined. Therefore, these possibilities should be considered and mentioned in order to evaluate their applicability for the presidential position in IR (based on the Constitution).

### **1. Appointed governance**

No one is superior to others and it is not accepted to make decision for others due to the acquired or granted capabilities neither it is acceptable to make others obey us otherwise there would be a reason from Quran or the tradition (the way of prophet's life). They are different Appointed Governance based on the range of authorities as follow:

-**The special appointed governance with absolute authority:** this belongs to God, the prophet, and Imam (appointed by God and the prophet).

- **The general appointed governance with absolute authority:** appointed with relation to God but appointed due to acquiring the required conditions, which include being Islamic scholar, juris-consult, and just.

-**Appointed with limited authorities:** it refers to whom are appointed by Imam/the prophet for limited authorities.

**2. Appointed by election:** meaning that every adult person is in authority of his/her own being and have governing position. They can assign some of issues to the others and make them ruler/governor. This can refer to ruling people in their religious, social, and material arenas.

### **3. Political advocacy**

This is a contract in which person(s) will assign others some responsibilities which they can undertake themselves. This refers to the election in the community/society in which a person is elected and is the representative/advocate of people in managing the society.

**The author's note on the non-conformity of the reasons against governance of women:**

The *ahadith* and traditions do not conform to the definitions and conditions of the presidential position in Iran. The *ahadith* refer to the absolute authority while the presidential

position in Iran is not defined/granted absolute authority. It is merely an executive position (political advocacy in the above categories).

It is only advocacy and executive position for the following reasons:

- the supreme leader has superiority over president.
- MPs are supervising and can question, interpellate, and even dismiss the President.
- The Judiciary can deprive him of his legal authority and dismiss him
- in executive arena: he cannot exercise his own will and desire but only the laws passed by legislatures
- in financial arena: president must spend the budget that is planned by parliament

We should respond to some questions before moving to conclusion:

Are the *ahadith* against the eligibility of women for statesmanship in all the governing/management positions? At any/all level of authority? If yes, how we have witnessed women in management and leadership positions in different executive fields in state institutions after the Islamic revolution? It includes the military commanders, management of mega organizations. Additionally, women were appointed as ministers. Therefore, given the dominance and guardianship of women over men in those positions, it should be against Sharia'.

Conclusion:

- Permit Principle: in which women are eligible to be President. According to this principle, people should not be deprived of any right otherwise it has been clearly mentioned in the constitution. Since in the current constitution, the presidency of women is not precisely prohibited, therefore, women should be eligible for this position.
- The equality/equity principle: Iranian citizens from all ethnicities are equal before the Constitution and issues related to colour, race, language, and gender are not considered as privileges in the constitution.
- The phrase *Rejaal* is not gender-oriented. This phrase confirms the eligibility of men for presidential position, yet, it stays silent about women's eligibility. Therefore, this phrase cannot be used as an excuse for violating the permit and equality principle and depriving half of the population of their rights.

- There is no single verse in the Quran against women's statesmanship and governance.
- The *ahadith* against women's eligibility are not authentic and if they would be, they are not applicable to/in conformity with executive responsibility of presidential position in Iran since these responsibilities are limited, transient, and technically are not included in the related *ahadith*.

Taken all together, there are no legal/jurisprudent obstacles to the eligibility of women for presidential position.



## Appendix 6: Semi-structured interview guide:

### Semi-structured interview guide

#### Introduction:

1. Introduction (offers your appreciation to the respondents for agreeing to participate in this research, re-introduce yourself and summarise the research and objectives).
2. The interviewee will have a summary of the research objectives and full contact address of the principal researcher. This includes University of Manchester email address and project specific mobile phone number (temporary SIM for field work).
3. Indicate how long the interview will take (60 to 90 minutes)
4. Provide statement of confidentiality (this is an academic exercise; you will not be identified in the reports produced from this interview unless you give express permission as per the consent form.
5. Confirmation of informed consent (I would like to confirm before we start that you are happy to proceed with the interview. During the interview if there is a question you are not comfortable to respond, you can skip it or indicate if you want to discuss it off record. Also you can withdraw from the interview at any time you want to).
6. Check if the interviewee is happy to be recorded. If not, notes will be taken during the interview and this will be noted on the consent form.
7. Make sure that the participants are comfortable during and immediately after the interviews. They should be advised to avoid issues that will disrupt their psychological wellbeing. Just in case if they become too emotional or tense, we will cut the interview short. If they will be seriously affected emotionally during the discussion, I will make sure that they will get a psychological counselling service.

