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Between State, Society and Domestic Sphere

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Herausgegeben von
Anja Pistor-Hatam

KULTUR, RECHT UND POLITIK IN MUSLIMISCHEN GESELLSCHAFTEN

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aus einem Stoff wie eines Leibes Glieder.
Hat Krankheit nur ein einzig Glied erfaßt,
so bleibt den andern weder Ruh noch Rast.
Wenn anderer Schmerz dich nicht im Herzen brennet,
verdienst du nicht, daß man noch Mensch dich nennet!“

Muslih ad-Din Sa'di: Der Rosengarten,
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Violence Against Women in Contemporary Iran

Between State, Society and Domestic Sphere

Ladan Rabbari

Introduction

Violence against Women (VAW) is recognized globally as a public health problem and a human rights violation.¹ In the first article of the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of VAW, this form of violence has been defined as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”² While countries around the world have established different systems to fight against VAW, it is essential to acknowledge the critical role that the global feminist movement played in establishing VAW as a societal problem in the past few decades.³

VAW does not have a legally recognized status in Iran. This does not mean that violence is not penalized, but rather that the authorities claim that they treat violence as a crime no matter who the victims and their genders are. Thus a separate framework for fighting VAW is deemed unnecessary. This lack of recognition means that in practice, despite their recurrence, many domestic violence cases against women are not recognized, and the official support for the victims is scarce.⁴ Because of its unrecognized status, there are no individual legal and policy units and official national statistics available on VAW such as lifetime or yearly physical and/or sexual violence, intimate partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence.⁵

Iran also is one of just six UN member states that have not signed the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women*

¹ Krantz & Garcia-Moreno (2005), 818–821.

² OHCHR (1993). Accessed 3.6.2020.

³ Kilpatrick (2004). 1210.

⁴ Salehi (2019), Accessed 5. 2.6.2020.

⁵ UN Women (2016). Accessed 2.6.2020.

(CEDAW).⁶ Following arduous years of debate and campaigning, the Iranian parliament passed a bill to join CEDAW in May 2003, but the conservative figures in the government rallied a push and successfully barred this attempt.⁷ This is not only due to the lack of legal recognition of VAW but also because the existing conservative political forces in the country do not believe that the definition of violence by the Convention is compatible with the country's institutionalized ideological standpoints. In fact, the national legislation enshrines many barriers to accessing fundamental rights in areas such as employment, marriage, and citizenship for women.⁸

This lack of legal and formal recognition, however, does not mean that VAW is not discussed within academic, civil society, political, and public spheres. Quite the opposite, VAW – and especially domestic violence – has attracted a lot of scholarship, activism, and public attention. VAW also is a very popular topic in popular culture and among Iranian activists. While the exclusively state-run Iranian TV works as a full-time propaganda machine and has mostly offered a homogeneous imagery of women in the form of stereotypical and archetypal characters, Iranian cinema, among other forms of artistic expression, has provided more diversity in women's imagery. Iranian cinema has specifically shown great interest in the issue of VAW and different gender-based discriminations, and has featured these topics in many productions. The critique of VAW and the problematization of gender-based discrimination in structural, societal, and domestic forms have been a recurring theme in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema. Iconic movies such as *Sara* (1992), *Ghermez* (1998), *Three Women* (2009), *I Am a Mother* (2012), *Hush! Girls Do not Scream* (2013), and *The Salesman* (2016) have addressed and critiqued VAW in its different forms, from domestic and honor-related violence to structural and societal VAW to which I will return in the following sections.

In terms of academic scholarship, studies conducted by prominent Iranian researchers such as sociologist *Shabla Ezazi*⁹ and legal scholar *Mehrangiz Kar*¹⁰ have specifically been influential in sparking interest in the new generations of scholars and the formation of a vast body of work on VAW in Iran. Many other scholars have taken up the torch, and the study of VAW has produced a considerable amount of valuable data

⁶ CEASEFIRE (2019).

⁷ Sepehri Far (2017).

⁸ CEASEFIRE (2019).

⁹ Ezazi (2004), 66-111.

¹⁰ Kar (2002).

across Iranian provinces and cities. The numbers of masters- and doctoral-level dissertations written on women's issues, including VAW, have been so overwhelming that universities even discourage students from researching the topic, especially due to the fact that authorities rarely take up the findings and policy implications on such topics.¹¹

This chapter reviews the scholarly research, policies, and contemporary legal, social, and media discourses on VAW in Iran. It draws on different forms of material, including but not limited to research and policy papers, laws and government inventories and websites, and other public media sources. I will mainly focus on the period after the 1979 Revolution. This choice has been made due to the fact that the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 had severe consequences for the legal and social frameworks and approaches to VAW. These changes will be briefly discussed in the following sections. This chapter's contribution is mainly in its adoption of a multilayered approach to the study of VAW in Iran that has been often reduced to interpersonal or individual factors. The chapter thus aims to show the complexity of VAW and how it cannot be reduced to an attitudinal and psychological phenomenon, and is organized as follows: In the next section, I will first outline an overview of prevalent forms of VAW in the Islamic Republic of Iran and introduce a typology of violence that this chapter draws on. The next sections include a more in-depth analysis of VAW that takes place in different spheres, where I will discuss VAW caused by direct or indirect interventions by the (i) *state and structures*, (ii) in the *society and culture* and (iii) in the *domestic* sphere. I will discuss how VAW is enabled, empowered, and perpetrated by different actors. The paper will outline the general political, legal, and socio-cultural issues that the country faces in its battle against VAW in the discussion and conclusion section.

