

The dilemma of Iranian women: From legal transformation to restriction and resistance for gender justice

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Abstract:

The Iranian legal framework formally recognizes principles of equality, yet gender-differentiated laws and policies continue to constrain women's rights, creating tension between domestic legal practices and international human rights norms. This study aims to analyze the development of Iranian women's position, state-imposed restrictions on their rights, and women's resistance strategies in pursuing gender justice within the post-revolutionary theocratic context. The study employs a qualitative library research approach with thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke. Source triangulation was used to strengthen the credibility of evidence derived from primary and secondary sources. The findings reveal three interconnected patterns. First, women's position shifted from state-led emancipation during the Pahlavi era to increased restriction following the 1979 Revolution, while reformist movements continued to advocate gender equality through alternative interpretations of Islamic law. Second, state regulations concerning education, public participation, compulsory hijab, and bodily autonomy constrained women's rights and were accompanied by sustained resistance, particularly following the death of Mahsa Amini. Third, Iranian women developed diverse resistance strategies through human rights advocacy, cross-ideological feminist coalitions, digital activism, and public mobilization. Overall, the findings indicate that women's rights in Iran are shaped by an ongoing contestation between state authority grounded in Islamic legal interpretations and women's demands for equality, autonomy, and citizenship. The study contributes to progressive legal perspectives by identifying spaces for negotiation, reinterpretation, and gradual reform within a restrictive legal environment, while highlighting women's collective agency in advancing gender justice through legal advocacy, digital mobilization, and transnational solidarity.



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INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Iranian Revolution involved women actively in mass demonstrations, support for armed groups, and the dissemination of anti-Western messages through print media, cassette recordings, and billboards, mobilizing *Rawzeh* and *Jalaseh* networks (Hegland, 1990; Kamalkhani, 1998). Many women, however, were also among those killed in the Cinema Rex fire and during Black Friday (Adamu, 2000; Afshar, 2007). Despite their major contributions to the revolutionary movement, women did not experience enduring improvements in their social and legal position, as revolutionary leaders did not fundamentally dismantle male-dominated structures within the prevailing religious and social order (Usman, 2002; Langford, 2018). Instead, the post-revolutionary government introduced compulsory hijab to reshape public morality and resist perceived Western cultural influence (Byng, 2010). Iran was subsequently transformed into an Islamic republic grounded in Shi'i political and religious doctrines, with the *Rahbar* holding supreme political authority (Sharifi, 2020; Al Apdolah, 2022; Yamani, 2022; Jayana, 2022). Consequently, gender-differentiated policies emerged in law, civil rights, and women's public participation, prompting sustained criticism from gender activists and feminist movements.

Previous scholarship on women in Iran can be classified into three main strands. First, women played an important role in the 1979 Revolution but experienced post-revolutionary marginalization through clerical domination, restrictions on public participation, and gender segregation (Kotwal, 2019; Azarmina, 2002; Latuconsina, 2021). Second, Islamic feminism has challenged conventional understandings of hijab and developed Islamic-based arguments for gender equality, although these approaches remain constrained by theocratic institutions and gender-differentiated interpretations of Islamic law (Mir-Hosseini, 2007; Tavassoli & Teo, 2021; Gashtili, 2013). Third, studies highlight tensions between modernization and traditionalism, the transformation of student movements into independent coalitions, strengthened grassroots strategies, and the increasing politicization of gender issues (Dezfuli, 2016; Assoudeh & Salazar, 2017; Sadeghi, 2010; Mohammadi, 2007; Khadem, 2018; Avcioglu & Avcioglu, 2016; Mikail, 2015; Daud & Rosadi, 2021; Wijayanto et al., 2022). However, few studies systematically connect historical transformation, state restrictions, and women's resistance. This study addresses this gap by integrating these dimensions to examine changing legal structures, restrictive policies, and women's agency.