If their psychological wellbeing will be seriously affected, they can contact:

1. Bonyad Farhang-e-Zendegi

Tehran,Syed Khandan,Sohrevardi-e- Shomali, No 829

Tel.No. +98 8852410 Website: [www.bonyadonline.ir](http://www.bonyadonline.ir)

2. Qeytarieh Counselling Survives: Chizar, Neda Square, No 56, Fourth floor. (North Tehran). The main helpline for all possible emergencies is: +982122689558.

**Interview questions:**

1. About the Feminist Civil Society in Iran
  - a. Can you tell me about yourself, your activities, and the professional association(s) with which you are affiliated?
2. Women's Empowerment
  - a. How do you define women's empowerment?
  - b. What has inspired you to initiate your work in promoting women's empowerment?
  - c. What do you consider to be the main gender issues in Iran?
  - d. How are you addressing women's empowerment and gender equality through your activities (writing and filmmaking)? Can you give me an example of how your activities address your goal of empowering women?
3. Hegemonic struggles
  - a) What are the key messages that you are trying to communicate through your writing/art work?
  - b) How do you think these messages relate to the beliefs or messages issues by the state?
  - c) Let's take a look at some of your work more closely.
    - What were you trying to communicate in this piece of work?
    - Were you conscious of using any particular strategies or language to communicate this message?
    - Who is/was the audience?
    - How do you think this document was used by the audience?
    - What impact did it have?

- Are there other documents you have produced which have communicated a similar message? How do they compare?
4. Socio-political structure in Iran
- a. Can you give me some examples of the work you have produced in different time periods over the past thirty years? Do you think what you do or say has changed over the past thirty years? If so, how?
  - b. How do you think the relationship between civil society and state has changed over the past thirty years?

### **Conclusion**

I have been asking all the questions so far; at this point I want to find out if you have any questions for me.

Thanks again for your time. I hope I can come back to you if I need more clarification on any issue.



### **Participant Information Sheet for semi-structured interviews**

#### **The role and contribution of civil society in promoting women's empowerment in Iran**

You are being invited to take part in a research study [as part of a student project – aimed at investigating the role of Civil Society in promoting women's empowerment in Iran]. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

Asieh Yousefnejad Shomali, Ph.D. Student in International Development and Policy, School of Environment, Education and Development, at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom.

#### **Title of the research**

The role and contribution of Iranian Civil Society in promoting women's empowerment

#### **What is the aim of the research?**

This study aims to investigate how the social actors in the civil society are supporting women's empowerment through the discourse of their publication, films, and human rights activism; how these social actors perceive the potential and role of their work in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality; the ideologies that are communicated through the discourse of the FCS' work and how these ideologies are shaped by the socio-political context in which they were/are produced. Finally, I intend also to establish and discuss the implications of such findings for our understanding of the relationship between civil society and state in Iran.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen as a participant of this research due to your perspectives and hands-on experience in writing documents and making films which are focused on women's empowerment in Iran.

### **What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

You will be asked to participate in two research activities. Firstly, documents (publications, films etc) you have produced which relate to the theme of female empowerment will be analysed. Secondly, you will be asked to take part in a Semi-structured interview which will last 60-90 minutes. During this interview, you will be asked to share your views, experiences and perspectives on your work as an artist/intellectual, how you are supporting women's empowerment through the discourse of your publication, films, and human rights activism and how you perceive the potential and role of your work in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality.