Contextualizing VAW in the Islamic Republic of Iran

When it comes to VAW, as Ezazi asserts, much attention has been given to the individual factors and interpersonal relations as the underlying cause for VAW.¹² This approach that depoliticizes the discourses around VAW in Iran is partially the result of the pressure on academics, activists, and civil society to stay seemingly apolitical. Researchers thus often opt for discussing VAW, within the family and using individualized and fam-

¹¹ Moradian (2009), 3.

¹² Ezazi (2015). Accessed 4.6.2020.

ily-oriented frameworks of analysis, in which addiction, unemployment, lack of education, and similar social factors are subtly touched upon. This approach allows the researchers to discuss the urgent issue of VAW while not crossing the boundaries delineated by the state's conservative forces.

Gender equality as a structural barrier against the realization of women's rights has been one of the most prevalent topics of public, media and political debate since the 1979 Revolution. While the Revolution had mobilized virtually all of Iranian society against the Shah,¹³ its aftermath threatened women's political, legal, and social situation, who had played an influential part in that battle.¹⁴ The Iranian religious and political authorities have since maintained the narrative that the 1979 Revolution 'freed' women from Western sexualization and had returned them their true dignity.¹⁵ Before critiquing this narrative, it is essential to acknowledge that positive change has been achieved for women in many sectors, such as education. However, the country struggles with widespread and often neglected forms of gender discrimination, including VAW in many different realms, from family rights to the job market.

While it is unthinkable to assume that VAW did not happen before the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic regime's establishment did reverse some of the most critical advancements in women's rights that were achieved before the Revolution. Some of the new laws have certainly played a role in – if they have not directly led to – the aggravation of VAW in Iran. For instance, while child marriage was a problem before 1979, the current laws made child marriage feasible by lowering marriage age to thirteen for girls. Earlier marriage for girls, who are older than nine years, is also allowed if the girl's legal guardian and an Islamic court approve the girl's readiness for marriage.¹⁶ This change and similar laws on women's and girls' position in the family, society, and other socio-legal and political spheres – to which I will return in the following sections – contribute to different forms of VAW in micro-, meso-, and macro- levels.

Patriarchal attitudes characterize the legally delineated power dynamics within social institutions and systems such as family, marriage, education, economy, and politics. Patriarchy is accepted through socializa-

¹³ Because of being the last king of Iran, *Mohammad Reza Šāh* (gov. 1941–79) is often referred to as simply "the Shah".

¹⁴ Halper (2005), 86.

¹⁵ See for e.g. Attarzadeh (2007).

¹⁶ Rahbari (2019), 45.

tion processes that have potent effects on women's sexuality, thereby making it an acceptable tool for men to keep women in subordinate positions.¹⁷ However, it would be a grave misconception to imagine Iranian women as self-evidently "subordinates" to men in everyday life because of these laws. Despite their legal precarity, widespread gender-based discrimination, and gender inequality in the country, generation after generations of women have stayed active members of society as well as within the Iranian women's political movements. Other studies have substantially discussed Iranian women's movement, their formation, and persistence in the contemporary context.¹⁸ Therefore, while this study focuses more on violence and victimization and much less on women's agentic movements and resistance to VAW, I caution the readers not to take this focus for lack of recognition for Iranian women's active, collective, and engaged work throughout the past four decades and the rest of the Iranian history to fight all forms of VAW. The next section presents an overview of the typologies used to study VAW and introduces the typology that is employed in this study. This short section is then followed by an in-depth analysis of VAW taking place in different social spheres.

Typologies of violence and VAW

The study draws on a broad definition of VAW as defined by the 1993 *Declaration on the Elimination of VAW*. Even though some types of violence included in this definition are not considered violence within the Iranian criminal code, they are considered violence in this paper nonetheless because they result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women. A typology of violence presented in the *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002) divides violence into three broad categories according to who commits the violent act: self-directed violence, interpersonal violence, and collective violence.¹⁹ Interpersonal VAW – that is, violence inflicted by another person or by a small group of people – is divided into two subcategories: family/intimate partner violence, and community violence. Family/partner violence describes violence between family members (often taking place in the home), while community violence describes violence between people who are unrelated and who may or may not know each other, and it generally takes place

¹⁷ Rahbari (2014b), 1–12.

