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**INVISIBLE STRUGGLES  
WORKPLACE CHALLENGES CONFRONTED BY  
WOMEN**

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## INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY

*THE PURPOSE OF MY DISSERTATION* is to examine the negative consequences of gender violence in the workplace, with a particular focus on the experiences of women. This dissertation is organized into three chapters: The first chapter discusses the ongoing issue of gender equality in the workplace, highlighting significant disparities such as the gender gap, the pay gap, representation in leadership, maternity policies, and occupational segregation. Despite some progress, numerous studies show that these issues remain pervasive. The second chapter delves into the nuanced experiences of Iranian women in key sectors, drawing on a rich tapestry of academic research and empirical studies. It examines sectors such as broadcasting, tourism, public sector careers, and labor force participation. In addition, the chapter highlights different facets of the challenges and opportunities that shape women's professional careers in Iran, providing a comprehensive understanding of their impact on gender dynamics. The third chapter focuses on the experiences of Iranian health care workers and examines the cultural and social factors that influence violence and harassment.

The thesis highlights that closing the gender gap in the workplace requires a multifaceted strategy. Organizations should implement initiatives such as unconscious bias training and ensure equal pay and leadership opportunities. Policy reforms, including extended parental leave, affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements, are essential to support working parents. Educational campaigns should challenge gender stereotypes and encourage girls to enter traditionally male-dominated fields. Despite increased educational opportunities, cultural norms and legal constraints continue to limit women's participation in formal employment, contributing to a paradoxical trend of increasing educational attainment but decreasing employment rates. Balancing work and family responsibilities remains a significant obstacle, exacerbated by inadequate support systems.

Violence and harassment plague health workers in Iran, ranging from sexual misconduct to assault. This harms both workers and potentially patient care. To address this problem,

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hospitals need strong anti-harassment policies, training, and support systems. Public education campaigns can increase awareness and respect. Further research, especially in underrepresented regions, is needed to understand the root causes.

This thesis serves as a literature review of existing studies and provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges women face in the workplace due to gender-based violence and the factors that influence their response to such incidents. It highlights the need for supportive environments and policies to empower women to respond to and challenge harassment in the workplace.

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# CHAPTER 1.

## NAVIGATING GENDER DISPARITIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE

### 1.1 Introduction

In the contemporary era, the matter of gender equality in the workplace has attracted considerable attention from a multitude of sectors and academic disciplines. While progress has been made towards inclusivity, a profound disparity persists in various forms, including the gender gap, the gender pay gap, leadership representation, maternity policies, and horizontal and vertical occupational segregation. For example, studies by Ganiyu (2018) and Hu (2024) have demonstrated the continued prevalence of these disparities across various industries and organizational contexts.

This chapter examines the multifaceted challenges faced by women in professional settings with the aim of elucidating the complexities, implications, and potential avenues for progress. By examining the intricate interplay between societal norms, organizational structures, and individual experiences, researchers such as Zhang & Wu (2024) and Ebenstein (2014) have provided valuable insights into the mechanisms perpetuating gender inequality in the workplace.

This chapter presents a synthesis of empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and real-world narratives to illuminate the barriers hindering women's advancement in the workplace and to highlight promising strategies for fostering a more equitable and inclusive professional landscape. The objective of this research is to inform both scholarly inquiry and practical interventions aimed at cultivating environments where all individuals, irrespective of gender, can thrive and contribute meaningfully to organizational success.

## **1.2 Gender Gap**

The gender gap in the workforce refers to the disparities observed between men and women in various aspects. These include employment rates, representation in top management positions, and the wage gap. The gender gap encompasses discriminatory practices and biases that impede women's advancement and their equal treatment in the workplace. These discriminatory practices and biases can take the form of direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, or harassment. Direct discrimination occurs when a woman is not hired for a job because of her gender. Indirect discrimination occurs when a woman is treated less favorably than a man in a similar job. This can include being passed over for a promotion or being given fewer opportunities to advance. Harassment is any unwelcome verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.

For further insight, one may consult the Hu (2024) study, which reveals that gender disparity in the workplace persists as a pervasive and disheartening phenomenon, despite notable advancements in equality. While it may appear to be an invisible issue in everyday life, it is in fact a pervasive phenomenon in the workplace. It manifests in various forms, including during interviews, promotions, and even in salary negotiations. This is a deeply entrenched issue that continues to erode the vitality of the workplace and impede the overall progress of society, particularly in industries such as finance, which is renowned for its high remuneration and status. Despite accounting for 46% of the workforce, women represent only 15% of executive positions in this sector.

A considerable body of academic research has been conducted on the issue of gender imbalance in the workplace, with several contributing factors being identified. In her 2018 study, Devillard posits that women often bear a disproportionate responsibility for household chores in addition to their professional roles. Furthermore, Ganiyu (2018) presents the theory that societal norms regarding gender roles significantly influence perceptions of leadership potential.

As Griffiths et al. (2019) observe, qualities traditionally associated with femininity are often perceived as highly significant in leadership roles, whereas traits traditionally associated with masculinity are often deemed less crucial. Despite this recognition, gender bias persists within research, with men typically viewed as more assertive and confident, while women are commonly seen as more cooperative.

Furthermore, Folke et al. (2020) found that female supervisors experience more severe instances of sexual harassment when managing predominantly male subordinates compared to when overseeing predominantly female subordinates. This phenomenon may be attributed to male subordinates experiencing a sense of intimidation and vulnerability in the presence of female supervisors, which may result in hostile behaviors such as sexual harassment.

Furthermore, Madsen (2018) highlights that unconscious bias is closely linked to how employees perceive women in the workplace. To address this hidden negative occurrence, managers need to have specialized knowledge to develop policies and provide training to company employees.

Chang (2020) suggested a method to improve gender equality by integrating new evaluation standards. This involves implementing objective and impartial evaluation criteria to mitigate the impact of gender stereotypes on decision-making. For instance, integrating gender-neutral criteria for job performance and skills into performance evaluation metrics can help mitigate bias against women. Hu's (2024) report concludes that there are significant differences in the way men and women are treated in the workplace. These differences extend beyond the employment rate to include the gender ratio in top management and the wage gap. These discriminatory and oppressive practices are particularly detrimental to women as a group.

As stated by Exley & Nielsen (2024), there is a gender gap in the workforce, with fewer women in traditionally male-dominated fields and lower pay for those who are there (Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz 2010; Goldin 2014; Blau and Kahn 2017; Michelsmore and Sassler 2016).

A multitude of studies have sought to identify the underlying causes of the gender gap, with various contributing factors emerging as key areas of interest. These include willingness to negotiate (Hernandez-Arenaz and Iriberry 2019) and compete (Niederle and Vesterlund 2011; Niederle 2016). In 2016, the topic of gender differences in risk preferences was explored by Croson and Gneezy (2009). Additionally, the role of discrimination was examined by Riach and Rich (2002).

More recent studies have focused specifically on factors such as the observation that female leaders receive lower rewards than equally effective male leaders (Grossman et al., 2019), the finding that women tend to demand lower starting salaries than men (Roussille,



2021), the evidence that women are less likely to self-report their qualifications (Murciano-Goroff, 2021), and the evidence that women engage in less negotiation even in female-dominated occupations (Biasi and Sarsons, forthcoming).

A number of studies have highlighted the impact of the confidence gap on women's participation in the labor market. For instance, it is evidenced by the fact that women have lower salary expectations (Reuben, Wiswall, and Zafar 2017), are less inclined to pursue competitive fields (Niederle and Vesterlund 2007; Buser 2014), hesitate to speak up (Coffman 2014), and are reluctant to apply for challenging positions (Coffman, Collis, and Kulkarni 2019). Additionally, Niederle, Oosterbeek, and Niederle (2014) found that women are less likely to speak up in meetings, Coffman (2014) reported that women are more hesitant to speak up in general, and Coffman, Collis, and Kulkarni (2019) found that women are less likely to apply for challenging positions.

To initially ascertain the existence of a confidence gap in the Exley & Nielsen (2024) study, participants completed a mathematics and science test and then responded to 17 self-assessment questions regarding their performance on the aforementioned test.

The presence of a confidence gap was evident in the responses to the 17 self-assessment questions. In particular, female participants expressed more negative beliefs about their performance than male participants in 16 of the questions. For example, in the primary sample, where there was no actual gender difference in performance, the study showed that 80% of women believed they were performing poorly, whereas only 56% of men did. It is evident that participants are aware that their performance will be judged as poor if another randomly selected participant, regardless of gender, judges the number of questions they answered correctly on the test as an indication of inadequate mathematical and scientific skills.

The experiments conducted by Exley and Nielsen (2024) demonstrate that analysts anticipate a difference in confidence levels between genders but fail to incorporate this factor into their ratings. Despite acknowledging the existence of the confidence gap, evaluators exhibit disproportionately negative perceptions of women's performance in comparison to men's. This phenomenon, known as the contagious confidence gap, represents a systematic bias rather than an inadvertent oversight.

Participatory decision making (PDM), which provides employees with the opportunity to contribute to work-related or organizational decisions (Valverde-Moreno et al., 2021b),

has been associated with a number of positive outcomes, including improved job performance. These outcomes include enhanced performance (Sukirno and Siengthai, 2011), elevated satisfaction (Pacheco and Webber, 2016), and reduced turnover (Spector, 1986). Nevertheless, while the advantages of PDM have been acknowledged for decades (Lowin, 1968; Harrison, 1985; Black and Gregersen, 1997), recent research has illuminated a significant concern: gender inequality in PDM practices (Shaed and Ishak, 2015; Valverde-Moreno et al., 2019; Mooney, 2022). Equal participation of women and men in decision-making at all organizational levels is a key indicator of a gender-inclusive work environment (Nishii, 2013; Kossek et al., 2017). Therefore, PDM has the potential to serve as a tool for measuring gender inclusivity in organizations.

Research indicates that traditional gender roles and stereotypes play a significant role in shaping the differences in women's and men's involvement in and experiences of organizational decision-making (Acar Erdol, 2018; Mooney, 2022). Gender stereotypes are widely held beliefs about the typical characteristics and traits of women and men (Eagly et al., 2020). These stereotypes often portray women as more communal (i.e., relationship-oriented, social, emotionally sensitive) and men as more agentic (i.e., assertive, confident, dominant) (Haines et al., 2016; Eagly et al., 2020). Agency, which includes traits such as decisiveness and leadership (Caleo and Heilman, 2014; Eagly et al., 2020), is a key element of these stereotypes. Moreover, gender stereotypes assign men greater status and value than women in interpersonal settings, including workplaces and organizations (Ridgeway, 2001). This perception of women as less competent decision-makers and their lower perceived status in organizational hierarchies (Tabassum and Nayak, 2021; Ridgeway and Markus, 2022; Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway and Bourg, 2004) can lead to situations where men are given more opportunities to contribute and exert greater influence (Mooney, 2022). Empirical evidence supports this assertion, indicating that female executives are less likely to be involved in CEO decision-making than their male counterparts at similar levels (Mooney, 2022). Consequently, women may perceive themselves as less involved in PDM compared to men (Valverde-Moreno et al., 2019).

Previous research on gender and the experience of PDM has yielded conflicting results. While some studies have reported that women experience less PDM than men (e.g., Pacheco and Webber, 2016; Valverde-Moreno et al., 2019), others have found that women reported slightly more. PDM (Valverde-Moreno et al., 20-21b) or no significant

gender differences (Kahnweiler and Thompson, 2000; Li and Qian, 2016). These discrepancies may be attributed to the distinction between PDM occurring at the workplace and organizational levels, as well as the gender-typicality of occupational roles.

In conclusion, research indicates that women experience less PDM than men at the organizational level, while experiences at the workplace level may be more diverse. In order to assess gender equality in the workplace and develop strategies to address it, it is crucial to consider the involvement of women and men in strategic, large-scale decisions.

### **1.3 Vertical segregation**

Vertical segregation of women in the workforce refers to the unequal distribution of women and men at different levels within an organization or industry. This phenomenon is evidenced by the fact that women are less likely to be found in top management, executive roles, or leadership positions, despite the fact that their educational qualifications may be similar to those of their male counterparts.

For further insight, please refer to Zhang & Wu (2024), which examines the critical link between gender equality and societal advancement. The authors claim that women's empowerment is indicative of broader social liberation. Furthermore, the study analyses gender bias in the labor market in China, distinguishing between direct and indirect inequalities, as well as vertical occupational gender segregation. It also highlights the continuing influence of traditional gender roles on women's career advancement.

In addition, Ebenstein (2014) examines the origins and methods of occupational gender segregation, focusing on cultural norms and gender dynamics. The author highlights how traditional stereotypes influence societal views of men and women, attributing gender inequalities in the workplace to family structures characterized by patriarchal dominance. Ebenstein also demonstrates how women are often discriminated against because of societal preferences for men, which are perpetuated by entrenched gender roles and family structures.

Furthermore, Yuan Xuhong et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative analysis using data from the China General Social Survey (CGSS2017) to demonstrate the destructive vertical effects of gender attitudes on female employment. Additionally, the study suggests that educational human capital has a positive impact on both gender attitudes and female employment, thus indirectly mitigating the detrimental effects of gender stereotypes on women's labor force participation.

Furthermore, the results of the CFPS China Family Tracking Survey (2014) indicate that improvements in gender perceptions can positively affect the reduction of vertical segregation. Additionally, progress in gender ideology is associated with an increased probability of improving women's occupational status.

Li Xiangrong (2017) identifies discrepancies in occupational gender segregation based on the level and type of educational background, suggesting that the degree of occupational gender segregation is also related to the academic disciplines pursued by graduates. Furthermore, Li Xiangrong posits that different employment units serve as determinants of the level of occupational gender segregation.

Zhang & Wu (2024) also demonstrate that improvements in traditional gender roles and education levels can mitigate vertical segregation. Despite the perception of female overrepresentation in the civil service, men hold many positions in political and governmental bodies and public institutions. Women without traditional gender concepts are more likely to enter public institutions, where higher levels of education facilitate access to all occupations. Zhang & Wu (2024) argue that addressing gender segregation and inequality in the workplace is crucial. Furthermore, China's legislative initiatives, including the "Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests," demonstrate a commitment to addressing gender inequalities. The promotion of awareness, the challenging of traditional gender norms, and the provision of quality education for women are critical to advancing gender equality. In order to promote parity in the workplace, it is essential to monitor occupational segregation and enforce quotas in key positions. The same study also asserts that promoting shared parental leave can reduce financial pressure on companies while promoting gender diversity in the workplace. Despite numerous studies that have highlighted the benefits of diverse leadership (Donovan & Caplan, 2019; Gero & Garrity, 2018; Williams, 2013; Woolley & Malone, 2011), progress in increasing women's representation in leadership roles remains slow in various sectors, including higher education. The "pipeline theory," which posits that increasing the number of women in lower-ranking positions will lead to an increase in women in leadership roles, has not been effective (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Studies by Ibarra et al. (2013) and McKinsey & Company (2018) indicate that biases impede women's advancement and that there has been a lack of progress in corporate America.

