



Gender Disparity and Obstacles Faced by Female Musicians in Iran's Music Industry

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Abstract

Iranian female musicians face numerous obstacles that hinder their entry and growth in the music market despite having the potential to flourish. These challenges include limited access to resources, fewer performing opportunities, and societal biases that favor male artists. This study aims to investigate the gender-related challenges that women artists in Iran face, particularly emphasizing the significant inequities that exist for musicians. Combining qualitative data from in-depth interviews and document analysis with quantitative data from structured surveys, the primary study investigates the gender-related challenges that function as barriers to entry and prevent female musicians' active participation and success in Iran's art market. The objective also hopes to offer valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders regarding the promotion of gender equality and the provision of support for female artists in Iran, especially in the music sector. The research findings articulate four significant barriers to entry to the music market for Iranian female artists: cultural norms, societal pressures, economic concerns, and governmental rules.

Keywords: *Female Musician, Barrier to Entry; Music Market; Gender-Related Challenges; Cultural Norms*

Introduction

In January 2018, Ali Ghamsari, a popular Iranian musician, was banned from performing after a woman sang during one of his concerts. A month later, Iranian authorities banned the music of singer Hamid Askari, who is a very popular pop star. He allowed his guitar player onstage to actually sing solo. And it might seem just so common to anybody who's been to a western concert, but that's just not allowed. She's not allowed to sing solo. And so her microphone is cut off, and Hamid Askari still has

problems in terms of getting permits for a concert. I'll just show you a little sort of excerpt of this. And in May, Iranian singer Negar Moazzam was summoned to court for singing to tourists in the village of Abyaneh.

There has been much worry and discussion among academics, historians, art critics, and artists worldwide about the visibility of female artists and their contributions to the world of art, so that gender norms create a disparity between males and females, often disadvantaging women in their pursuit of personal and professional aspirations. These inequalities stretch significantly into the artistic world, where women face gender-based discrimination in artistic and cultural activities (Baer & Kaufman, 2008).

This is supported by the fact that art investors, art curators, auction houses, and galleries consider works of art created by male artists to be more deserving of endowments and patronage than works created by members of the "other" artistic community (Beauvoir, 1949, Patel, 2022).

The disparity is particularly pronounced in regions like Iran. The aftermath of Iran's Islamic Revolution imposed laws and norms limiting women's activities and violating earned liberties. In such an environment, women face severe restrictions on their pursuits due to governmental policies, Islamic regulations, and societal expectations. Although all artists are subject to legal repercussions for not adhering to Islamic regulations, for women these restrictions are particularly stringent, especially in the realm of music. The current example is prohibition of women from public singing, compared to men who are allowed to perform government-approved content. This stark discrepancy underscores the entrenched gender inequality within Iran's cultural landscape.

These situations, along other challenges, can become a compelling force, acting as barriers to entry, and leading emerging artists to contemplate alternative career paths. Barriers to entry are factors that limit the ability of new firms to enter the market and compete effectively with incumbents, ultimately influencing the structure and behavior of industries.

In the following study we aim to answer this question: What are the barriers to entry in the music industry for Iranian female musicians? The question will be answered by delving into the challenges faced by women in Iran and categorizing barriers into cultural, social, familial, economic, and organizational domains. These barriers not only significantly impede female artists' entry but also their participation and success. Accordingly, we hope to raise awareness and offer insights to policymakers and stakeholders, facilitating positive change in the landscape of gender equality within Iran's cultural sphere, with a focus on the music industry.

Art and Gender Disparity

Gender inequality in the arts can be traced back to historical barriers that barred women from pursuing artistic careers and training until the late nineteenth century. Throughout the world, women have been denied the right to access and participate in artistic and cultural activities. This inequality persists despite international human rights mechanisms that protect women's equal access to and participation in cultural expressions.

Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) establishes the right to access, participate in, and contribute to all aspects of cultural life. Furthermore, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees the right to free expression and opinion without interference (UNESCO, 2009; UN Human Rights, 1966). Despite these international protections, women face numerous barriers to entry into the art world, and their voices are frequently silenced by a combination of national laws that violate international human rights standards (Freemuse, 2020).

Freemuse has documented how gender-based discrimination against women in the arts and culture is institutionalized and enforced by both state and non-state actors. These discriminatory practices are frequently justified in the name of protecting tradition, religion, and morality. As a result, women artists must navigate ambiguous and difficult definitions of family values and morality, or risk severe consequences such as censorship, harassment, or even imprisonment (Freemuse, 2021).

Reports on the art market highlight the persistent barriers women face in achieving recognition and success. The contemporary art market reveals a significant gender gap, with female artists' works vastly undervalued in comparison to male artists'. From 2008 to 2019, only 2% of the \$196.6 billion spent at art auctions went toward works by women. Furthermore, research shows that women's artwork sells for 42% less than men's, owing to gender bias rather than differences in talent (Smith, 2019; Adams, 2018).