This study analyses the development of women's position in Iran, state-imposed restrictions on women's rights, and women's resistance strategies for gender justice from the Pahlavi era through the post-1979 Islamic Revolution amid theocratic governance and gender-differentiated policies. It contributes to scholarship on gender and Islamic politics by examining changes in women's social and legal position, restrictive state policies, and resistance. Its findings are relevant to scholars, human rights advocates, and policymakers concerned with gender justice in Iran and other Muslim-majority contexts. Accordingly, the study asks: (1) How have women's position and rights developed from the Pahlavi era to the post-1979 period? (2) What restrictions have been imposed on women's rights? (3) How have Iranian women developed resistance strategies to pursue gender justice?

This study argues that women's rights in Iran have evolved through a contradictory trajectory of emancipation during the Pahlavi era, increased restrictions after the 1979 Revolution, and continuing resistance and reform. The Pahlavi era expanded women's opportunities through political rights, education, and family-law reforms. However, the Revolution marked a turning point towards a legal framework containing gender-differentiated provisions in criminal and family law. Restrictions have operated not only through legal regulation but also through compulsory hijab policies and state control of

education and public space. At the same time, restrictive policies have been accompanied by increasingly organized resistance through women's movement coalitions, legal advocacy, digital activism, and engagement with international human rights frameworks. The case of Mahsa Amini became a critical symbol of Iranian women's resistance and expanded international attention to gender justice. Thus, women's rights struggles involve an ongoing interplay among legal restrictions, women's agency, social mobilization, and opportunities for gradual reform.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on library research, to examine the development of women's rights, state-imposed restrictions, and women's resistance in Iran. Library research involves the systematic examination and interpretation of published and documentary sources relevant to the research problem, including books, scholarly journal articles, legal documents, policy materials, and field-based studies ([Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022](#); [Kraus et al., 2022](#)). This approach was selected because the study focuses on historical, legal, political, and social developments that can be examined through documented evidence rather than direct field observation. Library research also enables the researcher to compare different scholarly perspectives and construct an integrated interpretation of women's rights and resistance within Iran's changing socio-political context ([Reed et al., 2021](#)). Accordingly, the study synthesizes documented evidence to identify patterns of legal transformation, state restriction, and women's agency.

Data Sources

The data sources consisted of primary and secondary materials. Primary sources included the 1989 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, relevant state policy and legal documents concerning women's rights, and international human rights instruments, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Secondary sources included scholarly journal articles, books, case studies, and previous research addressing women's rights, gender-based restrictions, Islamic feminism, women's movements, and resistance in Iran. Academic literature was identified through reputable scholarly databases and indexing platforms, including Scopus, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and other relevant sources. Sources were selected according to their relevance to the research questions, scholarly credibility, and contribution to understanding the historical, legal, and socio-political dimensions of women's rights in Iran. The combination of documentary and scholarly sources enabled the analysis to connect formal legal provisions with documented social experiences and patterns of resistance.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and reporting. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the selected sources to identify evidence relevant to the research questions. Relevant evidence was coded according to recurring concepts, legal developments, forms of restriction, and resistance strategies. Through iterative comparison and refinement, related codes were grouped into broader themes. Three themes were developed: (1) the development of women's position and rights in Iran from the Pahlavi era through the post-1979 period; (2) restrictions on women's rights in law, education, bodily regulation, and public participation; and (3) women's

resistance through legal advocacy, feminist organising, cross-ideological coalitions, digital activism, and public mobilisation. The themes were comparatively interpreted to identify patterns, continuities, changes, and tensions in gender justice.