Despite earning the most degrees since 2006, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education (Johnson, 2016). The benefits of increased female leadership include improved performance, a stronger organizational climate, and increased innovation (Madsen, 2015). The White House Project (Wilson, 2009) highlights the importance of women in leadership for research, role models, and future generations.

While women are more visible in lower academic ranks, significant change in leadership roles remains elusive (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Madsen & Longman (2020) explain that current challenges in education require wise and courageous leaders at all levels of academia. Despite the progress made in promoting women's leadership in higher education, many talented women face internal and external barriers that hinder their potential. While research has illuminated the status of women in academic leadership, significant obstacles remain, including conscious and unconscious bias. However, the advancement of high-potential women into leadership positions is crucial to the advancement of education. Prioritizing this goal is essential to ensure the optimal education for future generations and society.

#### **1.4 Gender Pay Gap**

The gender pay gap is defined as the difference in earnings between men and women, typically expressed as the difference in median or average wages or salaries earned by men and women in the workforce.

Roussille (2024) employs data from Hired.com to investigate the influence of gender-based differences in salary expectations on the gender pay gap in online labor markets for engineering roles. The study indicates that women tend to request lower salaries than men, and that the respective difference in salary demands plays a significant role in the observed gender gaps in offer and final salary offers. Additionally, the study establishes a causal link between initial salary requests and subsequent offers by exploiting an unexpected change in salary requests on the platform. The results indicated that women who requested higher salaries did not experience any adverse consequences in terms of the number of bids or final offers received.

Furthermore, the report discloses an adjusted gender ask gap of 2.9% among high-wage tech workers. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the 3.3% raw bid gap can be fully explained by the ask gap alone, with women receiving slightly more bids and final offers

than men. The study highlights the necessity of recognizing the circumstances under which women can request higher compensation without encountering adverse consequences.

Although women have made progress in the economic sphere, the gender pay gap (GPG) remains a persistent problem for gender equality. The study (Farrugia et al., 2024) endeavors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of family and work-related policies, with a particular focus on family-friendly measures (FFMs), in contributing to and perpetuating the gender pay gap (GPG) in Malta. The study examines this issue from both a macroeconomic and microeconomic perspective, with a particular emphasis on the financial and insurance sectors.

The study reveals that some family-friendly policies (FFPs) at the macro and policy levels exhibit a gendered approach. For instance, the unequal duration of maternity leave (18 weeks) in comparison to paternity leave (1 day) perpetuates gender roles and stereotypes, ultimately contributing to the gender pay gap (GPG) over time. Nevertheless, certain family-friendly measures (FFMs), such as parental leave, career breaks, urgent family leave, teleworking, flexible working hours, and reduced working hours, appear to have a more gender-neutral approach. At the micro level of organizational analysis, the gender pay gap persists as a consequence of the operation of hidden biases based on an ideal worker rooted in masculine standards. Furthermore, mothers with greater care responsibilities and reliance on family-friendly policies face greater challenges in advancing their careers and continue to bear the highest burden for undertaking family-related unpaid work.

Furthermore, the European Parliament (2023) asserts that the implementation of the Pay Transparency Directive represents a significant advancement and that there is an immediate necessity for decisive political measures to address the gender pay gap. Furthermore, employers are prohibited from inquiring about a candidate's salary history and are obliged to implement gender-neutral pay structures. Furthermore, job advertisements must be non-discriminatory, and employees have the right to request their salary information in order to compare it with others in similar roles, regardless of the size of the company. This facilitates the identification of gender pay disparities and enables employees to pursue equitable redress in the event of discrimination.

The perceptions of what constitutes fair pay, as discussed by scholars (Buchel, Luijkx, & Achterberg, 2021; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), play an important role in perpetuating

inequality. Some researchers (Auspurg, Hinz, & Sauer, 2017; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016) posit that the lack of progress in reducing the gender pay gap (GPG)—the discrepancy between men's and women's actual earnings—is attributable, at least in part, to the persistence of gendered beliefs (Ridgeway, 2011) and the tendency to rationalize existing differences (Sauer, 2020).

Auspurg et al. (2017); Jasso, Shelly, and Webster (2019); and Sauer (2020) posit that the actual pay gap is often perceived as an expected and fair gap, regardless of whether it stems from inherent or acquired status. Furthermore, they argue that people tend to justify existing inequalities based on different types of available information.

In 2019, the average unadjusted gender pay gap (GPG) in the 27 EU countries surveyed was 14.1%, a figure that had remained relatively stable over the previous decade.

GPGs are higher for workers with more human capital, such as older workers with tertiary or post-tertiary education and longer tenure, as well as those with full-time and permanent contracts.

Moreover, the findings of Hurley et al. (2021) and Mari and Luijkx (2020) indicate that these trends are the result of the cumulative impact of gender and parenthood-related career interruptions, particularly for women.

Furthermore, there is a substantial body of evidence indicating that parenthood has a detrimental impact on women's wages and career progression. Studies conducted in different regions, including the United States (England et al. 2016), Western Europe, Central Europe (Cukrow-ska-Torzewska and Matysiak 2020), Eastern Europe (Nizalova, Sliusarenko and Shpak 2016), and Australia (Cooke 2014), consistently demonstrate that mothers experience wage losses and a decline in occupational status. These penalties, colloquially referred to as "motherhood wage penalties," exhibit considerable variation across countries, with their shape being influenced by a multitude of factors, including welfare policies, tax systems, income levels, occupational prestige, the number of children, and specific occupations.

Conversely, with the exception of those on paternity leave, men tend to receive financial rewards and bonuses for fatherhood, resulting in higher wages compared to men who do not have children.

The respective reports are further corroborated by the findings of Wysieńska-Di Carlo & Karpiński (2024), which evaluate gender pay gaps based on the results of interviews

conducted with Polish individuals of working age. It is noteworthy that both male and female respondents perceived the existence of a gender pay gap as an acceptable phenomenon. Moreover, the report identifies broader gender pay gaps among older workers and in highly regarded, male-dominated professions. It is noteworthy that the gender pay gaps observed in female-dominated occupations were comparable to those observed in male-dominated occupations.

The study also illustrates the relationship between gender and parenthood status on earnings expectations. It was found that both mothers and fathers are perceived as more deserving of higher earnings than childless workers.

Furthermore, this finding challenges the hypothesis that parenthood status accounts for the differences in how men and women view gender differences in perceptions of pay. In conclusion, the study by Wysieńska-Di Carlo & Karpiński (2024) indicates that gender and occupational characteristics are significant factors influencing perceptions of fair earnings and gender pay differentials.

## **1.5 Horizontal segregation**

The continued horizontal segregation of the sexes in the workplace represents a significant obstacle to gender equality. This phenomenon, whereby men and women are concentrated in different occupational roles, is a persistent challenge that requires urgent attention. Women are disproportionately represented in certain sectors or occupations, which are often referred to as "female-dominated."

As stated in the report on labor market dynamics (Valencia-Contrera & Rivera-Rojas, 2024), horizontal segregation remains a persistent challenge affecting gender equality in the workforce worldwide. Moreover, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2021) developed an index to measure progress in addressing gender segregation in the European Union and to provide insight into areas in need of improvement. As indicated in the annual report, a marginal increase of 0.2 points was observed in comparison to the 2018 data. In addition to the aforementioned points, the low and stable score of 61.3% observed in the 2019 report on the quality of work indicates a significant degree of gender segregation in the workplace.

The International Labor Organization and the United Nations Development Program (2019) published a report that highlights the differences in gender segregation over the years on eight Latin American countries. Furthermore, the authors recognize the



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significance of conducting studies to assess gender segregation, particularly in Latin America, in order to encourage the scientific community to study the health of workers and to facilitate the development of public policies and health programs that are aligned with the realities of each country.

In accordance with the preceding reports, Cattani & Rizza (2024) analyze the impact of the transition from manufacturing to service-based economies on gender employment patterns. The report discusses the increase in women's employment rates, particularly in the service sector, and the emergence of new social risks as a result of maintaining a balance between work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, the report highlights horizontal segregation, which in this context refers to the situation where women are overrepresented in precarious and low-skilled jobs. Furthermore, this report examines the concept of gender inequalities in order to elucidate the challenges and discrepancies related to female employees in various occupational sectors and to elucidate a number of traditional assumptions related to women's work.

Furthermore, this study examines the relationship between gender, occupation, and mental health using data from 38,066 female professionals in Western Europe. It highlights work-related risks that have a negative impact on the mental health of female employees, such as work overload, violence, and challenging client interactions observed in interactive service jobs. This is contrary to the belief that lower wages in female-dominated occupations, such as health professionals, legal-cultural professionals, and teachers, especially with shift and weekend work, are compensated by better working conditions.

In conclusion, the Cattani & Rizza (2024) report examines the importance of studying and evaluating customer-employee relationships and implementing gender-specific measures to reduce mental health risks, especially in the field of interactive services. It also considers the role of microclasses in the mental health of career-oriented women.

In accordance with the aforementioned reports, White & White (2006) posit that occupational roles are frequently classified as either more masculine or more feminine.

As Fruehwirth et al. (2024) posit, occupations within the domains of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are associated with masculine characteristics, including agency, whereas occupations within the domains of care work are associated with feminine characteristics, including communion. As Bundesagentur für Arbeit (2019) confirms, in Germany, only approximately 15% of employees in STEM occupations are

women. Furthermore, women in STEM occupations are also more likely to work part-time compared to men. In contrast, the majority of employees in care work occupations, which often receive less social recognition and pay compared to other occupations, are women, at around 77%. This highlights that men are significantly more involved in STEM occupations compared to women.

Moreover, Fruehwirth et al. (2024) draw attention to the overrepresentation of men in STEM and care work occupations in 202 currently approved German textbooks. Moreover, the gender-stereotypical belief that gainful employment belongs primarily to men remains dominant, as noted by Aulenbacher (2018). This highlights a series of problems. As textbooks are utilized on a daily basis in educational institutions for extended periods, they serve as a foundational socialization instrument that influences the perception of what is masculine or feminine, as well as career choices and other behaviors. It is therefore of the utmost importance to prioritize the inclusion of gender-fair and gender-neutral representation of occupations in textbooks.

In conclusion, horizontal segregation represents a significant obstacle to achieving gender equality in the workplace. To address this issue, a multi-pronged approach is necessary, including research into its effects, policy changes to promote equal opportunities, and educational initiatives to challenge gender stereotypes.

## **1.6 Maternity**

Maternity leave presents numerous challenges for women attempting to reconcile their parental responsibilities with their career aspirations. These challenges include concerns about the potential for skills erosion during extended leaves, logistical difficulties associated with shorter breaks, the inadequacy of support systems for reintegration into the workforce, the diversity of workplace cultures, and the pervasiveness of negative attitudes towards returning mothers.

The work of Son (2024) examines the historical evolution of paid maternity leave as a response to concerns about maternal and infant health in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially, legislation focused on protecting the well-being of pregnant women by restricting their employment around the time of childbirth. Nevertheless, recognizing the economic and financial vulnerability of women, especially those from low-income backgrounds, legislators, who were predominantly male policymakers and aligned with broader welfare initiatives, adopted a more dynamic approach by formally providing

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some financial support for expectant mothers who were unable to work. In contrast, the introduction of paid maternity leave was delayed and presented greater challenges for women in some countries with less developed welfare systems.

In 2018, Daly and Ferragina conducted a study confirming that the foundation of work-family policy represents paid maternity leave as the first social policy for female workers. Furthermore, in Western countries, it was introduced between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when women still did not have the formal right to participate in political decision-making. Furthermore, the report posits that the early development of paid maternity leave was driven by women's political struggles and provided enhanced opportunities for women to leverage their political influence. In fact, women's political participation was a foundational prerequisite for the establishment of paid maternity leave.

Furthermore, O'Brien & Arnold (2024) highlight the experiences of mothers employed in the film and television sector in Ireland, emphasizing that they are often perceived as a "problem" due to the perceived incompatibility of their parental responsibilities with their work in the creative industries (CI). Despite the belated attention to gender equality in Irish CI policy, pregnancy and motherhood continue to be regarded as issues for mothers to resolve independently, rather than being addressed in a structural and fundamental manner. The study, which was based on interviews with 12 mothers working in the respective sectors, revealed that self-responsibility is evident at all stages of motherhood. This includes managing pregnancy at work, the challenges that mothers face during maternity leave and returning to work, balancing caring and work responsibilities, and the expectation that mothers will find solutions to these challenges on their own. Furthermore, the responsibility of identifying suitable solutions to the challenges faced by working mothers has the potential to perpetuate prejudices, discrimination, and inequalities related to their parental status. The report emphasizes the crucial need for the Creative Industries (CIs) to understand the importance of structural and cultural change in order to shift the responsibility away from women workers personally.

Furthermore, a study by Allen et al. (2024) presents the challenges of working mothers returning to their jobs in the anesthesia sector after maternity leave. This qualitative study was conducted in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and aimed to identify influential factors in order to provide a framework to assist in planning re-entry.

Five key themes emerged from the 13 semi-structured interviews: the length of leave, planning for return, workplace culture, impact on career, and emotional impact. Participants expressed concerns about the potential for deskilling for longer leaves and logistical challenges for shorter leaves. Career-oriented women faced inadequate and informal planning processes for returning to work. Workplace culture was seen as a valuable factor, but now varies between countries. Some negative attitudes towards returning to work were observed, such as difficulties in accessing permanent work, which had some career implications. Finally, many participants acknowledged that there had been changes in their professional and personal identities, which had had a negative impact on their emotional well-being.

In conclusion, this research identifies factors that can facilitate the return to work of clinicians after maternity leave and acknowledges challenges, including negative attitudes, which may impede women's careers in anesthesia. Consequently, there is a shortage of female leaders in the workplace.

## **1.7 Leadership**

As indicated by the most recent data from Elizabeth Goryunova and Susan R. Madsen (2024), there has been a modest yet discernible advancement in women's leadership roles in business. The International Labor Office (ILO) has observed a slight increase in the representation of women in managerial and executive positions, rising from 30% in 2010 to 32.4% in 2019. Nevertheless, significant disparities persist across countries and sectors.