Despite the fact that there is a growing interest in female artists and that the prices of their works are increasing at a faster rate than those of male artists, which suggests that there may be a potential shift toward greater equity, there are still significant disparities that exist. In spite of the fact that there is a growing interest in female artists, this result has been observed. In order to gain valuable insights into the dynamics of the art market and to inform strategies to address gender inequality, it is possible to investigate whether this trend is driven by factors on the supply side or the demand side. This can be done in order to gain these insights. In order to acquire valuable insights into the art market, this is something that can be done (Köhler et al., 2019; Berkers et al., 2019).

Gender Barriers in Iran

These difficulties are especially evident in countries such as Iran, where underdeveloped infrastructure, deeply entrenched traditional gender roles, and restrictive Islamic laws further marginalize women. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of Islamic Jurisprudence), women's freedoms have been severely restricted (Keddie, 2006). The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023 ranks Iran 143rd out of 146 countries, indicating significant gender inequality. The statistics show that Iran's gender parity is deteriorating in four major subcategories: economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2023).

In the arts, Iran is one of the top 11 countries that restrict female artists. These challenges stem from traditional norms and gender roles, patriarchal values, religious beliefs and interpretations, and societal expectations of women's representation (Najmabadi, 2005). Since 2017, the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), a PEN America project, has received more urgent requests for assistance from Iranian artists than any other nationality, accounting for 12% of their total caseload (PEN America, 2022). The Iranian government recognizes and fears artists' ability to inspire Iranians to join the protest movement and raise global awareness of the atrocities committed in Iran on a daily basis. Samaneh Atef, an Iranian painter who has collaborated closely with ARC since 2019, described censorship in Iran as pervasive, stating, "We were raised in such a way that we were forced to censor our thoughts. We couldn't be our true selves (Atef, 2019).

Research emphasizes the importance of social and cultural factors in the flourishing of creative works, as well as how these elements can act as barriers to entry. Iran's social and cultural background presents significant challenges for artists and creative entrepreneurs, especially female artists. Iran is one of the top seven countries with the most censorship cases, and its theocratic regime continues to set the boundaries for acceptable artistic expression (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The power imbalance between men and women, reinforced by patriarchal public policy interventions, creates barriers to women's artistic expressions based on social morality. These regulations govern women's behavior, limiting their freedom of expression and movement, as well as their ability to freely pursue artistic endeavors (Nussbaum, 2000; Mahdavi, 2007).

The visibility of female artists in Iran's art scene is impacted by cultural norms and Governmental-Islamic rules, particularly those that pertain to the hijab, dress codes, and public behavior for women. Because of the pressures that society places on women in Iran, they are expected to prioritize their family and domestic responsibilities over pursuing their interests, which may include the arts. These expectations have the potential to discourage female artists from participating in the context of the art world. In addition, there may be legal repercussions for those who do not adhere to the rules found in Islam.

Furthermore, the high costs of equipment, facilities, and talent can serve as a significant barrier to entry. Furthermore, intellectual property rights can create barriers, with existing companies holding exclusive rights to their creations, limiting new entrants' ability to develop comparable offerings. Access to distribution channels is also a significant barrier, as established networks and contracts with distributors or exhibition venues can be difficult to break into. Furthermore, regulatory hurdles and the need for compliance with licensing and content regulations exacerbate the challenges that newcomers face, impeding their ability to enter and compete effectively. (Varzi, 2006; Khosravi, 2008; Mahdavi, 2009).

Music Sphere in Iranian Context

For the purpose of artistic expression and legal repercussions, all forms of art are impacted, but the impact is more pronounced in the realm of music. Ever since the Islamic Revolution, it has been against the law for women to sing in public, and women who act in soap operas are subject to stringent censorship, which prevents them from performing even the most fundamental actions, such as shouting or laughing out loud. When it comes to restricting cultural expressions and performances, local authorities in Iran frequently use their discretion, which results in the cancellation of a large number of concerts and performances. Shia religious leaders are particularly hostile toward female musicians because they are of the opinion that their performances take place in front of audiences that are comprised of people of both sexes violate Islamic principles (Nooshin, 2005).

Essentially, female musicians encounter significant limitations regarding the individuals they can collaborate and perform for. The difficulties women encounter is exemplified by prominent cancellations. For the past four decades, the prohibition on public performances has compelled singers and musicians who remained in Iran to relocate their artistic endeavors to private residences in order to evade legal consequences. They perform for acquaintances considered reliable at exclusive recitals, which remains an unlawful activity and can lead to complications. In order to gain a clearer comprehension of the matter, envision the circumstances that arose during the COVID-19 quarantine and the subsequent impact it had on singers and musicians. In reality, women have been subjected to a quarantine period lasting 40 years (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010).