¹⁸ See for e.g. Hoodfar & Sadeghi (2009), 215–223.

¹⁹ WHO (2002).

outside the home.²⁰ This typology further captures the nature of the violent acts that can be physical, sexual, or psychological, including deprivation and neglect.²¹

These typologies are useful in recognizing who inflicts what kind of violence on the victims. However, the perpetrator of violence is not the only party or power that should be held accountable. It is not always possible to successfully pinpoint the perpetrator or the source of a widespread source of violence, such as VAW, and gender-based discrimination. To rectify this issue in addressing VAW, I partially draw on the typology of violence suggested by *Johan Galtung*. This typology is based on the (non)existence of a recognizable agentic subject who inflicts harm. According to *Galtung's* categorization, violence entails three forms: personal, cultural, and structural.²² Personal violence is where the actor(s) and object(s) of violence are readily identifiable.²³ Cultural violence entails the violence that is legitimized by the social and symbolic spheres of our collective existence.²⁴ Finally, the notion of structural violence refers to a form of violence where the perpetrator is not an easily identifiable or agentic actor. This latter notion yields a more complex picture of inequality because it shows the consequences of institutionally maintained and reproduced economic, political, and social factors in violence and victimization.²⁵

Based on a combination of the existing categorizations of violence mentioned above, and the socio-cultural, legal, and political realities in Iran, I opt for a categorization here that is not based on the harm inflicted on the victims, but rather on spheres and perpetrators. I discuss VAW caused by direct or indirect interventions by the (i) *state and structures*, (ii) in the *society and culture*, and (iii) in the *domestic* sphere. This categorization does not mean that these spheres are considered disconnected. Quite the opposite, I will discuss different forms of violence and victimization within the three spheres and in relation to each other. Instead of using the term cultural violence, I will refer to society and culture as interconnected categories. The term "culture" has been associated with non-Western contexts and used in colonialist discourses within the social sciences.²⁶ To avoid essentializing practices of violence as charac-

²⁰ Krantz & Garcia-Moreno (2005), 818.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Galtung (1969).

²³ Ho (2007), 4.

²⁴ Galtung (1990), 291.

²⁵ Ho (2007), 2.

²⁶ Pels (1997), 163–183.

teristics of specific cultures, I discuss how societal attitudes, actors, and mainstream cultural beliefs work interconnectedly to maintain structures that contribute to VAW.

Structural and state VAW

When intersecting structures create a system where women's quality of life is reduced, and their human potential is diminished, a structural VAW has taken place.²⁷ Structural violence is an invisible manifestation of violence and harm that is built into the political, economic, and social fabric of a given society and perpetuates and safeguards inequalities within and between different social groups.²⁸ As *Ezazi* has discussed, if social and legal structures laws legitimize, justify, or inflict violence, individual and interpersonal factors become peripheral and have to be embedded within the broader analysis of social structures.²⁹

In order to understand structural VAW in Iran, the topic should be analyzed within the socio-cultural, political, and legal contexts. VAW is correlated with the overall gender equality, as the prevalence of VAW tends to be lower in countries with greater gender equality.³⁰ The gender gap index (GGI), which consists of the gender gap in four spheres of economy, politics, health, and education, is one indicator for analyzing women's position in society. GGI focuses on measuring societies' gender gaps instead of levels. This means that it ranks countries according to gender equality rather than relying merely on women's empowerment statistics and scores.³¹ Compared to other countries globally, Iran is a country with a relatively low score of GGI. Scoring 0.584, Iran's gender gap in 2019 ranked 148th out of 153 countries worldwide that were listed in the index. In 2018, 2017, and 2016, Iran ranked 142nd, 140th, and 139th.³² Between 2006 and 2015, the Iranian gender gap score had not seen any dramatic change.³³ The gap is specifically low in political empowerment and economic participation indexes (GGI), as women face even more serious structural barriers in gaining access to highly male-

²⁷ Mazurana & McKay (2001).

²⁸ Montesanti & Thurston (2015).

²⁹ Ezazi (2015). Accessed 4.6.2020.

³⁰ UNIFEM (2010).

³¹ *World Economic Forum's* report of gender gap index usually includes more than 130 countries around the world in its results, including Iran.

³² World Economic Forum (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). Accessed 23.12.2019.

³³ Rahbari (2016b), 1003–1010.

dominant political and economic spheres, and relatively less barriers in health and education indexes.