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap (2022) report highlights the fact that women hold an average of 36.9% of managerial and executive positions across industries. However, this proportion is not uniformly distributed across sectors. Indeed, some non-governmental and membership organizations, education, personal services, welfare, and healthcare, which are more associated with female workers, demonstrate a higher level of gender parity in leadership, with approximately 46-47% of leadership positions compared to sectors which are dominated by male employees, such as energy, manufacturing, and infrastructure, which range from 16-20%. Indeed, the public sector appears to offer a greater number of leadership opportunities for women than the private sector.

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Furthermore, the current data on the representation of women leaders in business environments serves as an essential rule for understanding and tracking the progress of women's empowerment. This can lead to positive and significantly improved correlations between board gender diversity and company performance. For example, Green and Newlands (2015) report that having at least one woman on the board increases the quality of governance and reduces the likelihood of the company engaging in fraudulent activities. Furthermore, Madsen's (2015) report indicates that companies with a higher proportion of female employees in management and leadership positions may benefit from improved financial performance, a stronger organizational climate, improved corporate social responsibility and reputation, better use of talent, and increased innovation and collective intelligence.

Furthermore, Deloitte's (2022) Progress at a Snail's Pace report corroborates that the global average for women on boards in 2021 will be 19.7 per cent, representing an improvement of 2.8 per cent from 2019. The Deloitte 'stretch factor' for women holding multiple board seats also indicates a slight increase of 1.3 in 2021, suggesting a greater commitment, which is more evident in some countries with mandatory board quotas, as they are legally required to engage a wider constituency.

Despite improvements in the representation of women in leadership roles, women remain under-represented at the most senior levels of companies worldwide. According to a 2022 study by Deloitte, only 6.7% of board chairs, 5% of CEOs, and 15.7% of CFOs were held by women in 2021. Moreover, the WEF (2022) reports that certain industries, including technology, energy, and supply chain/transportation, which were previously identified as having the lowest proportion of female executives, have demonstrated a higher rate of female hiring than male hiring in 2021.

Moreover, women are more successful in certain industries and are also more likely to reach senior positions in certain C-suite or director roles. This is evidenced by Grant Thornton's report, which indicates that in 2021, women will hold 38% of human resources director positions, 36% of chief finance officer positions, 23% of chief marketing officer positions, 22% of chief operating officer positions, and 21% of chief information officer positions globally.

As Adler (2015) notes, a significant proportion of women in senior executive roles have established their own businesses. In a similar vein, women in established companies share a common background in their home country, which is a key factor in their success.

Concurrently, the McKinsey and Lean In's Women in the Workplace 2022 report highlights the obstacles and challenges that impede women's representation in leadership roles. McKinsey has long emphasized the "broken rung," which refers to the disparity in promotion rates between women and men from entry-level to managerial positions. Consequently, fewer women than men have the opportunity to advance to senior leadership positions. The report indicates that the proportion of women who reach and progress through the various levels of management is 48% at entry level, 40% at manager level, 36% at senior manager level, 32% at vice president level, 28% at senior vice president level, and 26% at C-suite level (McKinsey & Lean In, 2022).

Finally, Noland (2016) posits that there are benefits to business performance when there are a significant number of female leaders. This highlights the importance of creating a pipeline of female leaders, rather than simply filling the higher leadership positions with women.

## 1.8 Conclusion

The research presented in this chapter illuminates the persistent challenge of the gender gap in the workplace. From underrepresentation in leadership roles (Zhang & Wu, 2024) and persistent pay gaps (Roussille, 2024) to horizontal segregation (Valencia-Contrera & Rivera-Rojas, 2024) and the complexities of balancing work and family for mothers (O'Brien & Arnold, 2024), women continue to face significant barriers to achieving equality in the workplace.

Furthermore, this thesis has demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the issue, emphasizing the role of unconscious, deeply entrenched societal norms regarding gender roles and a lack of supportive structures for working parents.

The resolution of the gender gap in the workplace necessitates a multifaceted approach. Organizations should implement a range of initiatives, including unconscious bias training and measures to ensure equal pay and leadership opportunities. Policy changes, such as those pertaining to extended parental leave, affordable childcare, and flexible working arrangements, can facilitate the support of working parents. It is imperative that

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educational efforts be undertaken to challenge gender stereotypes in order to encourage girls to pursue careers in traditionally male-dominated fields. Ongoing research is essential to refine these strategies and create a truly inclusive workplace for all.

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## CHAPTER 2. WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION IN IRAN

### 2.1 Introduction

The investigation of women's roles and challenges in various sectors of Iranian society is of paramount importance for comprehending the intricacies and dynamics of gender dynamics in contemporary Iran. This chapter draws upon a rich tapestry of scholarly research and empirical studies to navigate the nuanced experiences of Iranian women in key sectors. These include broadcasting (Ghasemi 2020), tourism (Carrasco-Santos et al. 2024), public sector careers (Javadian and Addae 2013), and workforce participation (Rostami-Povey 2016). Each study illuminates distinct facets of the challenges and opportunities that shape women's professional trajectories in Iran.

### 2.2 Beyond the Revolution: Education, Employment, and the Paradox of Progress for Iranian Women

The Paradox of Progress: The Iranian Revolution of 1979, driven by a desire for social justice and independence, presented a complex situation for women's education and employment, as argued by Rostami-Povey (2016). The modernization initiatives of the Shah, which resulted in a 31% increase in female university enrollment by 1979, did not address the broader socio-economic inequalities that persisted in Iran. This uneven development, coupled with political repression, gave rise to widespread discontent. The Islamic Republic, which was established following the revolution, initially promised to address economic marginalization. However, the Islamic Republic soon implemented a conservative



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interpretation of Islamic law, which restricted women's rights and access to education and employment.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) proved to be a pivotal moment in the country's history. With men at the war front, women were called upon to assume crucial roles in the workforce and participate in political demonstrations. The wartime mobilization not only challenged traditional gender roles but also fostered a sense of collective agency among women. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of a unified women's movement, transcending the ideological divides between secular and religious women. The collective advocacy of the movement for educational and employment rights underscored the paradox of a revolution that initially promised social justice but ultimately restricted women's opportunities.

The period following the Second World War saw a renewed focus on education as a result of the reconstruction efforts that were undertaken. The infusion of capital into public services, particularly education, led to a notable increase in the number of individuals enrolling in universities, both male and female. Despite conservative pressures to limit female education, women's participation in higher education has increased significantly, particularly in science and technology fields. This educational advancement was accompanied by some legal reforms regarding divorce, child custody, and employment opportunities. Nevertheless, these reforms remained constrained, and women continued to encounter significant obstacles in the workplace.

The expansion of women's education has not been overlooked by conservative elements within the Iranian government. Anxiety about social change and the potential challenges to patriarchal norms led to the implementation of quotas and geographic restrictions on women's university options. The objective of these measures was to restrict women's access to higher education, particularly in disciplines that were deemed unsuitable for them. Nevertheless, these initiatives proved largely ineffective, with the number of women enrolled in higher education continuing to rise.

Although women have made considerable progress in terms of educational attainment, a number of challenges remain. In certain academic disciplines, women have achieved higher success rates than men. Nevertheless, access to postdoctoral studies and formal employment opportunities remains constrained. The election of President Rouhani in 2013 offered a glimmer of hope for a relaxation of social restrictions and economic

sanctions, both of which have had a negative impact on women's education and employment prospects. As Iran navigates its complex political and social landscape, the future of women's education and employment remains a matter of critical importance.

Furthermore, it illustrates the paradoxical nature of progress for women in Iran, where educational advancements coexist with social and legal restrictions.

The employment situation of women in Iran is a complex one, comprising a number of interrelated factors. Despite the high level of educational attainment among Iranian women, their participation in the formal sector remains limited (Iran Statistical Yearbook, 2012-2013). Only 15% of the economically active population is female, with the majority concentrated in service industries (49%), followed by agriculture (26%) and industry (25%) (Iran Statistical Yearbook, 2012-2013). Although there has been a slight increase in female participation in government positions (35%) compared to the pre-revolution era, men still dominate these roles (65%) (Rostami-Povey, 2010a). Similarly, women hold a minority of manufacturing jobs, although there has been a small recent increase (Rostami-Povey, 2010a).

The limited access to formal employment can be attributed to a complex interplay of factors. Patriarchal social structures and ideology impede women's advancement to leadership and decision-making positions (Rostami-Povey, 2010a). Moreover, the policies of President Ahmadinejad from 2005 to 2013 were designed to discourage full-time work for women, promoting part-time work, early retirement, and even polygamy (Kadivar, 2012; Koolae, 2012).

Nevertheless, Iranian women demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency. Moreover, Iranian women are actively engaged in the vast and dynamic informal economy, encompassing a wide range of activities (Rostami-Povey, 2010). This encompasses unpaid family labor, home-based businesses such as crafts and food production, street vending, and even work in unregistered cafés. The advent of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram has enabled women to extend their reach by selling products online (Zanan Journal, 2014). It is notable that an increasing number of young, educated women are entering the traditionally male-dominated property and financial markets.

Iranian women encounter a complex array of obstacles in their pursuit of employment. The pervasive influence of rigid societal norms has the effect of relegating women to domestic duties, thereby impeding their access to leadership positions and decision-

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making spheres (Nejadbahram, 2012). This burden is further compounded by the phenomenon of the "double shift," whereby women are required to balance demanding domestic responsibilities with professional aspirations, often working longer hours to prove their worth (Rostami-Povey, 2010).

The educational system, while facilitating women's entry into their chosen fields, is deficient in equipping them for leadership roles and political influence. Moreover, the mainstream media perpetuates traditional gender roles, thereby failing to acknowledge the significant contributions women make to society (Farhadpour, 2012).

The legal framework presents a complex and multifaceted picture, which is further complicated by the interplay of various factors. The constitution guarantees equal citizenship rights, and some family law reforms support women who choose not to work outside the home. Nevertheless, discriminatory elements remain embedded within family, employment, and criminal law. In numerous instances, customary law regards women as dependents, thereby constraining their access to leadership roles (Hoodfar, 2000; Nejadbahram, 2012). For instance, Article 1117 of the Civil Law permits husbands to restrict their wives' work based on perceived family interests.

Notwithstanding these constraints, Iranian women demonstrate remarkable agency. Many women, particularly those from poorer families, circumvent restrictions by engaging in informal sector employment, where husbands' permission is not required. In families that value women's contributions, there is a possibility that they may encourage or even require their employment, which could render discriminatory laws less of an obstacle.

Despite the limitations imposed by the system, Iranian women are actively engaged in the economy, both formally and informally. This serves to illustrate the constraints of a patriarchal structure that impedes national development by failing to recognize the potential of women. While legal reforms are necessary, women's agency and their growing presence in the informal sector suggest a potential shift in gender dynamics within Iran.

In conclusion, the relationship between gender and education in Iran is a dynamic one, exhibiting both continuity and change over time. While traditional forces persist, women's activism is constantly pushing for change within the male-dominated system. This ongoing conflict suggests that the future of gender relations in Iran remains uncertain. However, there are indications that the tide may be slowly turning.

### **2.3 Beyond the Degree: Gendered Perceptions and Employment Realities for Iranian University Students**

In their 2011 study, Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam examine the intricate relationship between women's access to higher education and their subsequent participation in the Iranian workforce. To this end, they utilize data obtained through interviews with 51 university students and professors at five higher education institutions in Tehran and Isfahan between 2007 and 2009. The participants represented a diverse range of academic disciplines, including mathematics, engineering, social sciences, and women's studies. It is notable that all interviewees discussed the perceived benefits of higher education, as well as the perceived barriers to women's employment opportunities after graduation.

As indicated by the participants, universities serve as a platform that enhances both women's and men's awareness, providing them with an opportunity to interact that may not be feasible in other social settings (Rezai-Rashti, 2011). In general, women indicated that university environments provide a secure environment for them to develop self-assurance, particularly for those who excel academically. For instance, Zahra, a female graduate student, recounted her personal experience, stating that despite initially avoiding interactions with men when she entered university, her exceptional academic performance during her bachelor's degree gradually boosted her confidence, leading her to feel comfortable and equal in her relationships with both men and women.

Hamid, a male engineering student, observed the evolving dynamics between men and women and how women's increased participation in university life positively influences men's perceptions of women's capabilities. He observed that, despite the preponderance of male students in his department, some female students exhibited superior intelligence, with one woman achieving the highest marks in their fourth-year engineering class.

In terms of employment, a male Ph.D. student, Hossein, drew attention to the lack of incentives for men to pursue higher education due to the uncertainty surrounding the possibility of securing well-paying jobs in the future. Conversely, he proposed that for women, employment prospects are less of a concern, as they are traditionally expected to be financially supported by men. This perspective was further elucidated by Shirin, a female undergraduate student, who observed that women are confronted with a narrower range of options than men. A significant proportion of women pursue higher education as a necessity rather than a choice.

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In their interviews, the women emphasized enrolling in university out of personal interest and the necessity of obtaining a university degree for better job prospects, given the low status and pay associated with jobs requiring only a high school diploma. Moreover, the women interviewed emphasized the limited job opportunities available to women compared to men. They cited occupations such as taxi driving, factory work, and construction, which are typically inaccessible to women.

Moreover, the women interviewed discussed the challenges they face in the workplace due to gender biases, particularly in relation to the acceptance of female authority. Moreover, the women interviewed cited instances where they had been overlooked for supervisory or managerial positions due to perceptions that male employees would not respect their authority.

The insights gained from a focus group interview with university-educated women provide insight into their experiences navigating the job market. Furthermore, the participants underscored the significance of personal connections, or *par-ti bazi*, in securing employment. It was observed that a significant proportion of jobs are obtained through the establishment of connections with individuals occupying higher positions. This reliance on connections was perceived as particularly significant for women seeking positions in technical fields, where male dominance persists.

In addition, the focus group participants identified obstacles to promotion and managerial positions for women in the workplace. The participants provided examples of instances where gender discrimination hindered their career advancement. They cited instances where single women were passed over for promotion or faced challenges due to their hijab.

Finally, some participants discussed the challenges of working in religiously conservative environments, noting the potential implications for their professional opportunities and respect within such settings. This underscores the intricate intertwining of religious ideology and gender dynamics in the workplace, which can influence women's professional aspirations and experiences.

## **2.4 Educated Yet Underemployed: Unveiling the Paradox of Stagnant Female Labor Force Participation in Iran**

A study by Taheri et al. (2021) examines the perplexing phenomenon of a declining female labor force participation (FLFP) rate in Iran, a country witnessing a concurrent rise in women's educational attainment. While progress has been made in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive and quality education for all, the representation of women in the workforce (SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality) remains a cause for concern. In 2018, the participation rate of women in the workforce was only 16%. This apparent contradiction serves to highlight the persistent challenges that continue to impede the full economic integration of women in Iran.