### **What happens to the data collected?**

The data is being collected as part of a Ph.D. research project and will be transcribed and then analysed. The findings will be translated into English and reported in a PhD thesis and may be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, presented at conferences and/or shared with stakeholders in Iran. There is also a possibility that I would use this data in future research projects on female empowerment in Iran.

Therefore, any data collected from this research may be archived and used as part of a secondary data analysis process as well as part of future studies which will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, presented at conference and shared with stakeholders in Iran.

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

You will not be identified in the reports produced from this interview unless you wish it to be otherwise (See below). Your identity will be protected when the data is stored and is processed. The recorded files from this interview will be merely used for the transcription. These recordings will be transcribed and translated into English by myself immediately after each session. The recording will be filed using a code only known to myself. After transcribing and translating these recordings, I will format my digital recorder (destroying the audio file).

However, I am aware that you may not wish to have your data anonymised for a number of reasons. If this is the case, I will remove any reference to personal information in all reporting of the data but will report your name. I will send you a copy of the transcript prior to analysis in order to ensure you

are happy to have this data included in the research.

The transcription of the interview records will be stored on my laptop using a coded file name and locked by a password. It should be mentioned that my laptop is also encrypted by University servers using TrueCrypt software and it will remain encrypted even after the study completes. The transcription will be subsequently transferred to the University of Manchester secure network drives via the VPN. This will be stored in the University archive for a minimum of five years.

**What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself. You can also withdraw your data after this interview at any time up until the point of data analysis.

**Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

There will not be financial or any kind of compensation for your valuable time.

**What is the duration of the research?**

Semi-structured interviews will take 60 to 90 minutes. However, you are free to leave the session any time during the discussion.

**Where will the research be conducted?**

At a place and time convenient for you which will be any public/social places such as lobby of hotels or cafes so as to avoid any inconvenience and disturbance with regard to your daily working life.

**Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

The outcomes of research will form the basis of a Ph.D. thesis. Some data may also be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, presented at conference and shared with stakeholders (e.g. those working in Feminist Civil Society in Iran).

**Who has reviewed the research project?**

This research has also been reviewed by University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee. The research project has also been reviewed by the School of Environment, Education and Development Ethics Advisory Group at the University of Manchester. In

addition, two senior lecturers of the University of Manchester (supervisors) have reviewed the research plan.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If there are any issues regarding this research, you should contact the researcher in the first instance (please find researcher's detailed contact above). However, if you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact:

The Research Practice and Governance Coordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Coordinator: Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL',

Or , by emailing: [Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk),

Or, by telephoning: 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093.

*Or*, if a participant wants to make a formal complaint about the conduct of the research they should contact: the Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

By emailing: [research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk)

Or by telephoning: 0161 275 2674 or 275 8093

**Contact for further information:**

Asieh Yousefnejad Shomali

Development Policy and Management

School of Environment, Education and Development

University of Manchester

Oxford Road, M13 9PL

Email: [Asieh.Yousefnejadshomali@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Asieh.Yousefnejadshomali@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)

**This Project Has Been Approved by the University of Manchester's Research Ethics Committee [Ref 16205].**

## Appendix 8: Consent Form



The University of Manchester

### CONSENT FORM for Semi-structured interviews

#### **The role and contribution of feminist civil society in promoting women's empowerment in Iran**

Please put your initial in the box

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above project and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to myself.	
3. I also understand that I can withdraw my data after the semi-structured interviews at any time up until June 17 <sup>th</sup> 2017 when the data will be anonymised).	
4. I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded	
5. I understand that the audio recording will be transcribed	



6. I need to view the transcripts of the audio recording before it is finalized for the analysis	
7. I do wish to remain anonymous in the reporting of the research.	
8. I do not wish to remain anonymous in the reporting of the research.	
9. I agree that any data collected may be archived and used as part of a secondary data analysis process as well as part of future studies which will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, presented at conference and shared with stakeholders in Iran.	