While the invisibility and intangibility of structural violence mask the intentionality of acts of violence, legitimized state violence is usually perpetrated by visible actors. Defining “legitimate” forms of violence is a complex process and reliant on many ideological approaches to justice, security, and control. The lack of recognition of VAW can in itself be considered a form of violence because it not only ignores and/or denies the existence of gender-based violence, but it also limits access to justice. Additionally, blaming women victims is a characteristic of the judiciary system. This form of victim-blaming in its harshest form is illustrated in the executions of women who killed their abusers and violators, sometimes in self-defense, whether within or outside the family.³⁴

One of the most discussed forms of VAW in Iran is the state’s body control regime, in the form of mandatory veiling and dress code laws that apply to all women and girls over the age of nine. However, besides the law itself, there are many differential policies and legal regulations around its enforcement, which can also be considered forms of VAW. The country’s policing system not only deprives women of the right to choose their head- and body-wear, but also systematically intimidates, arrests, and incarcerates women who refuse to follow the strict veiling regulations in Iran.³⁵ The arrested women have sometimes to deal with charges that include “spreading propaganda against the regime” and “inciting corruption and indecency.”³⁶ Women who protest against compulsory hijab are considered political activists, and the state has given them hefty sentences. These women are sometimes forced to give forced public confessions as a state strategy to silence further activism.³⁷

The country’s body control regime, however, goes beyond the veiling question. The strict “gender segregation” introduced not only spatial and temporal regulations, but also barriers that would hinder women’s development and public activities. Women are, for instance, given specific shifts to use sports facilities. In the sports sphere, women’s access to some disciplines is limited.³⁸ They have been barred from entering sports stadiums, and while the ban has occasionally been (perhaps tem-

³⁴ See for e.g. the case of Reyhaneh Jabbari: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDRR0kjZ07Q>.

³⁵ Amnesty International (2019a). Accessed 20.6.2020.

³⁶ Ibid. (2019c).

³⁷ Doostdar (2019). Accessed 5.8.2020.

³⁸ Jahromi (2011), 109–124.

porarily) lifted, women have not yet gained full right to spectatorship.³⁹ In 2019, a young woman who faced six months in prison for illegally entering a stadium disguised as a man, set herself on fire outside the courthouse where she had been summoned, and later died in a Tehran hospital.⁴⁰ The woman who was dubbed “Blue Girl” after her favorite team’s attire color became a symbol of systematic misogyny in the country’s sport spectatorship and fandom spheres.

Gender segregation has also been implemented in the educational system wherein some periods, specific disciplines and job categories such as engineering, nuclear physics, and archaeology have been considered “unfit” for women.⁴¹ As a result of structural and legal systems, as well as some social attitudes that associate women mostly with the domestic sphere, economic, political, and educational spheres remain male-dominated, and women are subject to explicit and implicit forms of discrimination. Many forms of state and structural VAW converge with other forms of discrimination based on but not limited to ethnicity, sexuality, and age. Discrimination against people of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, for instance, has taken place by systematic suppression of ethnic language use in the formal settings and by universalizing Persian as the only official language, including for education. This policy has effectively marginalized languages other than Persian in Iran and has denied minorities their linguistic rights.⁴² Women, as transmitters of symbolic, linguistic, and cultural heritage to children, have been affected by, and have also played a key role in countering some of the effects of such policies.

In terms of the rights of the sexuality and of gender non-conforming women, criminalization of same-sex sexuality has proved to be a constant source of psychological strain. While same-sex couples are not actively sought and arrested, and homosociality among women is a common aspect of the Iranian cultures, the anxiety and fear of exposure is an undeniable part of same-sex partners’ survival. For transgender people who seek to transition, the state’s legislation is very vague and has remained silent on the legality of gender confirmation surgery and transgender, except on matters relating to the practical processes of gender confirmation.⁴³ Moreover, in a generally heteronormative context, most Iranians are not exposed to the intricacies of gender identity and

³⁹ Rahbari et al (2019), 1–22.

⁴⁰ Mostaghim & Etehad (2019). Accessed 8.6.2020.

⁴¹ Sahraei (2012). Accessed 5.6.2020.

⁴² Moradi (2020), 1171–1202.

⁴³ Saeidzadeh (2016), 249–272.

sexual orientation within the education system, or given the opportunity to express their non-mainstream sexual identities in semi-public or public spaces.⁴⁴

Regarding age-related structural discriminations in the country, one challenging issue has been the lack of a national and state-run welfare and social security program that would guarantee care to older people. Currently, the country's formal care services are limited, and the private sector and family members provide the prominent majority of care.⁴⁵ In the lack of such informal care providers, older people, especially women, face precarious social and financial conditions. Women are also the most prominent group of caregivers both within the formal and the informal care system, but women's labor is taken for granted and mainly remained uncompensated. This leads to widespread feminized poverty that affects young and older women.

There are also different forms of structural discrimination against girls that can lead to severe forms of violence. For instance, violence against female children takes place in the form of legalized "child marriage". Child marriage contravenes the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* of 1989.⁴⁶ Iran signed this Convention in 1991, but with the condition of reserving the right not to apply the articles that the state perceived as incompatible with Islamic Laws.⁴⁷ Studies have shown that poverty in the child's family, the social prestige awarded to girls who marry young, lack of child support persons/institutions, as well as sub-cultural traditions and tribal customs, are some of the reasons behind child marriage and forced marriage.⁴⁸ However, child marriage is reported to be most common in less economically and socially developed regions of Iran, indicating that it is not merely a legal issue, but also an issue with socio-cultural and political complexities.