A number of factors contribute to the phenomenon of FLFP stagnation. The continued prevalence of deeply entrenched social norms has resulted in the restriction of women's employment options, with certain types of work being deemed "inappropriate" for them. Moreover, the rigid segregation of jobs and industries based on gender concentrates women in a limited number of fields, often characterized by lower wages and fewer opportunities for advancement. Moreover, the effects of economic sanctions have also been disproportionately felt in sectors with a high concentration of female workers, thereby exacerbating the challenges they face.

Despite these challenges, there are indications of progress. The social stigma attached to women in employment appears to be receding, particularly among those with higher levels of education. This is evidenced by the growing number of women securing professional positions within the formal sector. These trends indicate a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards female employment.

To accelerate the economic empowerment of women and achieve the gender equality goals outlined in SDGs 5 and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), a multifaceted approach is required. In order to achieve the desired outcomes, it is essential that policy interventions prioritize the following areas:

The empowerment of women entrepreneurs is a crucial aspect of achieving gender equality. By facilitating access to credit and streamlining business regulations, the government can create a more favorable environment for women to establish and grow their own businesses.

One of the most significant challenges in achieving gender equality is the influence of gender norms. Programs that foster social change through education and promote gender-

inclusive public spaces can facilitate greater societal acceptance of women's participation in the workforce.

The removal of legal barriers represents a crucial aspect of this policy intervention. The removal of discriminatory legislation that restricts women's ability to seek employment without spousal permission or limits their access to parental leave benefits represents a crucial step towards the creation of a more equitable legal framework.

The redistribution of caregiving responsibilities represents a crucial aspect of social policy. Investments in childcare and elderly care services can alleviate the burden of care work on women, thereby facilitating their pursuit of professional opportunities with greater ease.

In conclusion, although Iran has made significant strides in educating its female population, this progress has not been reflected in a proportional increase in female labor force participation. Deep-rooted social norms, economic constraints, and a gender-segregated labor market continue to impede women's full economic participation. The implementation of the policy recommendations would facilitate the creation of an environment that is more inclusive and enables women to contribute fully to the nation's economic and social development.

## **2.5 Beyond Legislation: Balancing Work and Family for Iranian Working Mothers**

A study by Mehdizadeh (2011) examines the intricate interrelationship between work and family life for employed mothers in Iran, a nation undergoing a pivotal transformation in its social structure. As female labor force participation continues to rise, traditional gender roles are increasingly called into question, necessitating a re-evaluation of existing support systems. While legal frameworks, such as the Iranian Civil Code (Article 1168), posit shared parental responsibility, the reality falls short of this ideal. A significant discrepancy exists between these pronouncements and the lived experiences of working mothers, who frequently bear the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic duties. For further information, please refer to the source on traditional gender roles in Iran. This imbalance represents a significant barrier to women's full professional participation.

Policymakers have investigated a number of potential solutions to address this challenge. Proposals such as the introduction of paternal leave entitlements, which are supported by

existing legal frameworks, and the implementation of flexible work arrangements have the potential to promote a more equitable distribution of childcare responsibilities and to improve child well-being (Blossfeld & Drobnic, 2001). Nevertheless, the efficacy of such policies is frequently constrained by their scope, which frequently focuses on the public sector and neglects the nearly 60% of working mothers employed in the private sector (2006 Iranian census).

Scholars such as Lister (2003) and Ellingsaeter (2006) argue that the most effective strategy for supporting working mothers is the development of a robust and affordable childcare system. The system should encompass a comprehensive range of options, including both formal daycare centers with stringent quality control measures and well-regulated informal care arrangements that cater to cultural preferences and diverse family structures. The implementation of such a system would necessitate a significant investment of government funds and collaboration with private sector stakeholders.

Ultimately, achieving true work-family balance for Iranian working mothers necessitates a holistic approach that integrates adjustments to work time regulations with the establishment of readily available and accessible childcare facilities across all employment sectors. This approach must be informed by a critical analysis of existing policies, which should draw upon successful models from other developing nations. It would be beneficial to include specific country examples in this analysis. It is only through the implementation of comprehensive reforms and a cultural shift towards shared parental responsibility that Iran can create a supportive environment that empowers working mothers to fully participate in the workforce while fulfilling their familial obligations.

## **2.6 Beyond Sanctions: National Political Economy and the Vicious Cycle Discouraging Iranian Women's Work**

This report examines the enigmatic trend of declining female participation in the labor force in Iran, despite the educational progress of women (Karshenas & Moghadam, 2023). The study employs a multi-faceted approach, drawing upon economic theory, feminist political economy, and institutionalism, to examine the intricate dynamics shaping the Iranian women's employment landscape, with a particular focus on national political economy factors.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has long been distinguished by low female labor force participation (FLRP) rates (Clark et al., 1991; Youssef, 1971).



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However, Iran presents a particularly perplexing case. Despite rising educational attainment among women (Assaad et al., 2017, 2020), recent decades have witnessed a dramatic decline in their workforce participation, exceeding 30 percent (Laudati & Pesaran, 2021). It is evident that economic sanctions have a significant impact (Laudati & Pesaran, 2021), yet this research goes beyond this to examine the paradox of Iranian women and work in greater depth. The study employs a multi-pronged approach, informed by economic theory, feminist political economy, and institutionalism, to analyze data on urban women's participation across demographics. This encompasses a range of variables, including age, marital status, educational attainment, and the sector in which employment is undertaken, whether public or private. Furthermore, the study examines the distinctive economic and political institutions of Iran, which have been documented to disadvantage women legally and economically (World Bank, 2021; Moghadam, 2013). Finally, insights from social attitude surveys are incorporated to gain an understanding of how societal views may be evolving.

The report indicates that the decline in FLRP in Iran is not attributable to regional cultural differences. The argument put forth is that national political economy factors are the primary driver of the decline in female workforce participation, creating a vicious cycle that discourages female participation in the workforce. Four key forces have been identified as the primary drivers of the decline in female labor force participation in Iran.

The expansion of state-controlled institutions has been identified as a significant contributing factor to the decline of FLRP in Iran. The prevalence of state-controlled institutions has resulted in a decline in the financial stability of the central government (Said, 2015). This has resulted in the deterioration of social services that are essential for female employment, such as healthcare and education (Spierings et al., 2010).

Economic isolation and sanctions have also been identified as key factors in the decline of FLRP in Iran. The impact of economic isolation and sanctions on female labor demand in specific sectors has been documented by Laudati and Pesaran (2021). This hampers the prospects of women, particularly those with a lower level of education (Klasen, 2019).

The existing institutions have created a segmented labor market, with limited opportunities for women in the formal sector (Said, 2015). This frequently results in women being employed in low-wage, low-productivity roles within the informal sector (Karshenas, 2001).

The promotion of the patriarchal family model. The regime's promotion of a patriarchal family model serves to discourage female workforce participation (Haghighat, 2005; Soltani, 2017). Furthermore, discriminatory legal frameworks that restrict women's mobility, career options, and property inheritance rights serve to compound the problem.

Rather than regional variations, the interplay of these national forces is posited to be the primary driver behind the recent trends observed in the FLRP in urban Iran. This research illuminates the intricate web of factors influencing the participation of Iranian women in the workforce. This research underscores the pivotal role of legal frameworks and social attitudes in determining the gender wage gap and influencing female labor participation (Altonji & Blank, 1999; Klasen, 2019). It is therefore of the utmost importance that this vicious cycle be dismantled if Iran is to fully realize the potential of its female population.

A substantial body of research indicates that increased female labor force participation is associated with a range of benefits, including economic growth, enhanced well-being for women and children, and greater political participation (Becker, 1971; Psacharopoulos & Tzannatos, 1989; Klasen, 2019; Walby, 2009). By addressing the national political economy factors identified in this research, Iran can pave the way for a more prosperous and sustainable future, not just economically, but also socially and politically.

## **2.7 Beyond Bureaucracy: Unveiling Obstacles to Women's Advancement in Iran's Public Sector**

The study by Javadian and Y. In his 2013 study, Addae examines the ways in which organizational structures impede the advancement of educated Iranian women in the public sector. Building on the insights of Kanter (1977) and Acker (1992), which emphasize the influence of organizational design, this research focuses on two key obstacles: bureaucracy and occupational segregation. Bureaucracies, particularly those that deviate from Weber's ideal model (1922), have been the subject of criticism for perpetuating a male-dominated hierarchy that disadvantages women (see feminist critique). In Iran, public sector bureaucracies diverge from the ideal type in areas such as recruitment, authority, and office management, creating challenges for women.

Another significant barrier is occupational segregation, which channels women into specific jobs based on gender, not qualifications (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986). This phenomenon is evident globally, with women concentrated in healthcare and education, while

STEM fields remain male-dominated (Bear & Woolley, 2011). Despite the high female university enrollment rates observed in Iran, women's participation in the public sector workforce remains low (United Nations Development Program, 2010). This underrepresentation indicates that the skills and experience of Iranian women are not being fully utilized. While Western nations have achieved greater gender equity in public sector employment, Iran's unique context necessitates separate analysis. Despite ongoing efforts, women continue to encounter obstacles in attaining equality within organizations. Feminist scholars have identified an inherent male advantage embedded in organizational structures (Acker, 1989). This bias is evident across various domains, including economics (Waring, 1988) and leadership positions in international organizations (Metcalf & Rees, 2010). Nevertheless, research indicates that women's participation in the workforce offers significant benefits.

Empirical evidence indicates a correlation between elevated female representation and enhanced organizational performance (Francoeur et al., 2008; Meier et al., 2006). Women contribute to the diversity of perspectives and problem-solving approaches within an organization (Francoeur et al., 2008). Obtaining and wielding power within bureaucracies represents a significant challenge for women (Metcalf & Rees, 2010). It has been observed that informal power networks, which are crucial for success, often exclude women (Kottis, 1993). Moreover, their historical exclusion from the public sphere serves to marginalize their voices (Ferguson, 1984). Despite calls for reform, bureaucracies continue to exert a dominant influence within public organizations (Schofield, 2001).

Like many women worldwide, Middle Eastern women are striving for equal rights and economic opportunities, challenging the traditional assumption that they are predominantly confined to their homes. Despite the growing number of women entering the workforce, Middle Eastern women continue to face significant gender disparities in both social and economic spheres, influenced by cultural norms. For instance, in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, women lack the right to vote and are notably underrepresented in senior positions in both business and politics. Within organizations, gendered occupational structures impede women's career progression, compounded by socio-cultural and economic barriers such as mobility restrictions and limited access to training.

Iranian women share similar challenges with their Middle Eastern counterparts, but experience relatively more progressive conditions (Javadian and Singh, 2012). Despite the fact that women are permitted to work outside the home and that the number of women joining the workforce is growing, their participation remains low in comparison to their enrollment in higher education. Structural impediments within public institutions, in conjunction with the low employment rate, contribute to this discrepancy, resulting in a smaller proportion of women occupying managerial roles. The growth of female entrepreneurship in Iran can be attributed to the obstacles that have led women to pursue self-employment as a more viable career option.

The prevailing organizational structure in Iranian public institutions is predominantly bureaucratic. This system has facilitated economic progress in numerous developed nations. However, in countries such as Iran, bureaucratic systems have become a hindrance to development due to a lack of alignment with other societal systems, particularly the legal framework (Vardinejad, 2010). This disharmony has resulted in the formation of incomplete bureaucracies, which are characterized by chaotic processes, a lack of customer focus, unclear rules, and relationship-oriented procedures (Vardinejad, 2010). Despite the pejorative label of "bureaucracy," Iranian public organizations continue to operate under the "rule of man," diverging significantly from Weber's ideal bureaucracy, which embodies principles akin to democracy's "rule of law."

The recruitment process in Iran's public sector diverges from Weber's ideal bureaucracy, which emphasizes regulated qualifications. In contrast, recruitment is frequently based on non-bureaucratic criteria such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and political ideology, which contributes to discriminatory workforce selection (Jamshidian, 1994). The Iranian Constitution purports to guarantee equal rights, yet conditional clauses have the effect of limiting women's access to employment opportunities (Noshiravani, 2009). Such conditions serve to perpetuate gender discrimination in hiring practices, particularly in public organizations, where gender biases influence recruitment decisions (Iravani, 2008).

Moreover, the Iranian bureaucratic structures lack the rational-legal authority advocated by Weber, resulting in highly centralized decision-making processes and personal biases dictating managerial actions (Jamshidian, 1994). This traditional form of authority

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engenders a discriminatory work environment, particularly for women, who frequently encounter biased treatment and constrained career progression prospects (Ghorayshi, 1996).

Moreover, while the ideal bureaucracy is based on written and legal documents, Iranian bureaucracies frequently disregard regulations, relying instead on bribery and ideology-driven procedures (Jamshidian, 1994). Despite the existence of regulations pertaining to equal pay, gender disparities persist in salary distribution, reflecting the continued influence of deeply entrenched gender ideologies (Romstami Povey, 2004). This ideological management approach has the potential to erode the economic value of working in public organizations for women, which may in turn contribute to their inclination towards self-employment.

In addition to the bureaucratic organizational structure, the prevalence of occupational segregation has a significant influence on women's career decisions and opportunities in many societies (Sneed, 2007). This segregation categorizes certain occupations as "gendered," with societal perceptions designating some jobs as suitable for men and others for women (Acker, 1989). For instance, professions such as automotive repair are often associated with men, whereas roles such as childcare are typically perceived as more suitable for women (Gutek, 1995). Such a division serves to legitimate the exclusion of women from certain fields and perpetuates the devaluation of women's work (Kuhlmann and Bourgeault, 2008).

The concept of occupational segregation is theoretically grounded in the gender role framework. This phenomenon can be attributed to societal expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for men and women (Eagly, 1987). Masculinity is associated with agentic qualities such as assertiveness and dominance, while femininity is linked with communal traits like empathy and nurturing (Eagly, 1987). Consequently, occupations deemed appropriate for men emphasize agentic qualities, while those for women prioritize communal characteristics (Ochieng Walumbwa et al., 2004). This segregation not only restricts career opportunities but also reinforces gender stereotypes, particularly evident in government employment, where gender often determines job assignments (Re-skin and Hartmann, 1986).

Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, women in Iran have faced a distinctive form of occupational segregation (Kar, 2010). While legal rights to certain positions were

rescinded, women's participation in public organizations increased, primarily driven by economic necessity (Noshiravani, 2009). However, these opportunities are predominantly limited to low-paid, low-skilled roles in sales, office work, teaching, and healthcare (Ghorayshi, 1996). A growing body of research indicates a growing dissimilarity between male and female occupations, with many fields becoming male-dominated (Alizadeh and Harper, 2003).