Political promises to improve cultural rights frequently clash with the reality of local authorities' discretion, resulting in frequent cancellations of performances featuring women. Universities and the media also have strict regulations on women's artistic expression, further restricting their rights. Despite international commitments to gender equality, significant progress is lacking. However, ongoing protests by Iranian women continue to challenge these restrictions and call for greater rights and freedoms (Hemmasi 2010, 2011).

Overall, while male artists face challenges because free art is prohibited in Iran, they generally have more freedom and support to advance their careers. In contrast, female artists may face unique and greater challenges in expressing themselves artistically and advancing their careers than their male counterparts. These constraints have an impact not only on individual artist development, but also on the vibrancy and diversity of Iran's art scene, depriving both artists and the larger community of critical perspectives and contributions.

Datasets and Analysis

Our data are based on an initial sample of 10 female musicians who are active inside of Iran. For each artist, biographies, curriculum vitae, and other reference sources were consulted to determine the region of birth, ethnic identification, and gender for each artist.

Through in-depth interviews, participants were asked questions across nine distinct categories, including:

- Demographic Information
- Cultural Norms and Societal Pressures
- Economic Concerns
- Governmental Rules and Regulations
- Opportunities and Resources
- Support and Networks
- Personal Experiences and Stories
- Future Outlook and Recommendations
- Closing Questions

The categories tried to find out first, responses about societal expectations and family pressures. Second, participants' statement about the financial challenges of pursuing a music career as a woman. Third, instance of censorship and legal restrictions they have encountered or had to deal with during music activities. And finally acceptability and availability of music education and support networks.

Information shows that cultural norms have a significant impact on pursuing a career in music. One of the interviewees stated, "The cultural norms in Iran have significantly impacted my ability to pursue a career in music." She emphasized that society frequently requires women to prioritize their family and domestic responsibilities over their artistic aspirations. Other individuals expressed similar sentiments, describing how the expectations of family and community can discourage women from fully engaging in their music careers.

At the next step, economic challenges were recurring theme among the participants. Almost more than 50 percent of interviewees mentioned that the cost of equipment, training and musical production and instruments is remarkably high, and there are very few funding opportunities available for women, especially for newcomers. This is while families are more willing to support the son of the family than the daughter in music training process.

The next challenge was given to religious limitations, so that, women are not permitted to perform in front of audiences consisting of people of both sexes in Iran (Najmabadi, 2005). As a result, female musicians are restricted in venues and opportunities. As a result, many female musicians are forced to perform in private settings or segregated environments where their audience comprises solely females.

Discussion and Remarks

The combination of restrictions imposed by the government and religious beliefs creates an atmosphere that is hostile to female musicians in Iran. Not only do the restrictions restrict their capacity to perform and garner public recognition, but they also contribute to a more generalized perspective held by society that devalues the contributions that women make to the arts arena. 7 persons of interviewees emphasized on willing to leave the country or pursue their careers underground in the near future.

According to reports and interviews, one of the most significant restrictions that Iranian musicians face in the modern era is that they are required to obtain government permits in order to provide any kind of public performance. Furthermore, they are only allowed to perform in settings that are exclusively comprised of females or as part of a chorus with male singers in order to conceal their voices. Because of these restrictions, the careers of a great number of talented women are stifled, and they are forced to use pseudonyms in order to avoid public recognition.

In addition, the process of obtaining permits for concerts that feature female singers is fraught with challenges throughout the entire process. Bands are required to navigate complex regulations, and they frequently face permit revocations at the last minute, which render entire months of rehearsal and preparation null and void.

There have been reports that a concert performed in Iran was banned due to the presence of female musicians on stage. As an illustration, female members of the Isfahan National Orchestra were not permitted to perform in their city in the year 2018, and cellist Melanie Avanessian was not permitted to perform on stage in Tehran prior to the previous month.

In a different outcome, two of participants talked about their politically charged album. They were forced to quit, leave Iran, or hide, where they would face heavy risks. If they were to go back to their home country and these articles or videos got the attention of the police, they would be in great danger. Even though Nessa is well-known in the world of electronic music, she knows how hard it is to be a creative woman in Iran. "Because of Deep House Tehran, many people have asked me to be a DJ at an event, and whenever I've agreed, they've turned me down because I'm a woman. Even though I'm not dancing or doing anything, they don't like the idea of a woman being in the spotlight, even if I'm just standing behind the decks and mixing. "However, that doesn't mean people aren't doing their own thing," she says. "The people of Iran really do what they want, and they fight hard to keep things hidden." In Iran, women still perform, dance, make electronic music, and play DJ sets in the underground, where they face a lot of danger.