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

I agree to take part in the above project

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____



## Translation of the PIS for semi-structured interviews

اطلاعات شرکت کنندگان در تحقیق (مصاحبه ی نیمه سازمان یافته)

نقش و مشارکت جوامع مدنی در ارتقاء توانمندسازی زنان در ایران

از شما جهت شرکت در تحقیقی تحت عنوان " نقش و مشارکت جوامع مدنی در ارتقا توانمند سازی زنان در ایران " دعوت بعمل می آید. درک و آگاهی از اهداف تحقیق و جزییات آن ، قبل از اینکه تصمیم بگیری از اهمیت ویژه ای برخوردار است. لطفا مطالب زیر را در با دقت مطالعه کنید و اگر مایلید در ارتباط با آن با دیگران مشورت کنید. اگر نکته ای شفاف نیست و یا نیاز به ارایه ی توضیحات بیشتری است ، لطفا سوالات خود را در این ارتباط مطرح کنید. شما فرصت دارید که تصمیم بگیری که آیا مایل هستید در تحقیق شرکت کنید. بابت خواندن این فرم بسیار سپاسگذارم.

چه کسی تحقیق را انجام میدهد؟

آسیه یوسف نژاد شمالی، دانشجوی دکترای سیاستهای بین المللی توسعه و مدیریت- دانشکده محیط زیست ، آموزش و توسعه بین المللی، دانشگاه منچستر، انگلستان.

هدف از این تحقیق چیست؟

هدف از این تحقیق بررسی نقش و مشارکت جوامع مدنی در ارتقاء توانمند سازی زنان است. در این تحقیق، بررسی میشود که:

چگونه فعالان اجتماعی در جوامع مدنی از طریق انتشارات، فیلم ها، و فعالیتهای حقوق بشریشان از توانمند سازی زنان ایرانی حمایت میکنند؟ فعالان اجتماعی نقش و توانایی خویش را در ارتباط با توانمند سازی زنان و برابری جنسیتی چگونه ارزیابی میکنند؟ ایدیولوژی هایی که از طریق انتشارات و محصولات هنری این فعالین انتقال میابد چیست و اینکه چگونه این ایدیولوژی ها در بستر سیاسی-اجتماعی اشکل گرفته اند؟ در پایان، من قصد دارم که از این داده ها برای درک و مباحثه ی رابطه ی جامعه مدنی و دولت استفاده کنم.

دلیل انتخاب شما برای شرکت در این تحقیق چیست؟

از شما به جهت دیدگاهها و تجربیاتتان در زمینه ی تالیف و تولید مطالب /آثاری که هدف آنها توانمند سازی زنان در ایران است ، دعوت بعمل آمده است.

## اگر در این تحقیق شرکت کنم ، چه سوالاتی از من پرسیده خواهد شد؟

از شما تقاضا میشود که در دو فعالیت تحقیقاتی شرکت کنید: اول، مطالبی که شما منتشر کردید و یا آثار هنری شما که مرتبط به توانمند سازی زنان است، تحلیل خواهد شد. دوم، از شما دعوت میشود که در مصاحبه ای نیمه سازمان یافته که 60-90 دقیقه به طول میانجامد شرکت کنید. در طی این مصاحبه ، از شما تقاضا میشود که دیدگاهها و تجربیاتتان را به عنوان یک هنرمند/ اندیشمند در ارتباط با فعالیتهای خود( انتشارات، فیلم ها، فعالیت های حقوق بشری) در زمینه ی حمایت از توانمند سازی زنان با ما در میان بگذارید. همچنین، اینکه چگونه نقش و توانایی فعالیتهای خود را در جهت توانمند سازی زنان بررسی میکنید.