A variety of theories propose that occupational segregation is the result of individual choices, organizational discrimination, and structural barriers (Sneed, 2007). In Iran, these factors converge, collectively shaping the landscape of occupational segregation. This is influenced by societal norms, organizational practices, and government policies (Kelly, 1991). Organizational discrimination and societal stereotypes frequently prompt women to pursue occupations that are perceived as socially acceptable, such as teaching. Moreover, government regulations serve to reinforce occupational segregation by limiting women's access to certain professions (Alizadeh et al., 2000).

The implications of occupational segregation in Iran extend beyond the limited career choices available to women to societal disapproval and governmental regulations that dictate acceptable professions for women (Bahramitash, 2003). Despite initiatives to enhance vocational training in specific sectors, such as healthcare, restrictive legislation continues to impede women's career prospects and perpetuate occupational segregation. Consequently, Iranian women encounter significant obstacles in accessing a range of career pathways, which contributes to their comparatively low participation in the workforce.

Iranian women occupy a pivotal role in both the public and private sectors, offering invaluable expertise and a diverse range of experiences (Romstami Povey, 2004). With over 65 percent of university entrants being women, Iran stands to benefit from their knowledge and skills as they transition from education to employment (Iran Statistics Centre, 2009). Their participation contributes to the flexibility and innovation of workplaces, which in turn enriches organizational dynamics and fosters growth opportunities. Nevertheless, Iranian women encounter obstacles to career progression due to the lack of structure within the bureaucratic system and the segregation of occupations. The advancement of Iranian women is constrained by legal and governmental constraints,

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underscoring the necessity for democratic reforms (Hook, 2010). While existing legislation may be conducive to gender equality, its enforcement is often lacking, perpetuating discriminatory practices in public organizations. Corruption, management, and adherence to the rule of law are crucial factors in creating an equitable work environment for women. Despite the potential for improvement in bureaucracy, gender disparities persist, necessitating the implementation of comprehensive strategies to address women's participation in the workforce (United Nations Development Program, 2010). Enhanced public engagement empowers women to advocate for change, yet their workforce participation remains low. The presence of female role models can serve as an inspiration to younger generations and facilitate social acceptance of women in the workforce.

In order to gain an accurate understanding of women's career development, it is necessary to adopt a multifaceted approach that considers both individual and organizational factors (Fagenson, 1990). The "gender-organization-system" perspective offers insight into the manner in which societal norms and organizational contexts shape women's career trajectories. Future research should investigate the impact of educational policies on occupational segregation and examine the experiences of self-employed women in order to gain insight into their challenges and survival strategies in an unsupportive market environment.

Although Iranian women have made notable progress in education, gaining greater access to the workforce and other opportunities, they still encounter significant challenges in advancing their careers. The Iranian bureaucratic system, particularly within public institutions, is identified as the primary obstacle. These bureaucracies diverge from Weber's ideal type, particularly in recruitment practices, forms of authority, and office management, thereby intensifying the difficulties encountered by women in the workplace. Moreover, occupational segregation represents a significant obstacle to the advancement of Iranian women in the workplace. Despite their qualifications, women are constrained in their professional opportunities by societal and familial expectations.

Should these obstacles persist, Iranian women will continue to encounter difficulties in advancing their careers. The removal of these obstacles not only benefits women, but also contributes to the broader societal welfare. Despite the high levels of education and entrepreneurial activity among Iranian women, bureaucratic exclusion impedes their

potential contributions to the economy. Consequently, women are compelled to direct their abilities towards the private sector rather than the public domain.

The growing participation of Iranian women in education and the workforce has heightened awareness of gender issues in the country, potentially paving the way for the dismantling of patriarchal barriers. The replacement of the current ill-structured bureaucracy with one more aligned with Weber's ideal type, coupled with the elimination of occupational segregation, could significantly enhance Iran's economic prospects by increasing women's participation in the public sector. In light of the global focus on gender equality, progress in improving Iranian women's labor force participation could positively influence the country's international reputation and economic engagement.

While the focus of our discussion is on the specific challenges faced by Iranian women, similar issues affect women worldwide. The underrepresentation of women in both the private and public sectors persists globally, with modern bureaucratic structures perpetuating imbalances and inequalities. Occupational segregation remains a pervasive issue, particularly in STEM fields, across various nations. While some countries may implement regulations that impede women's involvement, modern democracies strive for gender equality. Nevertheless, disparities persist.

In conclusion, while bureaucracies play a vital role, it is necessary to evolve their processes and procedures in order to mitigate the discriminatory effects on women. It is therefore imperative that scholarly efforts be made to understand and address these issues if the goal of achieving improved representation and equality for women globally is to be achieved.

### **2.7.1 Navigating the Labyrinth: Unveiling Gender Dynamics in Iran's Tourism Industry**

Despite the high female workforce participation in the global tourism industry (UNWTO, 2019), persistent gender inequality persists (Carvalho et al., 2019). The existing research by Carrasco-Santos et al. (2024) explores leadership aspirations and gender dynamics in the context of tourism. However, their focus on Western contexts (Alarcón & Cole, 2019) fails to acknowledge the distinctive challenges faced by women in theocratic societies, such as Iran (Seyfi et al., 2023). Although the tourism industry employs a significant number of women on a global scale, opportunities for women in leadership roles remain



limited. This analysis is informed by Risman's gender structure theory (2018), which offers a non-Western perspective on gender in tourism and promotes inclusive practices that empower Iranian women in the industry.

Risman's theory posits that gender is not merely a matter of individual choices; rather, it is a complex social structure that is deeply embedded within various societal institutions (Risman, 2018). These institutions, which encompass family, education, and politics, play a pivotal role in the formation and perpetuation of gender norms. They establish a hierarchical structure that favors one gender over the other (Risman, 2004). The theory is structured around three interlinked levels of analysis.

The individual level of analysis concerns the micro-level. This level of analysis concerns the self-perception of individuals in relation to gender, and its influence on personality, career aspirations, and decision-making processes.

The second level of analysis is that of interactional processes. The examination considers how individuals navigate societal expectations associated with their gender when interacting with colleagues, supervisors, and clients.

The final level of analysis is institutional, which examines the macro-level influences on gender identity and behavior. This level of analysis examines the ways in which social, cultural, and organizational frameworks perpetuate distinctions between genders, influencing access to resources, career advancement opportunities, and power dynamics within the tourism industry.

Risman's framework has been successfully applied in tourism research to explore the challenges faced by women seeking leadership roles in hospitality (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019).

The Iranian context is characterized by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and gender norms.

Iran's history reveals a complex interplay between modernization efforts and the reinforcement of conservative gender norms. While the pre-revolution period saw advancements in women's education and limited access to the workforce, the 1979 revolution ushered in a new era of strict Islamic regulations that significantly impacted women's lives.

These regulations, which are informed by specific interpretations of Islamic law, restrict women's freedoms in both public and private spheres. Culturally reinforced expectations prioritize family obligations over career pursuits, thereby limiting women's opportunities for professional growth. The unequal access to education, employment, and societal privileges serves to further exacerbate gender inequality. Furthermore, Iranian family law also impedes women's mobility and labor market participation. In accordance with the prevailing norms, husbands are designated as the primary providers, and women require spousal permission for passports and travel. This creates significant barriers to both employment and personal autonomy.

The country's patriarchal structure has resulted in economic sanctions having a disproportionate impact on Iranian women. This is due to the fact that increased unemployment has a greater effect on women, reinforcing male-dominated norms and perpetuating the gendered division of labor. Moreover, the paucity of employment opportunities has rendered women particularly susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Despite their higher levels of education, Iranian women experience unemployment rates that are disproportionately high. Iran's low ranking in the Global Gender Gap Report is indicative of the pervasiveness of gender discrimination, particularly in the realm of economic participation. Nevertheless, Iranian women are not passive bystanders. Their frustration with discrimination has fueled recent activism, exemplified by the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement. This activism indicates a heightened level of historical consciousness among Iranian women, who are actively challenging ideological taboos and fostering collective social capital.

The tourism industry, which has traditionally been regarded as more accommodating to women, represents an ideal setting for these efforts to make a significant impact

The centrality of these challenges is underscored by the pervasive patriarchal culture of Iranian society, which is reinforced by its theocratic system (Bagheri et al., 2022; Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021). This is consistent with Risman's (2018) gender structure theory, which postulates that societal institutions influence and reinforce gender norms within families and workplaces. The women described experiences of discrimination in decision-making, promotions, and access to leadership roles, which aligns with Risman's concept of a hierarchical gender structure.

### 2.7.2 Beyond the Veil: Navigating Gendered Hierarchies in The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)

This study examines the evolving landscape of Iranian broadcasting and its impact on Muslim women. *Negotiating Challenges and Agency at IRIB: A Case Study in the Intersection of Gender, Faith, and Professional Aspirations*

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) presents a fascinating case study for examining the intersection of gender, faith, and professional aspirations. This research examines the experiences of Muslim women in navigating this complex workplace, shaped by both evolving social dynamics and entrenched religious codes (Ghasemi, 2020).

Prior to the 1979 Revolution, religious beliefs often discouraged women from pursuing careers in media, which was perceived as a secular domain (Khiabany, 2010). Women were largely excluded from the industry, which resulted in a media landscape that was devoid of their perspectives and experiences. Nevertheless, the post-revolutionary Islamification of broadcasting initiated a period of change. As the media landscape underwent a transformation, opportunities were created for religious women to participate in content creation aligned with their faith (Esfandiary, 2012). This shift created new opportunities for Muslim women to engage with the media in a manner that aligned with their values. The concept of challenges and resilience is a fundamental aspect of the field of study.

Despite the newfound opportunities, the research by Ghasemi (2020) reveals that IRIB remains a male-dominated environment with a clear gender bias. This is evidenced by two key challenges faced by Muslim women: One significant challenge for Muslim women in IRIB is limited career advancement. The organization exhibits vertical segregation, with a paucity of women occupying management positions. The participants described encountering a "glass ceiling" that restricts their promotions and professional growth (Ghasemi, 2020). Furthermore, horizontal segregation is evident, with women reporting instances of sexist attitudes and a general distrust of their capabilities from male managers.

One challenge that Muslim women in IRIB face is navigating religious codes in the workplace. IRIB's organizational culture, which is heavily influenced by traditional and religious beliefs, presents additional complexities for women. These cultural values are reflected in interactions between genders within the workplace, creating a tension between

professional duties and religious codes of conduct, particularly regarding physical proximity with male colleagues.

The process of navigating the landscape can be understood as a series of interrelated steps. In response to these challenges, participants adopted one of two main strategies: the skeptical and optimistic approaches.

The skeptical approach is characterized by a tendency to view the situation with a degree of skepticism and a tendency to adopt a more objective perspective. This approach prioritizes the focus on professional duties and career development within the existing limitations. This approach entails the implementation of strategies such as the prioritization of assigned tasks and the avoidance of conflict with superiors.

**The Optimistic Approach** This approach involves actively challenging the status quo and advocating for change. This approach entails the utilization of strategies such as the expansion of boundaries, the negotiation of authority, and the advocacy for change, with the objective of the creation of a more equitable work environment.

Both approaches demonstrate the various methods by which women navigate gender-specific limitations and establish a presence within the media landscape.

The research concludes with recommendations for improving women's working conditions at IRIB. These include the establishment of transparent guidelines to prevent bias, the implementation of objective criteria for promotions, the recognition of women's contributions, and the creation of equal opportunities for both genders. This would necessitate a multifaceted approach that addresses cultural norms, institutional policies, and workplace practices that continue to perpetuate gender inequality. Further research could be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the male perspective within IRIB, to examine organizational policies in greater depth, and to utilize more comprehensive data collection methods in order to gain a more nuanced insight into the gender dynamics that are evolving within this media landscape.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

In conclusion, Chapter 2 illuminates the challenges and opportunities for Iranian women across various sectors. From the resilience of Muslim women in broadcasting to the persistent gender gaps in tourism and public sectors, the chapter reveals systemic barriers hindering women's progress. Despite the expansion of educational opportunities, cultural

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norms and legal restrictions continue to impede women's participation in the formal workforce. This has led to a paradoxical trend of increasing educational attainment and decreasing employment rates. Balancing career and family responsibilities remains a significant challenge, particularly in the absence of adequate support systems. Nevertheless, the chapter also identifies potential avenues for change, with recommendations encompassing bureaucratic reforms and policies supporting working mothers. Ultimately, addressing structural inequalities and promoting gender-sensitive policies are crucial for unlocking the full potential of Iranian women and fostering a more inclusive society.

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## CHAPTER 3. BREAKING THE SILENCE: ADDRESSING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

### 3.1 Introduction

Iran's healthcare system is heavily reliant on its dedicated workforce, yet these essential workers are facing a hidden crisis: violence and harassment. Nurses frequently endure sexual harassment, often remaining silent due to concerns about the potential consequences and cultural norms (Zeighami et al., 2022). Emergency responders, such as paramedics, experience violence, and female pharmacists face customer harassment (Sahebi et al., 2019; Kaveh et al., 2023). This alarming phenomenon is not exclusive to Iran; healthcare professionals globally have reported similar experiences (Emary et al., 2024). This chapter addresses this under-reported issue, with a particular focus on the experiences of Iranian healthcare workers. This chapter will examine the cultural and social factors that influence the experiences of violence and harassment among Iranian healthcare workers. This thesis employs recent research, including the culturally relevant Nurses' Sexual Harassment Scale (Zeighami et al., 2024), to illuminate the crisis in detail and recommend effective solutions.

This chapter has the potential to have a significant impact beyond the Iranian healthcare system. By illuminating the specific challenges faced by Iranian workers, we can gain insights that are applicable to a global audience. This enhanced comprehension can inform the design of targeted interventions and systemic modifications that safeguard healthcare workers globally.

### **3.2 Under the Radar: Unmasking Workplace Violence and Under-Reporting Among Healthcare Workers**

In comparison to other professions, healthcare workers are at a disproportionate risk of violence. A number of factors contribute to this alarming trend, including overcrowded facilities, communication difficulties, and the presence of aggressive patients or their relatives. For instance, extended periods of waiting in emergency departments can result in frustration and disruptive behavior from patients, which may potentially escalate into violence towards staff.

The consequences of Workplace Violence (WPV) extend beyond the immediate incident. Exposure to violence has the potential to disrupt workflows, hinder patient care, and result in adverse mental and physical health outcomes for healthcare providers. Studies have demonstrated a correlation between WPV and diminished job satisfaction, compromised work performance, and increased feelings of guilt, anger, anxiety, and depression among healthcare professionals.

Although research indicates that the prevalence of WPV varies across different countries, it remains a significant global issue. It is of paramount importance to gain an understanding of the specific experiences of healthcare workers with WPV if effective strategies are to be developed to combat this issue. A recent study by Emary et al. (2024) examined the experiences of healthcare workers regarding workplace violence, focusing on Malaysia and drawing insights from other countries as well.