Data Validity

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing evidence across different types of primary and secondary sources (Carter et al., 2014; Moon, 2019). Documentary evidence, legal materials, and scholarly interpretations were cross-checked to identify consistencies, discrepancies, and differences in interpretation. Particular attention was given to claims concerning legal provisions, state policies, and major cases by comparing information across multiple independent sources (Ewald et al., 2022). The analysis also considered the historical and contextual differences among sources rather than treating all accounts as equivalent. The use of reputable scholarly publications and primary legal and policy documents further strengthened the credibility and traceability of the findings. These procedures were intended to enhance analytical consistency and reduce the risk of relying on a single interpretation of Iran's complex and contested gender relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The development of women's position and rights in Iran

The development of women's rights in Iran reflects a non-linear trajectory shaped by political, legal, and religious transformations. The findings identify three interconnected phases: state-led modernization during the Pahlavi era, the post-revolutionary institutionalization of gender-differentiated laws, and continuing resistance and reform since the 1990s. During the Pahlavi period, reforms expanded women's education, political participation, suffrage, and legal protection, particularly through the 1967 Family Protection Law. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a fundamental turning point, as the legal system increasingly incorporated Islamic principles and reversed or modified several earlier reforms. Gender-differentiated provisions in criminal and family law subsequently constrained women's autonomy in areas such as marriage, guardianship, divorce, and evidence, thereby transforming the legal conditions governing women's rights.

Table 1

Development of Women's Position and Rights in Iran

No.	Key Finding	Description of Finding	Analytical Significance	References
1	State-Led Modernisation and Women's Emancipation (1920–1979)	During the Pahlavi era, state-led reforms expanded women's access to education, political participation, suffrage, and legal protection. The Family Protection Law of 1967 challenged established patriarchal practices in marriage and family relations and strengthened women's legal position.	Modernisation created institutional opportunities for women's public participation and expanded their formal legal status.	Nayyeri (2013); Afary (1999); <i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i> (2000)
2	The 1979 Islamic Revolution as a Turning Point	The Islamic Revolution fundamentally altered the legal framework governing women. The Family Protection Law of 1967 was rescinded shortly after the Revolution, while subsequent legislation increasingly incorporated	The post-revolutionary transformation marked a shift from state-led legal modernisation towards a gender-differentiated legal order.	Nayyeri (2013); Osanloo (2015); Osanloo (2016)

		Islamic legal principles into family and criminal law.		
3	Gender Differentiation in Criminal Law	Post-revolutionary criminal-law reforms introduced gender-differentiated provisions in areas of criminal responsibility, evidence, and punishment. Women were consequently subject to distinct legal standards in particular criminal-law contexts.	Gender differentiation in criminal law institutionalised unequal legal treatment and reinforced gendered regulation within the post-revolutionary legal system.	Nayyeri (2013); Osanloo (2016); ICCPR
4	Restrictions on Women's Autonomy in Family Law	Post-revolutionary family law imposed or maintained gender-differentiated provisions concerning marriage, divorce, guardianship, custody, and related family matters. These provisions affected women's capacity to exercise autonomy within family relationships.	Family law became a central institutional mechanism through which gender hierarchy and patriarchal authority were reproduced.	Nayyeri (2013); Osanloo (2015); <i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i> (2000)
5	Tension between Human Rights Norms and Domestic Law	Iran's domestic legal framework contains constitutional and statutory provisions concerning women's rights while also maintaining gender-differentiated rules in several areas. This creates tension between formal commitments to equality and the implementation of gender-differentiated domestic laws.	The Iranian case illustrates the gap that may emerge between universal human rights norms and their domestic legal interpretation and implementation.	UDHR; ICCPR; Nayyeri (2013)
6	Women's Activism and Reformist Resistance (1990s–Present)	Since the 1990s, Iranian women's activists, reform-oriented intellectuals, and civil-society actors have challenged restrictive interpretations of women's roles and advocated legal and social reforms. These efforts have included attempts to reinterpret Islamic principles to support greater gender equality.	Women's activism demonstrates that the post-revolutionary gender order remains contested and that religious interpretation can become a site of negotiation and reform.	Afary (1999); Nayyeri (2013); Osanloo (2015)

Source: Author's synthesis based on the reviewed literature (2023).