## از اطلاعات حاصل ازین مصاحبه چه استفاده ای میشود؟

اطلاعات حاصل از تحقیق به عنوان قسمتی از تحقیق دکتری است که ترجمه و تحلیل، و در تز دکتری نوشته خواهد شد. این اطلاعات، در پروژه های تحقیقاتی آینده، در قالب ژورنالهای علمی و ارابه در کنفرانس ها عرضه خواهد شد و نیز با همکاران در دیگر جوامع مدنی تهران در میان گذاشته خواهد شد. این امکان وجود دارد که اطلاعات حاصل ازین تحقیق در پروژه های آینده در زمینه ی توانمند سازی زنان نیز به کار گرفته شود.

## چگونه اطلاعات محرمانه می مانند؟

اطلاعات حاصل از این مصاحبه هویت شما را مشخص نخواهد کرد، مگر اینکه شما رضایت خود را جهت استفاده ی ( بدون نام) بعضی نقل قول های خود اعلام بنمایید. به علاوه، در هنگام ذخیره و بررسی اطلاعات ، هویت شما محفوظ/ محرمانه باقی خواهد ماند. فایل های صوتی ذخیره شده، تنها به منظور رونویسی استفاده خواهد شد. این فایلها توسط خود من- بلافاصله بعد از هر مصاحبه -رونویسی و ترجمه خواهد شد. این رکودها توسط کد ذخیره سازی میشود. فقط خود من از این کد مطلع خواهم بود. پس از آن دستگاه رکورد دیجیتال من پاک خواهد شد ( فایل صوتی از بین خواهد رفت).

اگرچه، من مطلع هستم که شاید شما- به دلایل مختلف -مایل نباشید که اطلاعاتتان را محرمانه نگاه دارید. در این صورت من همه ی اطلاعات شخصی شما را پاک کرده و تنها نام شما را قید خواهم کرد. یک کپی از رونویسی (مصاحبه) ، قبل از شروع تحلیل برای شما فرستاده خواهد شد که اطمینان حاصل شود که شما از قید شدن این اطلاعات در تحقیق رضایت دارید.

این فایل های صوتی روی لپ تاپ ، قفل شده با رمز و کد گذاری شده ، نگهداری خواهد شد. این لپ تاپ توسط دانشگاه منچستر - با نرم افزار TrueCrypt software - رمزگذاری شده است و حتی پس از پایان تحقیق رمزگذاری شده باقی خواهد ماند. فایل های رونویسی ، سپس به شبکه ی درایوهای حفاظت شده ی دانشگاه منچستر از طریق VPN منتقل خواهد شد. این اطلاعات حداقل به مدت پنج سال حفظ و نگهداری می شود.

اگر من شایق به شرکت در تحقیق نباشم و یا تصمیم را عوض کنم، چه اتفاقی خواهد افتاد؟

تصمیم گرفتن برای شرکت در این تحقیق به عهده ی شماست . اگر شما تصمیم گرفتید در این تحقیق شرکت کنید این برگه ی اطلاعاتی به شما داده خواهد شد. سپس از شما درخواست میشود که فرم رضایت را امضا کنید. در صورتی که تصمیم گرفتید در این مصاحبه شرکت کنید، همچنان مختارید که در هر زمانی در حین یا بعد از مصاحبه، انصراف خود را اعلام کنید. برای اعلام انصراف خود نیازی به ارایه دلیل ندارید. شما همچنین میتوانید اطلاعات خود را پس از مصاحبه باز پس بگیرید ( تا زمانی که تحلیل اطلاعات آغاز نشده باشد).

**آیا به من وجهی، بابت شرکت در این مصاحبه، پرداخت خواهد شد؟**

هیچ گونه قدردانی مالی و یا هر گونه قدردانی دیگری برای زمان بسیار ارزشمند شما وجود ندارد.

**این مصاحبه چقدر به طول میانجامد؟**

این مصاحبه یک ساعت و نیم به طول میانجامد. اگر چه شما مختارید جلسه را در هر زمانی در حین گفتگو ترک کنید.

**این مصاحبه در کجا انجام میشود؟**

در زمان و مکانی که برای شما راحت تر باشد. این مصاحبه، در مکانی عمومی مانند لابی هتل، کافه، یا کتابخانه صورت میپذیرد. این بدین منظور است که ناراحتی و اختلالی در زندگی روزمره ی کاری شما بوجود نیاید.