Following the identification of relevant studies, a qualitative synthesis approach was selected for the analysis of the findings and the comprehensive understanding of healthcare workers' experiences with WPV. This method allows researchers to integrate insights from disparate qualitative studies, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon than would be possible through individual studies. A search for pertinent studies was conducted using four online databases: The databases utilized for this search were ScienceDirect, PubMed, MEDLINE, and JSTOR. In order to ensure that the most up-to-date findings were considered, studies published between 2015 and 2021 were included in the analysis.

To ensure the studies' relevance and quality, rigorous inclusion criteria were established. Included studies were required to employ qualitative or mixed methods for data collection and analysis and to focus specifically on healthcare workers' experiences with workplace

violence. Moreover, the studies were required to investigate the factors that precipitate WPV, the incidence of both reported and unreported cases, and to be published in either English or Malay in academic journals. Studies that did not meet the established criteria, as well as those that were not primary research, were excluded from the review. Additionally, studies that were not related to WPV, or that were not conducted among healthcare workers, were excluded. Furthermore, studies published outside the designated timeframe (2015-2021) or not in English/Malay were excluded.

The Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) tool was employed to assess the quality and methodology of the selected studies, thereby ensuring the overall strength of the research used in the synthesis. Finally, a thematic synthesis was employed to analyze the selected studies. This approach entails the identification, analysis, and interpretation of recurring themes within the studies. Thematic synthesis enables researchers to categorize and summarize key findings related to healthcare workers' experiences with WPV.

A total of 15 studies were included in the final analysis, which encompassed healthcare workers from various countries across the globe. The research methods employed were qualitative, with the majority of studies utilizing face-to-face interviews and others incorporating focus groups or open-ended surveys. The most frequently studied group of healthcare professionals was nurses.

Thematic analysis identified three key themes related to WPV experiences. The initial theme identified was that verbal abuse constituted the most prevalent form of workplace violence against healthcare professionals. A review of the literature revealed that healthcare workers consistently reported facing a barrage of abusive language, including insults, threats, and degrading comments. The second theme examined the perceived causes of WPV. A number of factors were identified as contributing to this issue, including instances where patients felt inadequately informed about their care, had unmet expectations regarding treatment, or experienced frustration due to long wait times or crowded facilities. Furthermore, the study identified poor communication between healthcare providers and patients/relatives, as well as factors related to patients themselves (e.g., pain, anxiety, substance abuse) and their relatives (e.g., stress from illness), as contributing elements. Finally, the third theme addressed the underreporting of WPV incidents. The studies revealed a concerning trend of a significant number of cases going unreported. A lack of support from management and the normalization of such incidents



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by healthcare workers themselves were identified as potential reasons for under-reporting.

Building on the identified themes, this review emphasizes the global nature of WPV in healthcare settings. Verbal abuse emerged as the most prevalent form of violence reported by healthcare workers across various countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and many others. Although physical violence was less frequent, it remains a significant concern.

The analysis identifies several factors that contribute to WPV. A tense atmosphere can be created when patients feel inadequately informed, frustrated by long wait times or crowded environments, or have unmet expectations regarding treatment. Moreover, substance abuse by patients can further exacerbate these situations. Furthermore, inadequate communication between healthcare providers and patients or relatives can result in misunderstandings and heightened emotions. Furthermore, the stress and frustration experienced by both healthcare workers and patients/relatives can also contribute to the creation of a volatile environment.

It is of concern that the review revealed a considerable underreporting of WPV incidents. A lack of support from management and the normalization of such incidents by healthcare workers themselves may contribute to this underreporting.

This highlights the urgent need to move beyond the perception that workplace violence is simply "part of the job." It is the responsibility of employers to create a safe and secure work environment for their employees. The implementation of specific policies and procedures to address WPV is of paramount importance. Such strategies should include the assessment of risk, the implementation of prevention measures, and the development of intervention protocols. For instance, the deployment of additional security personnel and the provision of basic training for staff can be effective measures towards the creation of a safer work environment. In conclusion, a multifaceted approach is essential for addressing WPV in healthcare settings.

In conclusion, the analysis revealed a troubling reality. Verbal abuse, in particular, represents a pervasive threat to healthcare professionals across numerous countries. A number of factors were identified as contributing to this issue, including inadequate patient information, unmet treatment expectations, and long wait times. Moreover, the review

identified a concerning trend of under-reporting, which may be attributed to a lack of support or the normalization of WPV incidents.

In light of these findings, it is imperative that healthcare institutions prioritize the safety and well-being of their staff. To address this issue, it is necessary to implement specific policies and procedures that address WPV through risk assessment, prevention strategies, and intervention protocols. Moreover, fostering open communication and addressing the root causes of patient frustration can contribute to the creation of a safer work environment.

At the national level, the paucity of research on WPV experiences among Malaysian healthcare workers represents a significant gap in knowledge. Further qualitative studies are essential to gain insight into how Malaysian healthcare professionals perceive WPV and its impact on the healthcare system. By gaining a deeper understanding of this issue, Malaysia can develop targeted interventions to create a safer work environment for its healthcare workforce, thereby improving patient care.

### **3.2.1 From Legal Issue to Personal Trauma: The Evolving Landscape of Sexual Harassment Research**

As Liang (2024) notes, the year 2017 represented a pivotal moment in global awareness surrounding sexual harassment (SH), with the emergence of the #MeToo movement. This social phenomenon, initiated by a single tweet, propelled the issue into the public consciousness and initiated a critical discourse that continues to this day. The movement's impact extended beyond social media, influencing policy changes in some countries and leading to a significant increase in reported sexual assaults. This surge in public and academic interest has fueled a parallel escalation in empirical research on SH. Researchers are meticulously unravelling the intricate tapestry of this pervasive issue, seeking to comprehend its multifaceted nature, root causes, and far-reaching consequences.

A recent study by Liang (2024) provides a comprehensive examination of SH, elucidating its multifaceted nature and its long-term impact on individuals and organizations. In particular, the intricate interrelationship of factors contributing to SH, including power imbalances, workplace norms, and societal misconceptions, will be examined. Furthermore,

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the psychological and professional consequences of SH for victims, including emotional distress, career setbacks, and potential long-term mental health issues, will be examined. The efficacy of current interventions designed to prevent and address SH will be evaluated, with a view to identifying areas for improvement and the development of more robust strategies.

In order to achieve these objectives, a scoping review of reviews was conducted, focusing on scholarly sources such as journal articles, books, and doctoral theses, while excluding less rigorous materials like undergraduate theses or news articles. The researchers employed rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the review encompassed the most pertinent and dependable research on the subject of workplace SH. Only systematic reviews and meta-analyses that synthesized existing research were included in the review. These reviews were required to explicitly address SH or related terms within a workplace context. The participants of interest were adult workers across various employment sectors, excluding students, children, or volunteers.

A meticulous search strategy was employed, utilizing scholarly databases in psychology, behavioral sciences, and health, with search terms including "sexual harassment," "review," and "#MeToo movement." Manual searches were also conducted in prominent journals on aggression and sexual harassment, including *Violence and Victims* and *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. Following an initial search that yielded 468 articles, duplicates were removed, leaving 363 for review. The titles, abstracts, keywords, and study types were evaluated against predefined criteria to determine their eligibility. To ensure consistency, an independent reviewer conducted a second review of these decisions. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and a comprehensive analysis of the full texts of the articles, resulting in a final selection of 22 articles that were directly relevant to the prevalence, coping mechanisms, and risk factors associated with SH in the workplace.

In summary, the scoping review methodically evaluated existing research on SH to ensure that only the most pertinent studies were included.

The analysis revealed a positive and evolving landscape in SH research, characterized by a more nuanced and victim-centered approach. There has been a shift in focus, moving from viewing SH as a purely legal issue to acknowledging its profound personal effects. This includes a more profound comprehension of the psychological, emotional, and

professional consequences for victims, in addition to the acknowledgment of SH within a broader contextual framework.

The scope of research has expanded to encompass a diverse range of settings, including healthcare facilities, military bases, and digital spaces. Methodologically, the field has witnessed significant advancements, including the use of systematic reviews and meta-analyses, as well as a growing interdisciplinary approach that incorporates insights from various fields. This positive trajectory indicates a growing commitment to comprehensively understanding and addressing SH in a sensitive and empathetic manner. This thesis contributes to the ongoing discourse on SH by elucidating its multifaceted consequences. It also paves the way for the development of effective strategies to eradicate this pervasive issue from workplaces around the globe.

### **3.3 Finding Their Voice: The Nurses' Sexual Harassment Scale (NSHS)**

Sexual harassment (SH) is a pervasive issue in healthcare workplaces, creating a hostile environment for nurses through a range of unwanted physical, verbal, psychological, and visual behaviors. However, existing tools to measure SH in healthcare often lack a focus on nurses' experiences. Such instruments may be researcher-designed, thereby failing to consider the victim perspective, or may be limited in scope, thus failing to capture specific details of SH. Furthermore, they may not be tailored to the healthcare setting. Given the high prevalence of sexual harassment among nurses (1%-38%) and its detrimental consequences, there is a clear need for a more accurate and culturally relevant measurement tool.

A recent study by Zeighami et al. (2024) addresses this gap by developing and validating the Nurses' Sexual Harassment Scale (NSHS), a Persian-translated instrument specifically designed to assess sexual harassment experienced by nurses. The NSHS is designed to provide a reliable measure, with the ultimate goal of fostering a safer work environment for nurses through more accurate assessment of SH prevalence and its impact.

The study builds upon a previous qualitative study exploring nurses' experiences with sexual harassment (SH). The second phase of the study employs a quantitative approach to develop and validate a new measurement tool: the Nurses' Sexual Harassment Scale (NSHS). The NSHS employs Classical Test Theory (CTT) to assess its psychometric

properties. The CTT methodology acknowledges the presence of measurement error and distinguishes between a nurse's true experience of sexual harassment (the construct being measured) and the score they obtain on the scale. The development process adheres to a well-established eight-stage protocol, which encompasses the following stages: defining the construct, generating scale items, obtaining expert review, conducting a pilot test, and evaluating the items for optimal performance. The study was conducted in Kerman, a major city in southeastern Iran.

The Nurses' Sexual Harassment Scale (NSHS) has been demonstrated to be a reliable and valid instrument, specifically designed to assess the nuanced experiences of sexual harassment faced by nurses in Iran. The survey comprises 15 questions which explore both the less overt forms of sexual harassment ("hidden sexual harassment") and more overt behaviors ("manifest sexual harassment") encountered within the Iranian nursing workplace.

In order to ensure that the NSHS accurately captures these experiences, a multi-step validation process was employed. The initial item pool was informed by a comprehensive literature search, including relevant themes and insights from Zeighami et al. (2022). Subsequently, experts evaluated the content validity of the questions, ensuring that they accurately reflected the realities of sexual harassment in the Iranian nursing context. This was further corroborated through the calculation of Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI) scores. Furthermore, face validity was addressed through interviews with nurses who had directly experienced sexual harassment, and by utilizing the Item Impact Method to refine the clarity and understandability of the questions. A pilot test involving 50 nurses yielded valuable data that informed further refinement. During this stage, the data underwent meticulous analysis with regard to missing data, central tendency, dispersion, and potential biases.

Following the promising pilot test, the NSHS was administered to a larger sample of 316 nurses in order to confirm its validity and reliability. Exploratory factor analysis and scree plot analysis were conducted to examine the underlying structure of the NSHS and determine the optimal number of factors. Moreover, a minimum factor loading requirement was considered to ensure the robustness of the identified factors. Convergent validity was further explored by correlating NSHS scores with the Impact of Event Scale – Revised

(IES-R), a well-established measure of PTSD symptoms commonly linked to sexual harassment experiences.

The reliability of the NSHS was evaluated through a three-pronged approach. The internal consistency of the scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, both before and after the factor analysis. Higher values indicate stronger consistency. Test-retest reliability was evaluated by having nurses complete the scale twice, with the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) employed to assess the consistency between these responses. Finally, McDonald's Omega provided a comprehensive measure of internal consistency.

The final number of scale items was determined through a process of careful balancing. The advantages of shorter scales, such as increased respondent favorability, were weighed against the enhanced reliability often associated with longer scales. The finalization process also considered the ease of use of the scale, as measured by the percentage of unanswered questions and the average completion time. The NSHS has proven to be a reliable and valid instrument for measuring sexual harassment among nurses in Iran following a meticulous development process.

The Nurses' Sexual Harassment Scale (NSHS) was developed in Iran with the specific intention of addressing the needs of nurses who are victims of sexual harassment. The 15-item survey encompasses both subtle and overt forms of harassment, which have been categorized into two subscales. The NSHS was developed in a rigorous manner with the intention of accurately capturing the experiences of those who have been subjected to sexual harassment. Notably, the scale demonstrates strong internal consistency and measures what it is designed to measure. Moreover, it distinguishes itself from other instruments by taking into account the cultural context of Iranian nurses. The NSHS has the potential to serve as a valuable tool for raising awareness, improving preventative measures, and protecting nurses' well-being. Although certain limitations do exist, the NSHS represents a significant advancement in the assessment of sexual harassment among nurses in Iran.

### 3.3.1 Beyond the "No Help Wanted" Sign: How Iranian Retail Workers Cope with Customer Sexual Harassment

Building on existing research on workplace sexual harassment, a study by Kaveh et al. (2023) focuses on a specific, under-examined area: customer-perpetrated harassment of female retail workers in Iran. Although sexual harassment is a global issue, and Iranian labor laws protect workers, many incidents go unreported. The majority of research examines harassment by colleagues, yet customers are also a common source of such incidents.

The researchers conducted confidential interviews with the participants, following a semi-structured guide based on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) framework. This theory examines the influence of attitudes, social norms, and perceived control on an individual's behavior. The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each, were audio-recorded in order to facilitate the detailed capture of the participants' experiences. Moreover, with the participants' consent, the researchers also took discreet field notes about body language in order to gain a more holistic understanding. To analyze the data, the researchers meticulously reviewed the transcripts, coding them into categories that aligned with the TPB constructs. This process ensured a systematic analysis while allowing for the emergence of new themes from the participants' stories. The 16th interview marked the achievement of data saturation, indicating that no new significant themes were emerging and that the researchers had gathered a sufficient dataset for analysis.

In order to guarantee the reliability of their findings, the research team enlisted the assistance of members who were tasked with reviewing the transcripts of the first five participants to ensure accuracy. The dependability of the research was ensured through an external review of the research methods, while conformability was guaranteed by a peer reviewer. The transferability of the findings was enhanced by the researchers' acknowledgment of the limitations of the study and their use of triangulation. The researchers, cognizant of their own cultural background, meticulously translated the interview quotes from Farsi to English, taking into account cultural nuances to ensure an accurate representation of the original meaning.