The findings further reveal a persistent tension between Iran's engagement with international human rights norms and the continuation of gender-differentiated provisions in domestic law. Although equality is recognized within international human rights frameworks, its implementation remains shaped by Iran's constitutional and legal structure, creating a gap between formal equality and substantive legal practice. Nevertheless, women's rights have remained a contested field rather than a fixed outcome. Since the 1990s, women activists, reformist intellectuals, and civil-society actors have challenged restrictive interpretations of Islamic law and advocated more egalitarian approaches to women's rights, citizenship, and gender justice. Overall, the Iranian case demonstrates that women's rights have evolved through an ongoing contestation among Islamic legal interpretation, patriarchal institutions, human rights norms, and women's agency, revealing both persistent structural constraints and possibilities for legal and social transformation.

Restrictions on women's rights in Iran

A synthesis of the scholarly literature indicates that restrictions on women's rights in Iran operate through interconnected legal, educational, social, and surveillance mechanisms. These measures regulate women's access to higher education, participation in the public sphere, bodily autonomy, and freedom of expression. At the same time, the persistence of these restrictions has generated diverse forms of resistance, particularly through digital activism, civil-society mobilisation, and public protest.

Table 2

Restrictions on Women's Rights in Iran

No.	Key Finding	Description of Finding	Analytical Significance	References
1	Restrictions on Access to Higher Education	State policies, including gender-based quotas and segregation measures, have constrained women's participation in particular areas of higher education.	These policies affect women's educational opportunities and access to subsequent social and professional mobility.	Parsi (2012); Basmechi & Gabe (2021); Rezai et al. (2019)
2	Regulation of Women's Participation in the Public Sphere	State policies have sought to regulate women's participation in public and professional life while reinforcing expectations concerning women's domestic roles.	Such regulation reinforces gendered divisions between public and private spheres and constrains women's social autonomy.	Parsi (2012); Lob (2016)
3	Compulsory Hijab as a Mechanism of Bodily Regulation	Compulsory hijab regulations have been enforced through legal and administrative measures, including sanctions for non-compliance.	The policy restricts women's bodily autonomy and freedom of personal expression in public spaces.	Daud & Rosadi (2021); Haidar (2020)
4	Surveillance and Criminalisation of Gender-Norm Violations	State authorities have monitored compliance with dress codes and other gender-related norms and imposed sanctions on women considered to have violated them.	Surveillance and sanctions function as mechanisms of social control over women's visibility and behaviour in public spaces.	McKirdy (2018); Setyawan (2022)
5	Women's Resistance through Digital and Social Activism	Campaigns such as <i>My Stealthy Freedom</i> have used digital platforms to challenge compulsory hijab and advocate women's civil rights.	Digital activism has expanded opportunities for women to articulate grievances, construct collective identities, and mobilise beyond conventional public spaces.	Basmechi & Gabe (2021); Ghoreishi (2018)
6	The Mahsa Amini Case and the Expansion of Women's Rights Mobilization	The death of Mahsa Amini following her arrest by morality police in 2022 triggered widespread protests and international attention to restrictions on women's rights in Iran.	The case transformed individual grievances over compulsory hijab and state control into broader demands for dignity, freedom, and gender equality.	Setyawan (2022); Basoeki Utomo (2022); Salsabilla (2022)

Source: Author's synthesis based on the reviewed literature (2023).

The findings demonstrate that restrictions on women's rights in Iran operate through multiple and mutually reinforcing mechanisms, particularly educational regulation, control of public participation, compulsory dress requirements, and surveillance. Rather than being

confined to formal legislation, these mechanisms extend into women's everyday experiences and regulate their mobility, bodily autonomy, and visibility in public life. The findings also indicate that such restrictions have generated sustained forms of resistance. Digital campaigns, social activism, and public protests have provided alternative spaces through which women have challenged state regulation and articulated demands for greater equality and civil liberties.