**آیا نتیجه ی این تحقیق چاپ خواهد شد؟**

نتیجه ی این تحقیق اساس این تز دکتری را تشکیل خواهد داد. جنبه هایی از آن در ژورنالهای علمی چاپ خواهد شد یا در کنفرانس ها مطرح خواهد شد و نیز با همکاران در دیگر جوامع مدنی تهران در میان گذاشته خواهد شد (مثلا فعالان در جوامع مدنی در ایران) .

**چه کسی این پروژه را بررسی کرده است؟**

این تحقیق توسط کمیته ی اخلاق تحقیق منچستر بررسی شده است. این پروژه همچنین توسط تیم مشاورین اخلاقی دانشکده ی محیط زیست، آموزش، و توسعه در دانشگاه منچستر بررسی شده است. به علاوه دو استاد ارشد دانشگاه نیز، طرح اصلی این تحقیق را مطالعه کرده اند.

**اگر طی فرایند تحقیق طبق پیش فرض ها پیش نرود، چه خواهد شد؟**

اگر هر مشکلی در ارتباط با این تحقیق رخ داد، ابتدا با محقق تماس بگیرید. آدرس من در ادامه ی این فرم قید شده است. در صورتی که مایلید نیستید با تیم تحقیق ارتباط بر قرار کنید ، لطفا با آدرس زیر ارتباط برقرار کنید:

The Research Practice and Governance Coordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Coordinator: Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL',

Emailing: [Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk),

Telephoning: 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093.

اگر مایل به تنظیم شکایت رسمی در ارتباط با روند برگذاری این تحقیق هستید ، لطفا با آدرس زیر ارتباط برقرار کنید:

The Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

Email: [research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk)

Telephone :0161 275 2674or 275 8093.

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کمیته ی ضوابط اخلاقی تحقیق دانشگاه منچستر این پروژه را تایید نموده است (شماره ی ارجاع (Ref 16205) کمیته ی اخلاق)



**Translation of Consent Form for semi-structured interviews**

فرم رضایت شرکت کنندگان در تحقیق (مصاحبه ی نیمه سازمان یافته)

نقش و مشارکت جوامع مدنی در ارتقای برابری جنسیتی و توانمندسازی زنان در ایران

اگر از شرکت در این تحقیق رضایت دارید، لطفا فرم اعلام رضایت را کامل کنید.

لطفا در صورت توافق، در ستون مقابل علامت تیک بزنید.

من تایید مینمایم که مطالب پیوست در ارتباط با پروژه ی بالا را خواندم و فرصت کافی برای بررسی مطالب و پرسیدن سوالات داشته ام و با رضایت پاسخگوی سوالات بودم.	
من متوجه هستم که حضورم در این مطالعه داوطلبانه است و مختار هستم که از پاسخگویی کناره گیری کنم (حتی بدون ارایه دلیل).	
من مطلع هستم که میتوانم اطلاعات حاصل از این مصاحبه ی نیمه سازمان یافته را پس از مصاحبه -و قبل از محرمانه سازی اطلاعات در 17 ژوئیه 2017- باز پس بگیرم .	
من آگاهی دارم که این مصاحبه ضبط میشود.	
من مطلع هستم که ضبط صدا رو نویسی خواهد شد.	
من مایل هستم که رونوشت ضبط صدا را، قبل از نهایی شدن، بخوانم	
من مایلیم که در گزارش این تحقیق گمنام بمانم	
من مایل نیستم که در گزارش این تحقیق گمنام بمانم	
من رضایت خویش را جهت استفاده از اطلاعات حاصل از این مصاحبه به منظور تهیه ی آرشیو ، استفاده به عنوان اطلاعات رده دوم ، و همچنین مطالعات آتی اعلام میدارم. این امکان هست که این	

مطالعات در مجلات علمی چاپ شود، در کنفرانس ها ارایه شود، و نیز با همکاران در دیگر جوامع مدنی در ایران در میان گذاشته شود.	
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من رضایت خویش را جهت شرکت در این مطالعه اعلام میکنم

نام شرکت کننده:

تاریخ:

امضا:

کمیته ی ضوابط اخلاقی تحقیق دانشگاه منچستر این پروژه را تایید نموده است (شماره ی ارجاع کمیته ی اخلاق).  
(Ref 16205).