The analysis revealed that participants employed a variety of strategies, including silence, warnings, or leaving the store. The most frequent response was silence. This preference

can be attributed to a lack of confidence in selecting an appropriate response and a fear of adverse consequences, particularly from employers. While some participants felt empowered when they did respond, the potential for negative workplace consequences ultimately discouraged them from doing so. Additionally, social norms influenced the participants' responses. While friends encouraged them to assert themselves, employers and colleagues generally discouraged such reactions. It was perceived that families were entirely against any confrontation. The pressure to retain employment led participants to comply with employer expectations, even if it meant enduring harassment silently.

The perceived behavioral control, or the perceived ability to respond to harassment, exhibited considerable variation among the participants. Some participants reported overcoming their initial fear and feeling empowered to respond, while others opted for silence due to external factors limiting their control. The decisions of the participants were influenced by a number of factors, including employer disapproval, fear of termination, and negative judgments from others. Conversely, the presence of support from colleagues or customers could embolden individuals to challenge the harassment. Conversely, the fear of the harasser's retaliation could result in individuals remaining silent. Ultimately, external pressures and internal anxieties constrained the participants' perceived control over their responses to customer sexual harassment.

Despite a desire to respond in a different manner, silence was the most common reaction to customer harassment. This was due to a complex interplay of factors. The fear of losing their jobs due to employer disapproval, social stigma, a lack of support, and the fear of retaliation from the harassers all contributed to their silence. Moreover, the participants may not have possessed the requisite communication skills to respond assertively.

In conclusion, this study illuminates the multifaceted reasons why women who experience customer sexual harassment often remain silent. The Theory of Planned Behavior offers a valuable framework for understanding the decisions made by these individuals. The fear of job loss, social stigma, lack of support, and acceptance of power imbalances all contribute to the silence of those experiencing customer sexual harassment. To address this pervasive issue, it is necessary to implement interventions on multiple fronts. It is of the utmost importance to enforce existing labor laws against sexual harassment. Psycho-



educational programs can empower women by teaching them about the dynamics of harassment and equipping them with assertiveness skills. Ultimately, the elimination of the acceptance of sexual harassment as a workplace norm necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses both the legal and social aspects of the problem.

### **3.3.2 More Than Just Words: A Meta-Analysis of Workplace Violence Against Iranian Emergency Medical Services.**

The phenomenon of workplace violence (WPV) has emerged as a significant concern for healthcare workers globally, with emergency medical services (EMS) personnel facing a particularly elevated risk. This violence, which encompasses physical assault, verbal abuse, bullying, and even sexual harassment, has a detrimental impact on the mental and physical health of EMS personnel (World Health Organization). A review of the literature reveals that between 70 and 80 percent of EMS personnel experience WPV annually, with verbal abuse being the most prevalent form. This violence not only has an impact on the individual's well-being but also contributes to job dissatisfaction and may result in a reduction in the quality of care provided. Moreover, the nature of EMS work subjects personnel to a variety of challenging and often distressing circumstances, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence from patients or their companions.

Given the significant impact of WPV on EMS personnel and the lack of specific data on its prevalence in Iran, Sahebi et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive study on workplace violence against Iranian EMS personnel. A systematic review and meta-analysis will be employed to estimate the prevalence of different forms of WPV, identify contributing factors, and explore potential preventive strategies across various emergency response settings.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature and extent of workplace violence (WPV) experienced by Iranian Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel, this study employed a systematic review methodology. A comprehensive search of national and international databases was conducted until December 2018. These included resources such as SID, MagIran, Google Scholar, PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus. In order to ensure comprehensive coverage, both English and Persian keywords related to violence, healthcare workers, and emergency services were utilized. To ensure comprehensive coverage, manual searches were also conducted. The studies were selected

rigorously based on the established criteria outlined in the PRISMA checklist. Only those studies focusing on the prevalence of physical, verbal, and cultural violence against Iranian emergency medical services (EMS) personnel were included in the review. Studies that were irrelevant, specific intervention research, and those lacking full-text access were excluded from the review. The quality of each selected study was evaluated using the STROBE checklist. To ensure the integrity of the process, two independent researchers conducted the search, selection, quality assessment, and data extraction procedures. Any discrepancies were resolved through the involvement of a third researcher. A pre-defined checklist was employed to extract pertinent data from each study, encompassing publication details, sample characteristics, and prevalence rates for the three WPV categories. The statistical analysis entailed the calculation of variance and weighted average prevalence rates using the binomial distribution. Furthermore, the  $I^2$  index was employed to assess heterogeneity, thereby informing the selection of a random effects model for the meta-analysis. Finally, to explore potential relationships between WPV prevalence, publication year, and publication bias, meta-regression and Begg's test were employed. All statistical analyses were conducted using STATA software.

The analysis of nine qualified studies revealed a concerning prevalence of WPV, with an overall prevalence of 36%. The prevalence of physical violence was 39%, while that of verbal violence was 73%. Verbal violence was found to have a prevalence of 13%, while physical violence had a prevalence of 16%. The prevalence of cultural violence was found to be 51%. It is notable that the prevalence of all forms of WPV exhibited considerable variation across studies. The highest rates of physical and cultural violence were concentrated in southern Iran, while the lowest were observed in the northwest.

Comparisons with studies from other countries revealed a similar prevalence of verbal WPV, while physical violence appeared to be somewhat higher in Iran. The research identified a number of potential contributing factors, including a lack of public awareness regarding the duties of emergency medical services (EMS), stress and anxiety among patients' families, delays in EMS arrival or service provision, and potential mental health issues of patients or their companions. Furthermore, the analysis indicates a concerning trend of increasing WPV prevalence over time, which may be attributed to factors such as an increase in EMS service utilization or growing public frustration.

The study thus underscores the necessity for the implementation of multifaceted interventions with the objective of addressing WPV against Iranian EMS personnel. It is therefore imperative that public education campaigns be implemented with the aim of clarifying the roles and responsibilities of EMS personnel. Moreover, anger management training for EMS personnel can equip them with more effective tools to navigate stressful situations. In addition to the aforementioned measures, addressing potential mental health issues among patients and companions, along with efforts to improve response times and service delivery, could further contribute to a safer work environment for Iranian EMS personnel.

A systematic review and meta-analysis methodology was employed in order to ascertain the prevalence of workplace violence against EMS personnel. The results indicated a concerning prevalence of WPV, with physical violence rates ranging from 22.58% to 60.39% across different regions. This study highlights the significant vulnerability of Iranian EMS personnel, particularly in the southern provinces.

These findings contribute to the global understanding of WPV against EMS personnel. The implementation of a multifaceted approach, which encompasses training for EMS personnel, the enactment of supportive policies such as an increased police presence, and the dissemination of public awareness campaigns, offers a framework for the creation of a safer work environment for Iranian EMS professionals. It is therefore imperative that measures be taken to ensure the well-being of these individuals, as this is of the utmost importance for the continued robustness of the emergency healthcare system and the effective delivery of care to communities.

### **3.3.3 On the Front Lines: Unveiling Workplace Violence against Pre-hospital Paramedics in Kerman, Iran**

The phenomenon of workplace violence (WPV) is a growing global problem, with an increasing prevalence in healthcare environments (Dehghan-Chaloshtari & Ghodousi, 2017). WPV encompasses physical, verbal, and cultural violence (Heydarikhayat et al., 2012). Physical violence encompasses actions such as beating or slapping, while verbal violence encompasses behaviors such as insulting and yelling. Cultural violence encompasses harassment based on ethnicity or language (Dehghan-Chaloshtari & Ghodousi, 2017; Emam et al., 2018; Pourshaikhian et al., 2016).

Health workers are particularly susceptible to WPV, which can significantly impair their self-esteem, work quality, and cause psychological and physical harm (Sheikhbardsiri et al., 2017; Hosseinikia et al., 2018; Jiao et al., 2015). Despite the significant risks faced by hospital and prehospital personnel, health systems often fail to ensure their safety (Hosseinikia et al., 2018; Maguire et al., 2018). Statistical data indicates that between 70% and 80% of healthcare workers experience violence on an annual basis (Dehghan-Chaloshtari & Ghodousi, 2017).

Emergency medical personnel, who are first responders in crises, are at heightened risk of violent assaults due to their work in unstructured, public, and high-stress environments (Bernaldo-De-Quirós et al., 2015; Iranmanesh et al., 2013; Petzäll et al., 2011). The prevalence of workplace violence against these personnel represents a significant threat to the emergency care system (Bigham et al., 2014). Factors such as working in isolated settings, handling valuable items, and proximity to patients in distress have been identified as increasing the risk of violence (Gormley et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016).

In a study published in 2019, Dadashzadeh et al. investigated the strategies employed by Iranian pre-hospital nurses to manage workplace violence (WPV). The study's findings indicated that these nurses received minimal training, lacked the necessary support, and were unprepared to handle WPV.

In a study conducted by Campo and Klijn (2017), the perception of verbal abuse among prehospital personnel in southern Chile was investigated. The results indicated that 51.4% of professionals and 46.6% of paramedical technicians had experienced verbal abuse in the past year, with 17.6% of technicians and 13.5% of professionals perceiving the abuse. In a similar vein, Alharthy et al. (2017) conducted a study in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, with the objective of assessing the prevalence of workplace violence (WPV) among emergency medical services (EMS) workers. The findings revealed that 65% of respondents had experienced WPV, with verbal abuse being the most prevalent form of violence, occurring in 61% of cases. The majority of perpetrators were patients' relatives (80%) and patients themselves (51%). In a similar vein, Lindquist et al. (2019) examined WPV among prehospital care providers in India, reporting an overall prevalence of 67.9%. This was further subdivided into physical violence (58%) and verbal violence (59.8%).

Despite the profound impact of workplace violence (WPV) and its deleterious effects, the issue has not been adequately addressed in the Iranian healthcare system. This study by

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Azami et al. (2018) examines WPV against prehospital paramedical personnel at emergency medical centers affiliated with Kerman University of Medical Sciences. The objective of this study is to determine the prevalence of workplace violence (WPV) against prehospital paramedical personnel at emergency medical centers affiliated with Kerman University of Medical Sciences. Furthermore, the study aims to identify differences in WPV levels and types based on demographic characteristics, key factors influencing WPV from the perspective of paramedical personnel, common reactions of paramedical personnel to WPV, and reasons for these reactions.

This cross-sectional study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences in 2019. The target population consisted of paramedical personnel from road and urban prehospital bases supervised by Kerman University of Medical Sciences. To ensure confidentiality, the questionnaires were anonymized and distributed and completed during working hours. A total of 223 questionnaires were returned, representing a 72.4% response rate after excluding incomplete and undelivered questionnaires.

In order to participate in the study, individuals were required to meet the following criteria: hold a bachelor's degree in nursing or an associate/bachelor's degree in prehospital emergency nursing; have at least one year of work experience in a prehospital emergency center; and demonstrate a willingness to participate. Those who did not consent or submitted incomplete questionnaires were excluded from further participation.

The data collection process entailed the administration of a questionnaire that had been developed following an extensive literature review (Amini et al., 2020; Dadashzadeh et al., 2019; Hosseinikia et al., 2018; Pourshaikhian et al., 2016; Rahmani et al., 2012; Sahebi et al., 2019). The Persian-language questionnaire was divided into four sections: demographic characteristics, an 18-item assessment of WPV on a five-point Likert scale, factors influencing WPV, and reactions to WPV. The content was validated by ten professors from Kerman University of Medical Sciences. A pilot study was conducted with paramedical personnel who were not involved in the main study in order to confirm the reliability of the instrument.

The study population consisted of 200 male participants, with the majority (47.5%) holding an associate degree in nursing. Verbal violence was the most frequently reported type of workplace violence (WPV), with 47% of respondents indicating this as the most prevalent form of violence they had experienced. This was followed by physical violence

(32.5%), and cultural violence (16%), with 4.5% reporting no violence. The primary factors influencing WPV were identified as a lack of public awareness regarding the duties of emergency medical personnel and a shortage of specialists in prehospital bases. The least significant factors were the lack of retraining programs for violence management and patient deaths. The majority of paramedical personnel (39%) reported no reaction to WPV, prioritizing patient and family rights. Conversely, 40.5% of respondents perceived violence as a normal occurrence in their workplace. A statistical analysis revealed that there were significant differences in the level of exposure to WPV based on age, work experience, and marital status. The analysis revealed that personnel who were younger, less experienced, and married reported higher exposure. The results of the multiple linear regression analysis indicated a negative relationship between WPV and age and work experience. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed that work experience had the most significant impact on the relationship between WPV and age. No significant differences were found for other demographic variables.

The majority of paramedical personnel responded to WPV by not reacting and respecting patient and family rights, as evidenced by the findings of Gates et al. (2006) and Tala et al. (2011). This non-reactive approach is likely due to the expected nature of violence from stressed patients and their families. A considerable number of respondents did not perceive WPV as a significant issue, viewing it as an inherent aspect of their role. This viewpoint is consistent with the findings of Alharthy et al. (2017) and Heydarikha-yat et al. (2012), which indicated that only a small percentage of respondents reported WPV incidents.

The study also demonstrated a negative correlation between WPV and both age and work experience. Older and more experienced personnel are better equipped with the skills to manage violence, including emergency scene and anger management techniques (Alharthy et al., 2017; Dehghan-Chaloshtari & Ghodousi, 2017; Ghasemi et al., 2009; Mozafari & Tavan, 2013). Those who were married reported a higher incidence of WPV than those who were single. This may be attributed to insults directed towards their family members, which can result in physical confrontations (Aghajanlou et al., 2010; Paryad et al., 2015).

In conclusion, these personnel, particularly those stationed in urban and road-based facilities within Kerman province, are at elevated risk due to their extensive workloads and frequent interactions with patients and their families. In order to address these challenges, it is of the utmost importance that the Ministry of Health and the Emergency and Disaster Management Center prioritize this workforce. This includes the provision of essential training and the implementation of national media campaigns designed to raise community awareness. Moreover, it is recommended that personnel with specialized skills be selected and that they complete comprehensive educational courses.

### **3.4 Beyond Fear: Unveiling the Complexities of Silence Among Sexually Harassed Nurses in Iran**

The nursing profession plays a pivotal role in healthcare delivery, providing patients with compassionate and skilled care. Nevertheless, nurses are confronted with a significant challenge that impairs their well-being and ability to perform their duties effectively: sexual harassment. This pervasive issue manifests in various forms, including verbal advances and physical assault, and has detrimental consequences for both nurses and the healthcare system (Yang et al., 2019).