The Mahsa Amini case represents a significant manifestation of this broader pattern of restriction and resistance. Her death following detention by the morality police transformed opposition to compulsory hijab into a wider mobilization around women's dignity, freedom, and citizenship. Overall, the findings suggest that the Iranian case is characterized not simply by the persistence of restrictive policies but by an ongoing interaction between state regulation and women's agency. Restrictions on education, public participation, and bodily autonomy have constrained women's rights, while digital activism and collective mobilization have created new spaces for contestation and demands for structural change.

Iranian women's resistance for gender justice: From advocacy to social movements

Amid the gender-differentiated legal framework that developed after the 1979 Revolution, Iranian women have continued to challenge discriminatory policies through legal advocacy, feminist organizing, civil-political mobilization, and cross-ideological cooperation. The findings identify a gradual transformation from rights-based advocacy towards broader social mobilization. Efforts to promote the ratification of CEDAW, the development of legal protections against violence, and cooperation between secular and Islamic feminists demonstrate the persistence of organized demands for gender justice. The death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 subsequently became a critical moment that broadened these demands and generated substantial transnational attention to women's rights in Iran.

Table 3

Resistance and Struggles for Gender Justice among Iranian Women

No.	Key Finding	Description of Finding	Analytical Significance	References
1	Advocacy for the Ratification of CEDAW	Women activists and reform-oriented groups advocated for the ratification of CEDAW as an international framework to address discrimination against women.	International human rights norms provided an important normative and advocacy framework for challenging gender-based discrimination.	Eeles (2003); Mir-Hosseini (2002); Kar (2000)
2	Feminist Movements and Gender Equality Advocacy	Iranian feminist actors promoted gender equality through parliamentary engagement, civil-society organizations, public campaigns, and other forms of political participation.	Feminist mobilization strengthened collective awareness of women's rights and sustained demands for legal and institutional reform.	Fazaeli (2016); Kar (2000)
3	Women's Coalitions as a Civil-Political Force	The Coalition of the Iranian Women's Movement brought together numerous activists and organizations to advocate constitutional reform, legal equality, and engagement with international women's rights standards.	Coalition-building strengthened the organizational capacity of the women's movement and enabled collective action across different groups.	Fazaeli (2016); Young & Fazeli (2013)
4	Solidarity between Secular and	Feminists from different ideological and intellectual backgrounds developed areas of cooperation around shared	Cross-ideological cooperation broadened the movement's constituency and reduced fragmentation	Fazaeli (2016); Fazaeli (2007)

	Islamic Feminists	concerns regarding women's rights and legal reform.	around gender-justice demands.	
5	Legal Advocacy for Protection against Violence	Women's rights advocates contributed to sustained efforts to develop stronger legal protection against violence against women, including advocacy surrounding the proposed legislation on the protection of women against violence.	Legal advocacy demonstrates that organised civil-society pressure can create opportunities for policy debate and institutional reform within a restrictive legal environment.	Latuconsina et al. (2021)
6	Post-Mahsa Amini Mobilisation for Justice	The death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 generated widespread protests, human rights advocacy, and international attention to compulsory hijab, state violence, and women's rights.	The case transformed longstanding grievances into a broader mobilisation around women's dignity, freedom, and gender justice and strengthened transnational solidarity.	Daras (2023); Esfandiari (2022)

Source: Author's synthesis based on the reviewed literature (2023).

The findings demonstrate that Iranian women's resistance has developed through multiple and interconnected forms of advocacy. Early efforts focused on international human rights mechanisms, particularly advocacy surrounding CEDAW, while feminist organizations and coalitions subsequently expanded mobilization through civil society, political engagement, and public campaigns. Cross-ideological cooperation between secular and Islamic feminists further strengthened the movement by creating a broader platform to address shared concerns about legal inequality and women's rights.

The findings also indicate that legal advocacy has remained an important component of women's resistance. Efforts to develop stronger legal protection against violence illustrate the movement's attempt to translate gender-justice demands into institutional and legislative reform. However, these efforts should be understood as part of an ongoing advocacy process rather than as evidence of a linear or complete transformation of the legal system.