Structural and state VAW in Iran is based upon a notion of gender as essential, binary, and differential, according to which women and men are different categories of citizens that should be treated with respect, but differently. Women are considered under the protection of their fathers until they marry, for which they require their father's permission and approval. After marriage, as the article 1105 of the Iranian Civil Code clearly states, husbands are considered the head of families. Iranian social security regulations discriminate against women for specified

⁴⁴ Rahbari (2020), 69–86.

⁴⁵ Amini et al (2013), 17–34.

⁴⁶ According to which, 18 is the age of majority.

⁴⁷ UNICEF (1989). Accessed 15.1.2020.

⁴⁸ Suuntaus Project (2015).

benefits, such as family bonuses, and automatically pay such benefits to married men with children. In order for a woman to be eligible to receive such monetary compensation, she must prove that her husband is unemployed or has a disability or that she is the sole guardian of their children.⁴⁹ These forms of structural discrimination and violence have severe consequences for family gender dynamics, to which I will return in the discussions below.

In the above, I briefly outlined examples of structural violence and different forms of violence that are either legitimized by the state and/or are systematically ignored by the relevant authorities. It did by no means offer a comprehensive view of structural and state VAW. Instead, it offered some insights into several structural dynamics that have either led to or have hindered the fight against VAW in Iran. It is important to note that other forms of traditional forms of gender-based abuse and violence, such as killing or abuse of infants and female children due to son-preference and female genital cutting are forms of violence that have been considerably suppressed if not eradicated thanks to the efforts of different state-run and activist entities in the Iranian context.

Society and culture

Patriarchy is a global problem and has, for centuries, shaped the way women are viewed in society and culturally represented. In Persian, Iran's official and most widely spoken language, one can easily trace misogyny in the form of commonly used sexist proverbs, expressions, and swear word. The socio-cultural attitudes towards women are not to be seen as separate from the structural discrimination. A stark example of which is the growth in the so-called "vigilante" harassment of women, which is the informal imitation of the systematic suppression of women by the morality police who supposedly spread piety. Vigilantes are private citizens who, feeling empowered by the state authorities, enforce the country's body control regulations in public spaces by telling women to "cover themselves up". Examples of vigilante violence in the form of verbal harassment and physical VAW are well-documented on several social media.⁵⁰

Other forms of violence in public spaces such as street harassment – from whistling and verbal abuse to making physical and sexual advances

⁴⁹ Sephri Far (2017). Accessed 7.6.2020.

⁵⁰ Amnesty International (2019b). Accessed 7.6.2020.

– have been reported to be commonly experienced by Iranian women.⁵¹ The chance of street harassment is especially higher if the victim is alone and not accompanied by a male companion, revealing patriarchal spatial dynamics of gender.⁵² There is a large gap in reporting street violence to the authorities because of the systematic victim-blaming and the lack of support from public institutions such as the police. The perceived threat of secondary victimization by the police and the lack of institutional trust in the police force compels victimized women to abstain from reporting harassment.⁵³

VAW perpetrated in public spaces in Iran has also been reported in the form of acid attacks. Acid attack is aimed to disfigure or kill the victim by acid burn. It is a form of violence that does not exclusively target women, but in many cases, it is rooted in gender dynamics.⁵⁴ In Iran, most victims of acid attacks are indeed women.⁵⁵ While it is not a widespread form of VAW in Iran, acid violence is often perpetrated by men against women due to the refusal of marriage proposals by the victim, for punishment or revenge reasons, alleged extramarital affairs, or after divorce.⁵⁶ In 2013, in the whole country of Iran, there were four cases of acid attacks reported.⁵⁷ In 2014, however, a series of acid attacks in the city of Isfahan targeted women who were driving their vehicles on the streets. Some official Iranian news agencies reported fourteen to sixteen attacks in one month.⁵⁸ Although never proven, these series of attacks were highly suspected to be systematically organized by hardliner vigilantes who targeted women who did not observe the hijab.⁵⁹ Whether true or not, the general outrage of the Iranian people as a result of the attacks had significant consequences for the country's legal approach to punishing acid violence. The laws were changed in favor of a harsher punishment for acid-attacks in the form of *qeṣās* (*retaliation, punishment*). In Islamic law, *qeṣās* is a form of punishment based on retributive justice, where based on an “eye for an eye” justice, the same form of damage done to the body of the victim, is inflicted on the perpetrator, with the same method (*qeṣās-e'ōzv*). The law also states that in severe forms of acid

⁵¹ Hashemianfar & Golestan (2015), 629–630.

⁵² Lahsaiezadeh & Yousefinejad (2012), 17–37.

⁵³ Rahbari (2014a), 60.

⁵⁴ Krantz & Garcia-Moreno (2005), 821.

⁵⁵ Mohamadi (2019). Accessed 18.12.2019.