A significant proportion of nurses globally are affected by sexual harassment, with estimates indicating that over half of the nursing workforce has experienced such behavior (Kahsay et al., 2010). Such incidents give rise to a hostile work environment, which in turn gives rise to stress, burnout, and a decline in the quality of patient care (Ali & Ezz El Rigal, 2016). Despite its prevalence, sexual harassment remains significantly underreported by nurses (Glenton et al., 2015). It is therefore of great importance to gain an understanding of the reasons behind this silence if effective interventions are to be developed to combat this issue.

A study by Zeighami et al. (2022) examines the underreporting of sexual harassment among nurses, with a particular focus on the Iranian context. The study employs qualitative research methods to investigate the subjective experiences of nurses in Kerman hospitals. The study examines the social, cultural, and psychological factors that prevent nurses from reporting incidents of sexual harassment.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 18 female nurses in Kerman, Iran, representing a range of ages, experience levels, and positions across various

hospital types and wards. The data collection period spanned from September 2020 to August 2021. The interviews sought to elucidate the nurses' experiences of sexual harassment and the underlying factors that prevented them from reporting these incidents.

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety, allowing for a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the data. The researcher conducted multiple rounds of listening and transcript review, identifying units of meaning within the participants' narratives. The units were then condensed while maintaining the core themes. The condensed units were then assigned codes, which were subsequently grouped into subcategories. Finally, the subcategories were aggregated into the major category, which constituted the foundation of the qualitative content analysis. The phenomenon of sexual harassment in the workplace is perpetuated by a pervasive culture of silence, which allows such incidents to continue unchallenged. This iterative process ensured a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the nurses' experiences and the factors contributing to their silence.

The study demonstrated that a significant impediment to the reporting of sexual harassment among nurses was the fear of social stigma. This stigma manifested in two ways: firstly, in negative perceptions of the nursing profession itself, and secondly, in disapproval of women who live independently.

The study demonstrated that stigma towards nursing was a significant factor in nurses' silence about sexual harassment. The participants reported experiencing negative attitudes and prejudice throughout their careers, beginning in university and continuing in the workplace. This stigma originated from a multitude of sources, including family, friends, acquaintances, and even the broader community. Some participants indicated that feelings of job insecurity contributed to their silence. The participants indicated that they were fearful of termination or hindered career advancement if they reported sexual harassment by doctors. In certain instances, the concern of losing one's position outweighed the motivation to voice concerns, particularly in private hospitals. Moreover, some nurses perceived a power imbalance with physicians. The participants posited that the dominance of physicians, coupled with the perception of nurses as having a lower level of education, contributed to a climate where abuse could occur.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, four criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (2018) were employed: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. The credibility of the study was enhanced through the process of peer



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checking, whereby two researchers independently reviewed the data for accuracy and consistency. Furthermore, member checking was conducted, involving discussions with participants to confirm that the researchers' interpretations (codes and categories) aligned with their experiences. Dependability was achieved through an external check by faculty members who reviewed the coding process and code acquisition. Finally, the transferability of the findings was enhanced by providing a clear and transparent description of the participant selection process, the data collection methods employed, and the overall analysis process. These measures collectively ensured the rigor and trustworthiness of the research findings, thereby allowing for potential application to similar contexts in the future.

Moreover, the stigma attached to independent living for women contributed to the silence surrounding sexual harassment. Those who lived independently (either away from family, widowed, or separated) reported experiencing abuse from both male colleagues and physicians. Female colleagues also demonstrated negative attitudes towards women who chose to live independently. The combination of social pressure and the fear of further judgment if they spoke out about sexual harassment led these participants to remain silent. A significant obstacle to breaking the silence on sexual harassment was the perception that organizational policies and legislation were inadequate. The participants expressed concerns about the lack of a formalized reporting protocol, the absence of dedicated complaint mechanisms, and a perceived lack of supervision by authorities to address these issues. Moreover, the absence of robust legal frameworks and limited awareness about the complaint process left many nurses feeling unsupported and unsure of their rights. This is exemplified by Participant No. 6, who attempted to report harassment but was discouraged by the head nurse, who cited a lack of relevant laws and support. These deficiencies fostered a sense of powerlessness and discouraged nurses from reporting incidents, perpetuating the cycle of silence.

The study identified family dynamics as a significant barrier to nurses reporting sexual harassment. A further key concern was the fear of restrictions on their independence. Some nurses expressed concern that reporting harassment would result in their families, particularly their spouses, confining them to the home or even preventing them from working.

Another concern was the potential for victim-blaming from family members. Nurses reported instances where they had confided in family members, only to be subsequently criticized or held responsible for the harassment.

Moreover, the study identified a lack of trust as a significant barrier to nurses reporting sexual harassment. Some nurses expressed concern that even confiding in close friends could have unintended consequences.

This finding is consistent with previous research conducted in Tanzania and Sri Lanka (Tollstern Landin et al., 2017; Adikaram et al., 2013; Adams et al., 2013), which found that nurses experienced shame and reluctance to return to work after harassment incidents. As previously observed by Adikaram et al. (2013) in Sri Lanka, social norms and expectations can contribute to this fear. The societal expectation of female respectability and purity can create an environment where victims feel responsible for the harassment, as evidenced by some nurses attributing their silence to shame and blame. These findings underscore the necessity to dismantle the social stigma attached to victims of sexual harassment. Research by Ross et al. (2016) underscores the necessity of addressing sexual harassment by considering broader societal and organizational factors that influence gender roles, power dynamics, and reporting behaviors.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, personal anxieties were also identified as a significant barrier to reporting sexual harassment. The study aligns with prior research by Adikaram et al. (2013), which highlighted the influence of cultural norms. The fear of social judgment, self-blame, and societal expectations can lead nurses to avoid using the term "sexual harassment" altogether (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2013). Moreover, the psychological impact of sexual harassment, as documented by Kim et al. (2015) and Tollstern Landin et al. (2017), can manifest as fear, anger, and a loss of trust, which further discourages nurses from reporting incidents. Furthermore, Maghraby et al. (2009) underscores the potential for a decline in self-confidence.

These findings underscore the necessity for a multifaceted approach. It is therefore of the utmost importance to address the personal and psychological impact of sexual harassment on nurses through the provision of professional counseling services. Moreover, the establishment of robust support systems for victims, including early intervention and effective coping strategies (Kim et al., 2015), is of paramount importance. Landin et al. (2017) and Adikaram et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of clear and efficient reporting

procedures. Finally, it is of the utmost importance that organizations implement clear policies, provide staff training, and implement robust enforcement mechanisms in order to prevent such incidents (Ross et al., 2016).

### 3.4.1 A Line Crossed: Exploring Nurses' Strategies Against Workplace Sexual Harassment

Although nurses play a vital role in healthcare, they are confronted with a concerning reality: sexual harassment in the workplace.

This pervasive issue manifests in various forms, including verbal advances and physical contact. Such incidents can originate from patients, families, colleagues, or even superiors. Aggregate data from numerous studies indicates a pervasive prevalence of sexual harassment against nurses, with rates exceeding those observed in other professions. Such experiences have a deleterious impact on nurses' mental and physical well-being, with the potential to give rise to job dissatisfaction and ultimately to a deterioration in the quality of patient care. This situation thus requires a more detailed examination of the causes and consequences of sexual harassment in nursing, in addition to the development of effective strategies to create a safer and more respectful work environment for our dedicated healthcare professionals.

To gain insight into how nurses navigate these situations, Zeighami et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative descriptive-explorative study utilizing conventional content analysis. This method permitted the researchers to gain insight into the lived experiences of nurses and identify recurring themes within their narratives. The study recruited 18 female and 4 male nurses from both public (affiliated with Kerman University of Medical Sciences) and private hospitals. Data collection involved the administration of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted between September 2020 and April 2021. The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 100 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed in full for in-depth analysis. The Graneheim and Lundman method was employed by researchers to code the interviews with the objective of identifying categories and subcategories that emerged from the nurses' descriptions of their coping strategies.

The study identified four key strategies employed by Iranian nurses to protect themselves from sexual harassment.

Additionally, behavioral responses were identified as a significant strategy employed by Iranian nurses to protect themselves from sexual harassment. Nurses described deterrent

behaviors, such as ignoring or acting sternly to discourage the harasser, maintaining professional boundaries, and avoiding jokes or excessive friendliness. Furthermore, some participants indicated that dressing modestly could serve as a preventative measure.

Furthermore, adjustments to working conditions were identified as a strategy. Strategies included modifying work environments (wards or shifts) to reduce contact with harassers and implementing scheduling adjustments, such as preferring female nurses for female patients or ensuring balanced staff combinations.

The act of informing is defined as the dissemination of information to a specific audience. It is of the utmost importance to provide education on sexual harassment. Effective strategies include academic education, in-service training to reduce workplace harassment, and early education during childhood. Nurses have indicated a need for training on how to handle sexual harassment, which is often not covered during their formal education.

In terms of hospital security, it is important to note that: The nurses found that legal action against harassers, the installation of cameras, and the prompt addressing of harassment reports were effective in deterring further incidents of sexual harassment. It was demonstrated that prompt intervention by security personnel was an effective means of preventing further instances of harassment.

In conclusion, this study offers significant and practical insights into the coping strategies employed by nurses to address workplace sexual harassment. The study identified four main strategies: behavioral response, working conditions adjustment, informing, and the performance of hospital security guards. These strategies underscore the necessity for nurse managers to take immediate and comprehensive actions to prevent and manage sexual misconduct against nurses.

In order to guarantee both legal compliance and the creation of safer work environments, healthcare managers and policymakers must design, develop, and promote robust guidelines.

Moreover, there is a pressing need for educational, interventionist, and preventative strategies to enhance the coping skills of nurses in handling sexual harassment.

### **3.4.2 Broken Trust, Broken Systems: The Urgent Need to Address Workplace Violence Against Iranian Healthcare Workers**

Building on the established knowledge of workplace violence (WPV) against healthcare workers (HCWs), a comprehensive study by Foroughian (2024) explores the specific

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experiences of HCWs in Mashhad, Iran. While global studies indicate a significant concern regarding one-year physical violence prevalence, ranging from 19% to 47%, a more nuanced understanding is necessary for this context.

The retrospective analysis included doctors (specialists and assistants) and nurses with at least one year of experience and a willingness to participate. The study employed a standardized World Health Organization (WHO) questionnaire, translated into English, to collect data on demographics, workplace characteristics, and experiences with violence in the past year. The section on violence encompassed verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence (inappropriate touching, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse), with the perpetrators categorized as either patients or visitors.

The findings indicated a significant prevalence of workplace violence against healthcare workers (HCWs). Half of all participants reported having been physically assaulted, with patients and visitors identified as perpetrators in equal numbers. Notwithstanding the absence of weapons, approximately half of the HCWs perceived such attacks to be a common occurrence. Moreover, no formal investigations or consequences for attackers were reported, and satisfaction with the control of physical violence remained low.

Verbal harassment was reported by nearly 87% of healthcare workers (HCWs). While the majority of respondents indicated that such incidents could be prevented, a significant proportion did not take any action in response. Coworkers were identified as the primary perpetrators of verbal harassment, and emotional distress was a significant consequence. A notable proportion of respondents expressed discontent with the measures in place to address verbal harassment.

Although less frequent than other forms of mistreatment, bullying and aggression affected nearly half of the HCWs surveyed. The primary source of verbal harassment was patients' companions, and a significant number of incidents were not reported. Similarly, a paucity of formal investigations and consequences was observed, and dissatisfaction with control measures remained high. It is fortunate that no cases of sexual violence were reported.

Gender emerged as a significant risk factor, with women experiencing higher rates of physical violence and bullying/aggression compared to men. It is notable that belonging to a minority ethnic group was associated with a slightly lower likelihood of physical violence, while a higher level of worry about violence was linked to a decreased chance of experiencing it. The presence of established reporting procedures appeared to facilitate

the reporting of incidents of physical violence. Moreover, women were three times more likely to experience verbal harassment and bullying than men.

In sum, this study highlights the urgent need for improved response mechanisms to address WPV against HCWs. The high prevalence of physical assault, verbal harassment, and bullying/aggression underscores the necessity for effective interventions and policies. It is of the utmost importance to address the specific vulnerabilities of women and minority groups in order to create a safer work environment.

In comparison to global studies, this research identified similar or higher prevalence rates of workplace violence. In this study, 50% of respondents reported experiencing physical violence, 87% reported verbal abuse, and nearly half reported bullying or aggression. It is noteworthy that instances of sexual violence were not reported. Gender emerged as a significant risk factor, with women more likely to experience physical violence and bullying, and men reporting higher rates of verbal abuse. These findings suggest the potential for cultural variations.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal studies, conducting comparative analyses across diverse healthcare settings, and evaluating intervention effectiveness. Moreover, it is of great importance to investigate the psychological consequences of violence, to explore cultural variations, and to examine reporting systems and leadership roles. Further investigation is warranted in emerging areas such as technology-based violence, intersectional populations, and educational interventions.

The alarming prevalence of violence against healthcare workers (HCWs) in the workplace underscores the urgent need for interventions and policies aimed at reducing these incidents. The implementation of evidence-based strategies by healthcare institutions can facilitate the protection of staff and the creation of a more positive work environment.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter reveals a pervasive issue that plagues healthcare systems in Iran: violence and harassment against healthcare workers. These incidents encompass a broad range of experiences, from the silent suffering of sexual harassment endured by nurses (Zeighami et al., 2022) to the overt violence faced by paramedics on the job (Sahabi et al., 2019). The consequences of such behavior are far-reaching, affecting not only the well-being of these essential workers but also potentially compromising the quality of care delivered to patients. The findings presented here underscore the urgent need for

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a multifaceted approach to addressing this global problem. Hospitals must assume a leadership role in fostering a safe work environment for their staff. This can be achieved through the implementation of clear anti-harassment policies, comprehensive training programs that equip staff with de-escalation techniques and self-defense skills, and the establishment of robust support systems to ensure workers feel comfortable reporting incidents (Zeighami et al., 2022; Emary et al., 2024). Public education campaigns also play a critical role in raising awareness and fostering respect for healthcare workers. Educating the public about the demanding nature of healthcare professions, the challenges faced by workers, and the importance of clear communication can contribute to a more supportive and understanding environment (Sahebi et al., 2019). Furthermore, additional research, particularly in regions where data is scarce, is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the specific cultural and social factors that contribute to violence and harassment against healthcare workers around the world. By acknowledging the global scope of this issue, fostering open communication, and implementing effective interventions, we can move towards the creation of safer and more respectful workplaces for all healthcare professionals. Ultimately, this will not only safeguard the well-being of healthcare professionals but also lead to a more positive and productive healthcare system, ensuring better patient care for all.

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