The Mahsa Amini case marked a critical juncture in this trajectory. Her death in 2022 transformed longstanding opposition to compulsory hijab and state regulation of women's bodies into a broader mobilization around freedom, dignity, and gender justice. It also expanded international attention and transnational solidarity with Iranian women. Overall, the findings suggest that Iranian women's resistance has evolved from rights-based legal advocacy towards increasingly networked forms of social mobilization, combining international advocacy, feminist coalition-building, legal reform efforts, digital activism, and public protest. Rather than indicating a completed transformation, this trajectory demonstrates the continuing capacity of women's movements to contest restrictive structures and create spaces for gender-justice claims.

Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Iranian women's rights have developed through a non-linear interaction between legal transformation, state restriction, and women's resistance. First, women's position shifted from state-led emancipation during the Pahlavi era to increased legal and social restrictions following the 1979 Revolution, while reformist actors continued to advocate gender equality through alternative Islamic interpretations. Second, restrictions on education, public participation, bodily autonomy, and personal freedom have constrained women's rights while generating sustained domestic resistance and international

scrutiny, particularly following the death of Mahsa Amini. Third, Iranian women have expanded their agency through human rights advocacy, feminist coalitions, digital activism, and public mobilization. Overall, the Iranian case reveals an ongoing tension between state authority grounded in Islamic legal interpretations and evolving demands for gender equality, citizenship, and autonomy, transforming women's rights from a domestic struggle into a transnational gender-justice concern.

These findings are relevant to the global discourse on the tension between religious law and universal human rights. In several Muslim-majority countries, including Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, women continue to experience restrictions concerning access to education, freedom of dress, and participation in public life (Mattingly, 2019; Ramadhan, 2020; Kayen, 2022). The death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 marked a critical turning point that attracted international attention, triggering widespread protests across more than 80 cities in Iran and drawing condemnation from the European Union and the United Nations (Mas'odi & Ahmad, 2023). In Indonesia, although the socio-political context differs, debates over women's roles in public life and dress code policies remain contested (Jones, 2007; Husein & Slama, 2018). Therefore, the struggle of Iranian women reflects a broader, ongoing contestation among individual autonomy, gender equality, and state regulation (Mahdi, 2004; eClinicalMedicine, 2022).

Within the framework of feminist legal theory and progressive legal perspectives, these findings indicate that legal systems in which religious and political authority are closely intertwined may institutionalize gender-differentiated provisions affecting women's rights (Obiora & Perry, 2001; Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2014; Thuy, 2022). From the perspective of critical legal studies, the interpretation and institutionalization of Islamic law in Iran are not necessarily neutral, but may reflect patriarchal structures and the interests of religious and political authorities in maintaining existing social relations (Abidin, 2020; Leiliyanti et al., 2022; Kafara, 2022). This study indicates that, although legal reform remains possible, as reflected in efforts surrounding the 2018 Bill on the Protection of Women against Violence, such change is incremental and does not necessarily address the structural roots of inequality in family and criminal law (Stark, 2020; Bea & Taylor Poppe, 2021). This finding supports the broader argument that law can function as both an instrument of emancipation and repression, depending on the actors and institutions that shape its interpretation and implementation (Szablowski, 2019).

This study suggests that legal change without a corresponding transformation in social consciousness is unlikely to produce lasting equality (Joshi, 2017; Yamin et al., 2019). The Pahlavi era demonstrates that top-down approaches to women's emancipation, when not sufficiently embedded in broader social and cultural structures, may be vulnerable to reversal during periods of political transformation (Keddie, 2003). By contrast, the struggle of Iranian women after 1979 demonstrates that organized grassroots movements, despite operating under state restrictions, can sustain demands for gradual social and legal change (Gilani et al., 2022). Furthermore, sustained movement-building has become an important strategy among Iranian women. Rather than relying solely on political transformation from above, activists have developed forms of collective agency through cross-ideological cooperation between secular and Islamic feminists and through the strategic use of digital spaces (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015; Warren, 2018). This indicates that the pursuit of gender justice is a long-term process requiring a combination of legal advocacy, social mobilization, and international solidarity (Cameron, 2010; Carreon & Moghadam, 2015).