⁵⁶ See Farhad et al (2011); Rasouli et al (2015).

⁵⁷ Hojati (2015), 89–97.

⁵⁸ E.g. Fararu News Agency (2017); Shooshan News Agency (2014). Accessed 7.6.2020.

⁵⁹ Rahbari (2020b).

attack, capital punishment might be justified (*qeṣāṣ-e nafs*).⁶⁰ This severe punitive approach has been criticized by activists who believe the government's attention is misplaced on the aftermath of the attacks, instead of investigating and attempting to resolve the structural issues that lead to the violence.⁶¹

Besides urban and public spaces, VAW in Iran also takes place in work and semi-public environments. In the health care system, while violence against health care workers is reported, specific forms of verbal, physical, and sexual violence are only perpetrated against female nurses.⁶² Similar findings have been reported for female workers in the industrial sector.⁶³ Besides the existing explicit forms of violence, there is also evidence of implicit bias in the form of employment bias. Although women comprise over half of university graduates – and even more than half in some disciplines – their participation in the labor force is reported to be between seventeen and nineteen percent.⁶⁴ The Iranian labor code includes provisions to hinder discriminations against women, but the same code states that women should occupy jobs that are “mentally and physically suitable for women”, further clarifying that women cannot become judges or firefighters.⁶⁵ Definition of “discrimination” within the code justifies selective and sexist employment procedures that favor men. Furthermore, a woman's spouse has the legal right to bar his wife from occupations that he considers against “family values” or “inimical to his or her reputation”. The law not only directly discriminates against women, but also facilitates discrimination by employers against married or engaged women out of a supposed fear that their employees might be barred from coming to work by their spouses.⁶⁶

Here, I outlined some prominent forms of socio-cultural VAW. Similar to the previous section, the section has by no means offered a comprehensive list of all forms of socially enforced violence. As seen in the example of women's right to labor, as outlined above, the structural violence, the societal attitudes towards women, and the women's marital status and their position in their household go hand in hand in facilitating or hindering women's access to the labor market and hence, possibly also to relevant economic conditions, independence and social status.

⁶⁰ The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI, 2019). Accessed 7.6.2020.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Najafi et al (2017), 44–58.

⁶³ Saberi et al (2019), 1075–1087.

⁶⁴ Sepehri Far (2017).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The relationship between the structural, societal, and domestic forms of VAW is not top-down or vice-versa, but rather a complex dynamic of reinforcement, reproduction, and perpetuation. In the next section, I discuss the third category within the adopted typology, namely, VAW in the domestic sphere.

Domestic sphere

While dominantly used interchangeably with “intimate partner” violence in the literature, in this section, I refer to all violence that women and girls endure within a household or as a result of the woman’s/girl’s membership in the household as domestic violence. It has been discussed that the prevalence of domestic violence in Iran has been the result of prominently patriarchal settings in the Iranian family. The traditional family structure in some Iranian regions is built on the idea of male domination, as a result of which women are expected to perform primarily reproductive labor. The patriarchal family model means that the Iranian family considers the wife under the “custody” of the husband, not only based on legal rights and responsibilities, but also within some culturally maintained norms. Legally speaking, women are obliged to have the permission of their fathers or husbands to travel. According to the Iranian passport law, married women must receive permission from their husbands to qualify for receiving a passport.⁶⁷ Because men are economically and socially considerably more empowered than women, and the power dynamics of the family are unbalanced, men might use their power and legal right to limit their wife’s mobility. In 2015, a top Iranian female athlete was barred by her husband from leaving the country to take part in an international sport competition.⁶⁸ This sparked some attempts to change the law to allow “elite” women to leave the country without spousal approval. However, the law has not passed yet, and even if approved, it still discriminates against many Iranian women. The least economically empowered women, such as unemployed women or stay-at-home wives and/or mothers, who together compose the majority of adult Iranian women, are viewed by the state as dependent and under the care and protection of their husbands.⁶⁹

Such form of dependency not only creates legal precarity, but also exposes women to forms of abuse and violence in the family. According

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Esfandiari (2015). Accessed 5.8.2020.

⁶⁹ Aliverdinia & Pridemore (2009).

to global data, intimate partner violence and its corresponding impact threaten the lives of almost thirty-five percent of women at some point in their life.⁷⁰ In Iran, due to the supposed “privacy” of the household affairs⁷¹ and the lack of recognition for VAW, there are not many reliable statistics about the frequency of VAW. The Census Bureau – the official government agency in charge of large-scale demographic studies – has never conducted a study on domestic violence and has not allowed international organizations to do so either.