Appendix 11: The table of the most prominent women’s publication in Iran, their editors, focus areas, obstacles, and alliance(s).

<b>Magazine /Journal</b>	<b>The Editor(s)</b>	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Focus areas</b>	<b>Obstacles</b>	<b>Audience and alliances</b>
<b>Zanan</b> (1992)- present  Known as most popular women’s press in Iran	Sh.Sherkat, Independent Journalist/ Previous editor of Zan-e-Rouz	Convergence between male religious scholars (known as new religious thinkers), women activists and feminists from different ideological backgrounds, and from inside and outside of Iran (Mir- Hosseini, 2002, Bayat, 2007, Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004, Taheri, 2011).	Represented “Islamic feminism,” <sup>56</sup> decentring the clergy from the domain of interpretation,” questioning legality and justice readings of the Qur’an, offering gender-sensitive interpretations of Islamic texts <sup>57</sup> , Focusing on gender equality in Islam, political/public participation of women as mujtahids (religious scholars), judges, and as the	<i>Zanan</i> was taken to court in 1998 on charges of persuading women against men and promoting homosexuality (Bayat, 2007)  Survived 3 trials and was closed down in 2008 (relaunched in 2014).  They missed the contribution of their	Educated young urban women (Batay, 2007).  Most readers are students or college educated, and a quarter are men.  Allied with Prominent intellectuals and male reformers to address the significance of

<sup>56</sup> Mir-Hosseini (1996); Najmabadi, (1998); Moghadam (2002)

<sup>57</sup> Bayat, (2007), Tohidi, (2010)



		<p>Zanan focuses on legal, socio-political, and economic issues from the perspective of various women's interests (Jahanshahrad, 2012). Draw on both Western feminist sources and Islamic Iranian feminist sources to develop their reference frame (Mir Hosseini, 2002).</p> <p>First journal in Iran that confronted unequal gender rights/laws (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).</p> <p>Forcing some legislative reforms (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).</p>	<p>President of the country. (Mir-Hosseini, 1996).</p> <p>Individual freedom, women's employment and civil and family law and penal code (Mir-Hosseini, 1996, Afshar, 1998).</p> <p>Taboo stories on violence against women, single mother household, the spread of AIDS, and the plight of many runaway girls. (Esfandiari, 2005 in Taheri, 2011).</p>	<p>two key contributors (Kar and Saidzadeh) (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).</p> <p>Received little support from reformists, being ignored by secular women, and distanced by elite women Mir-Hosseini, 2002).</p>	<p>women's rights and their negligence of gender issues (Tohidi, 2010).</p> <p>Mobilising women's support for reformers through introducing them as advocates for gender equality.</p>
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<b>Magazine Journal</b>	<b>Editor</b>	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Focus area</b>	<b>Obstacles</b>	<b>Audience and Alliances</b>
<b>Zan (1998)</b>	F. Hashemi, member of political elite, MP, and daughter of president Hashemi (1989-1997)	Issues of central concern to the international community such as stoning, human rights abuses and elections. (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004)	Campaigned to encourage women to stand as candidates for Majlis Khebreghan (assembly of experts) (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004)  Deploying Women's committees in a number of cities in order to organize women activists more strategically and to create sustained pressures on local government	In 1999, closed down for two weeks convicted for 'assaulting' security forces and lamooning one of the main juridical and religious principles of Islam (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004, Mir- Hosseini, 2002).	Reached a high circulation in its short life (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004) Having close links with the political elite.
<b>Farzaneh (1993)</b>	Ebtekar, Politician Abbas-Gholizadeh, Writer And women	Focus on gender and Islam, criticised feminism and Zanan to	Platform for engaging in theoretical/theological debates and a moderator between policymakers and		Allying with publically esteemed religious figures to promote women's