The findings are consistent with Moghadam (2003) and Glas and Alexander (2020), who argue that women's movements in Muslim-majority countries operate paradoxically:

restrictive political and legal structures constrain women while simultaneously strengthening collective mobilisation. Unlike Paidar (2001) and Aghtaie (2016), who emphasise the state's role in shaping gender subjectivity in Iran, this study highlights women's agency as a central dimension of resistance. Whereas Mir-Hosseini (2002) focuses on *ijtihad* and the reinterpretation of religious texts as a pathway for reform, this study identifies international advocacy through instruments such as CEDAW as another important dimension of women's rights mobilisation, despite Iran's non-ratification of the convention. In contrast to Eeles (2003), who questions the effectiveness of international advocacy, this study suggests that international attention has contributed to sustained visibility and pressure concerning women's rights and legal reform. Thus, this study acknowledges structural constraints while highlighting women's continuing agency and transformative potential.

Based on these findings, several practical measures are recommended. Policies should strengthen substantive, rather than merely formal, gender equality within the constitutional and legal framework. Legal reform should address provisions that discriminate against women in areas including family law, education, employment, and public life. At the same time, the state should create more inclusive spaces for dialogue among government institutions, religious leaders, academics, and women's organizations to develop a broader understanding of gender equality and justice. Strengthening human rights education is also essential to increase public awareness of non-discrimination and women's legal rights. In addition, support for civil society organizations and women's movements should be expanded to enable their constructive participation in policy-making processes and the development of policies that are more responsive to women's needs and rights.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the challenges facing Iranian women are not adequately explained by the application of Islamic law alone, but by the ongoing structural contestation between state authority grounded in Islamic legal interpretations and an increasingly organized women's movement. The findings show that restrictions on women's rights, including educational regulations, compulsory hijab, surveillance, and the criminalization of gender-norm violations, have contributed to sustained forms of resistance at both domestic and transnational levels. The Mahsa Amini case represented a critical juncture in this longer trajectory of restriction and resistance, transforming longstanding grievances into broader mobilization around women's dignity, freedom, and gender justice. The findings further demonstrate that cross-ideological cooperation, digital spaces, and transnational solidarity have expanded women's capacity to challenge restrictive structures and advance gender equality as a broader human rights concern.

This study contributes to progressive legal perspectives by demonstrating that legal systems in which religious and political authority are closely intertwined are not necessarily monolithic, but may contain spaces for negotiation, reinterpretation, and gradual reform. Women's movements have utilized these spaces through alternative interpretations of *ijtihad*, legal advocacy, human rights frameworks, and cross-ideological feminist coalitions. The findings also challenge the assumption that religion is inherently incompatible with gender equality by showing that women's resistance can emerge both within and across religious and secular traditions. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of combining legal advocacy, international human rights mechanisms, digital mobilization, and systematic documentation of women's rights violations to strengthen evidence-based advocacy, public awareness, and policy engagement.

This study has several limitations. Its findings are primarily based on literature analysis and prominent cases and therefore do not fully capture the everyday experiences of women across different social classes, regions, and socio-political contexts in Iran. In addition, the internal dynamics of state institutions and variations in local policy implementation were not examined in depth. Future research should employ ethnographic and field-based approaches to capture the diversity of women's lived experiences and forms of resistance. Further research could also examine the roles of men, educational institutions, and digital media in shaping and transforming gender relations. Comparative studies involving other Muslim-majority countries may further illuminate how different legal, political, and cultural contexts shape patterns of women's restriction, agency, and resistance.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Abdul Bar Mursyid: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Methodology; Project Administration; Writing Original Draft; Validation; Visualization; Writing Review & Editing.

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