However, in 2004 the Office of the Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, the Interior Ministry, and the Ministry of Higher Education decided to undertake a project in Iran’s twenty-eight provinces regarding domestic violence. This thirty-two-volume study includes findings regarding violence towards women and children, family issues, divorce, and marriages, remarriages, the statues and effect of education, and works on violence in the capital cities of each province, but is not available for public viewing.⁷² However, some scholars with institutional access have been able to extract some of the findings. The study shows, for instance, that sixty-six percent of married women in Iran are subjected to some kind of domestic violence in the first year of their marriage, either by their husbands or by their in-laws.⁷³ The study also quotes the Iranian police stating that forty percent of all murders in Iran happen due to domestic violence, and that fifty percent of all murdered women are killed by an immediate member of their family and most often someone living with the victim.⁷⁴

While domestic physical violence can, in theory, be reported to the police, sexual violence in the form of marital rape does not even have enough legal grounds to be reported. The Iranian law does not recognize marital rape because marital sex is considered a part of the wife’s responsibility and the husband’s right. While not explicitly mentioned in the law, article 1108 of the Civil Code obliges women to comply with their marital responsibilities. Otherwise, the husband has the right to stop providing alimony (*nafāqa*) to the wife. Alimony includes food, shelter, clothes, costs of health services, and other essential means and goods. This form of deprivation can eventually force the wife to comply with the husband’s demands.

⁷⁰ Naghavi et al (2019), 307–320.

⁷¹ Jahromi et al (2016).

⁷² Moradian (2009), 4.

⁷³ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.

The supposed sanctity of the family, deeply rooted in patriarchal and heteronormative societal norms, expects women to preserve their family's "honor" by safeguarding the problems they face within the family. In the case of violence in the family unit, it is generally not accepted to call the police, and women are expected to either keep silent or to seek help from elders in their community, or from counselors or psychologists.⁷⁵ Women are thus encouraged by their environment – family and friends – to be more tolerant and to try to face and resolve the problems they have in their marital life, including violence, without seeking outside help. While there has been some change in the society's perception of divorce, it is still perceived to be a shameful act and a failure, primarily if asked for by the wife. Women's legal right to divorce in general and to divorce due to VAW is also limited.⁷⁶ The Persian expression "a woman goes with the bridal gown to the husband's house and returns with grave-cloth" shows that it is considered a significant shame for a woman to "wreck" her marriage by any means. At the time this paper is being written in 2020, there are reports indicating that VAW in domestic spheres is on the rise because of coronavirus lockdown in the country, that adds to the precarity of women in already risky conditions by exposing them to more violence and cutting access to social and cultural sources of support.⁷⁷

Another form of VAW in Iran is honor killing. While often not considered a very common issue in Iran, this form of violence still takes place in the country, especially in more traditional and patriarchally organized regions. Most recently, in early 2020, the case of a 14 years old girl who was decapitated by her father due to his daughter's supposed indecency⁷⁸ sparked nation-wide outrage not only by the public and rights activists, but also by many Iranian female politicians.⁷⁹ In some cases, there is evidence that women are compelled to commit suicide because of the mental anguish to which their family and community subject them; and there are instances in which the family kills a female member to safeguard its "honor", while pretending it to be a suicide.⁸⁰

Violence in the domestic sphere, however, does not remain in the domestic realm and can lead to further victimization and social problems in other spheres as well. Different forms of violence that take place

⁷⁵ Naghavi et al. (2019).

⁷⁶ See <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6aae318.html>. Accessed 8.6.2020.

⁷⁷ Lipin et al (2020). Accessed 5.8.2020.

⁷⁸ Sayki (2020). Accessed 3.6.2020.

⁷⁹ Borna (2020). Accessed 8.6.2020.

⁸⁰ Aliverdinia & Pridemore (2009), 316.

in the household are, for instance, among underlying factors that lead to children ending up on the streets. Domestic violence has contributed to the violence connected to the “street children” issue in Iran, as girls who run away from parental homes become homeless and sometimes have to resort to sex work to be able to provide their basic survival needs.⁸¹ This makes them highly vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse.⁸² Street children are not only at risk of sexual violence but also vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases.⁸³

As regards the rights of young women and girls in the family, while the father has the responsibility to provide education for his children, female children are sometimes not allowed to study as long as their male counterparts and are forced into marriage at a young age.⁸⁴ The legal guardianship of the father over his daughter means that he can limit his daughter’s choices. The education of girls can also be hindered due to the lack of close access to education facilities. In these cases, the potential loss of control over choosing marriage partners, and the possibility of a daughter marrying and living far away, as well as concern about potential harm to family reputation are some reasons why parents hesitate to allow girls to go away to study.⁸⁵

This section highlighted some of the most prevalent forms of VAW in the domestic sphere and how they are affected by external and structural factors. Now that I have briefly outlined the three categories and various forms of VAW, I will discuss the existing difficulties and challenges ahead in the eradication of different forms of violence against girls and women in Iran.

Eradicating VAW in Iran: challenges ahead

This chapter reviewed the scholarly research, policies, and contemporary legal, social, and media discourses on VAW in Iran using a typology of violence that aimed to unravel structural, societal, and domestic forms of VAW. The chapter revealed the interconnectedness of the structural, societal, and domestic spheres and how different forms of VAW taking place in any of these spheres are affected, reinforced by other spheres.