	in the political establishment	<p>attract attention of traditional thinker (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).</p> <p>Applied an academic approach to women's issues.</p> <p>Play a significant role in Beijing conference (1995) in which they made Women's NGOs familiarized with the agenda of the conference (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).</p>	<p>intellectuals, as well as between traditional thinkers and modernists.</p> <p>Published in both Persian and English, the journal clearly aimed to appeal to 'experts' both inside and outside Iran.</p> <p>(Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004, p. 32)</p>		<p>rights. They also highlight prophet's wife, sister, daughter, and granddaughter for their leadership roles (Taheeri, 2011).</p>
<b>Zan-e-rouz (Today's woman)</b>	Sherkat	<p>Criticise and form the IR regimes 's developing discourse and policies on gender (Mir-Hosseini, 2002) on problems of widows, women's</p>	<p>It focuses on the issues of female suicide, of population control, of laws of custody and divorce, of obstacles to changes in laws on marriage and polygamy</p>		

		domestic and unpaid work, and critical analysis of the portrayal of women in state-related television programmes (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004)	(Sullivan, 1998)		
<b>Payam-e-Hajar</b> <b>1979</b>	Taleghani, Politician	Inform the IR regime of the plight of working women, rural women, and other suffering women. Promoting women's rights within the context of Quranic interpretation (Jahanshahrad, 2012)	Dynamic and gender-sensitive re-interpretation of Quranic sources (on polygyny, divorce, and child custody) (Taheri, 2011).	Was closed twice on 1993 and 2000. Ideological and factional politics have always overshadowed the discussion on women's rights and gender issues.	Allied with the reformist movement
<b>Jens-e-Dovom</b> <b>(1998)</b> The first women's publication	N.A. Khorasani, independent writer/editor	Shaped a reference frame drawn on the works of both inside and diasporic Iranian feminists.	The most popular and influential secular publication. Known as the most radical and informed among women's press in Iran (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).	Was forced by the authorities to stop publication in 2001, however, the editor, launched a new quarterly	

that openly complied with a secular perspective		Its articles focused on women's movements, translations of well-known feminist texts, and writings by and interviews with Iranian feminist scholars in diaspora (Mir-Hosseini, 2002)	It contains articles on a special themes such as Women and Modernism, Women's Organisation, Civil Society, and Democracy and Women (Mir-Hosseini, 2002).	journal, <i>Fasl-e Zanan</i> (Women's Season) in May 2002. (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004).	
<b>Neda</b>	Number of women of the power elite	Demand a share for themselves in politics (Mir-Hosseini, 2002)	Addressing the policy makers in order to negotiate laws related to gender issues	It kept distance from feminism, did not jeopardize its legitimacy by association with feminist press/activists (Mir-Hosseini, 2002)	It has limited number of readers and subscribers are men, or researchers and governmental organizations. The journal clearly addresses the male ruling elites, not women. Related to clerical and patriarchal structures of power. It supported Khatami in the 1997 presidential election. (Mir-Hosseini, 2002)

<b>Payam-e-Zan</b>	Male Islamic scholars in Qom The editor was S. Z. Mortazavi, who was student of a cleric known as progressive interpreter of Islamic family law	Attacking on and opposing to the feminist publication's agenda	It rejected gender equality as a Western idea with no compatibility in Islam; rather, it proposed the concept of complementarity of gender duties and rights		Related to clerical and patriarchal structures of power. Distance itself from feminism to maintain its political legitimacy but its editor appeared in defence of the reformists.
<b>Hoquq-e-Zan</b>	Geramizadegan and Religious scholars	Gaining justice and gender equality within the discourse of the sharia and Iranian culture	Women's legal rights in Islam e.g. on the right of unilateral divorce. (Taheer,2011)		