Table 1 shows the main concerns for females' musician based on collected data:

Category	Details
Government Permits and Regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Musicians need government permits for any public performance. • Women are only allowed to perform in all-female settings or as part of a chorus with male singers to obscure their voices. • Obtaining permits for concerts is difficult and subject to last-minute revocations.
Performance Restrictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerts have been banned due to the presence of female musicians • Example: Female members of the Isfahan National Orchestra and cellist Melanie Avanessian were barred from performing • Musicians like Ali Ghamsari and Hamid Askari faced bans for allowing female performances.
Legal and Social Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Musicians face bans, court summons, and other legal issues for including female performers • Example: Iranian singer Negar Moazzam was summoned to court for singing to tourists • Female musicians like AIDA and NESSA Azadikhah face risks of going underground or leaving the country.
Economic and Financial Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female musicians often need to be self-funded • Legal authorities must approve albums for publication, limiting income opportunities • Financial challenges are exacerbated by censorship and limited performance opportunities.

Impact of Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media has provided a platform for female musicians to showcase their talent despite restrictions • Example: Sepide Jandaghi and other vocalists share music online • Iran blocked Instagram accounts of female musicians in 2019.
Cultural and Societal Pressures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women face societal and familial pressure to prioritize domestic responsibilities over artistic pursuits • Female musicians navigate moral policing and societal discomfort with women in prominent roles • Fear of losing family, friends, and country leads to self-censorship.
Resilience and Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female artists show resilience by finding ways to express themselves despite restrictions • Strategies include symbolism, private spaces, international collaborations, advocacy (artivism), and online platforms • "Female Voice of Iran" documentary showcases their talent and determination.
Normalization and Public Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instances of women singing in public and informal settings are becoming more common despite official restrictions • Videos of women singing publicly circulate widely, challenging regulatory intransigence • The virtual presence softens the contours of officially regulated spaces.

Results

Interviews, reports, and literature in this field demonstrate the significant obstacles Iranian female musicians face in entering the music industry. Islamic society deeply roots economic problems, cultural norms, and legal implications as the main obstacles. Aspiring artists often consider alternative career paths to overcome these obstacles. We can classify barriers into the following categories: social, cultural, economic, family, and organizational components.

Cultural barriers to entry include cultural gender norms and traditional roles.

- **Gender roles:** From a young age, social and cultural norms determine gender roles and influence career choices and artistic activities. Cultural pressures prioritize traditional female roles over artistic ideals and discourage women from pursuing careers in art.
- **Traditional roles in music:** Traditional norms discourage women from singing and playing freely because they consider these activities more suitable for men and devalue female artists. This bias affects women's willingness to enter the music industry, leading to the marginalization of female artists and their work.
- **Assertiveness and self-promotion:** Because of socio-cultural norms, female musicians may struggle with assertiveness and self-promotion. This hinders their ability to defend themselves and advance their careers.

Family Barriers to Entry, Lack of Family Support and Resistance

- **Cultural expectations:** Families often prioritize family duties over women's artistic aspirations.
- **Safety concerns:** Families may resist supporting female artists for fear of social and legal repercussions, discouraging them from pursuing music careers.

Economic Barriers to Entry, Financial Problems:

- Depreciation of currency: Depreciation of Iran's currency poses a challenge to purchase tools and other essential resources.
- Income inequality: Female singers face economic challenges because they cannot independently release albums or perform to earn comparable income to their male counterparts. This inequality limits their knowledge and professional growth.
- Challenges of self-financing: economic challenges, despite motivations rooted in personal values and professional achievements, make it difficult for female artists to self-finance.

Organizational Barriers to Entry, Institutional Barriers

- Limited access: Institutional barriers, such as limited access to resources and inequalities, hinder women's career advancement despite their talent and potential.
- Censorship: Government policies and censorship further restrict artistic freedom and exacerbate gender inequality.
- Unequal educational opportunities: Unequal educational opportunities limit the prospects of female artists by affecting their ability to develop skills and establish their careers.

Cross factors, Socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and place:

- These factors intersect with gender dynamics, shaping the experiences of women artists and influencing the support and resources available to them.

Conclusion

The analysis of gender barriers facing female artists in Iran shows a complex interplay of cultural norms, social policies, family expectations, and organizational challenges. By comprehensively understanding these obstacles, it is possible to create targeted strategies to solve them and finally work towards a more inclusive and fair artistic landscape in Iran and beyond. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy reforms, societal changes in gender perception, and increased support for female artists. By creating an environment that values and promotes gender equality, we can enrich Iran's cultural landscape and ensure that artists, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to freely express themselves and succeed. The main goal is to foster a more diverse and inclusive artistic environment in Iran, challenge common standards, and enrich cultural expression and social progress.

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