⁸¹ Ardalan et al (2002), 187–220.

⁸² Hosseini Divkolaye et al (2020).

⁸³ Rahbari (2016a), 347–352.

⁸⁴ Aliverdinia & Pridemore (2009), 307–320.

⁸⁵ Hegland (2009), 57.

In terms of structural and state violence outlined in this chapter, it is essential to note that the Iranian state is neither structurally nor ideologically a homogenous body. The four-decades-long history of post-revolutionary Iran has shown that the country's leadership (*rahbari*), as well as its executive, legislative and judicial branches, have sometimes adopted different standpoints concerning different issues, including women's rights and freedoms. Despite this historical diversity, achievements in legal reform have been difficult to achieve. The fight against VAW is not entirely taking place outside of the governmental spheres, and some governmental agencies have been at the forefront of the battle against it. The Office of the Vice President for Women and Family Affairs is, for instance, one entity that has tried relentlessly to create a comprehensive bill to protect women from violence.⁸⁶ So while some state actors are responsible for many discriminative policies that hinder the fight against VAW or lead to it, other actors have attempted to mitigate the effects of such policies or to change or eliminate them entirely.

Regarding the socially and culturally legitimized forms of VAW, it is difficult to talk about "cultural" effects without risking some sort of essentialization. Speaking of misogyny and patriarchy in the Iranian context, however, neither means that the entire society and various cultures are ubiquitously characterized by them, nor that the manifestations of patriarchy and misogyny that exist in Iran are exclusively "Iranian" and do not exist elsewhere. However, it is possible to argue that many of the existing socio-cultural problems in Iran have historically traceable political and structural roots. Feminized poverty, which was discussed in the previous sections, for instance, is a structural form of violence that has led to economic violence in male-headed families. This has also resulted in lower status of women in the labor market, lack of equal access to financial resources or positions, and systematic exclusion from specific labor categories.⁸⁷ I, therefore, invite the readers not to draw generalizing conclusions about the Iranian culture or country as a whole based on the examples provided in this research.

As per domestic forms of violence, this article showed that it is impossible to discuss VAW happening within the domestic sphere without understanding the greater social and legal frameworks within which it exists. Domestic violence is a global phenomenon and is traceable even in countries that have robust preventive and/or punitive approaches to tackle it. At the same time, it is possible to discuss that in Iran, where

⁸⁶ Sepehri Far (2017).

⁸⁷ Rahbari & Sharepour (2015), 227–248.

VAW is not recognized, due to the lack of commitment to national and international measures to fight it, it is challenging to offer effective and appropriate support to victims, prevent violence and deal with its large-scale social consequences.

Discussing VAW in Iran, it is also important to address religion, as one argument put forth in the critique of Iran's legal schemes in fighting VAW is that the country's reliance on hardliner and patriarchal interpretations of Shari'a law has led to the legal foundations that not only do not recognize VAW, but even perpetuate it. Religious arguments in patriarchal social contexts have sometimes been used and manipulated to help perpetuate harmful practices from child marriage to polygamy practiced without the consent by the partner(s).⁸⁸ *Mebrangiz Kar*, an Iranian legal scholar, has discussed the positions of two different political groups, namely the moderate and the conservative groups, each of whom offer different interpretations for concepts such as the rights of religious minorities, Islamic penal codes, elections, and government legitimacy. According to Kar, in the Iranian context, where religion plays an essential role in the socio-cultural and political realities and history, human rights and Islamic reform are mutually dependent – one cannot be realized without the other.⁸⁹ The interrelations between culturally reinforced norms and religious beliefs and their link to VAW deserves a more extensive inquiry in the contemporary Iranian society.

The path towards eradicating VAW in Iran is challenging, to say the least, and Iranian women's implicit and explicit forms of activism against violence in its many forms deserve further scholarly attention. I would like to emphasize that I did not intend to, nor have I been able to provide a comprehensive overview of VAW in Iran, but rather to share some insights on interconnected political, cultural, and domestic spheres, and pinpoint the structural foundations of violence. It seems to me that Iran's problem with VAW requires collective initiatives that involve legal, social, and political reform. Women's rights activists' efforts in Iran have shown that reform is not impossible. Historical changes in women's rights in Iran, such as the right to adopt a child as a single woman and the right to full blood money,⁹⁰ have been achieved through ongoing efforts by activists. However, the price of activism remains high, and many Iranian activists have received hefty sentences for their activism, while others have chosen to live outside of Iran in exile. As the

⁸⁸ Karam (2015), 67.

⁸⁹ Kar (2010), 1–18.

⁹⁰ See for e.g. <https://www.bbc.com/persian/world-39210796>. Accessed 8.6.2020.

gender ideologies are deeply interwoven in the Iranian regime's identity, reforming the ideologies requires changes in the country's very political foundations.