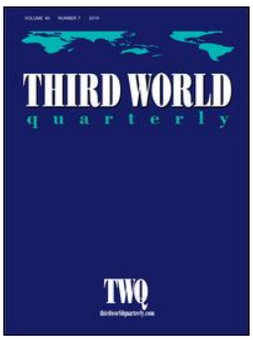

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# Registered NGOs and advocacy for women in Iran

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**ABSTRACT**

Registered women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Islamic Republic of Iran occupy a critical space in the socio-political landscape. They are neither government insiders nor anti-regime activists, instead advocating for incremental change within the constraints of the system. Drawing on interviews with NGO leaders, this article sheds light on the objectives and activities of five registered women's organisations as they work in the so-called 'moderate' political climate of the Rouhani government. The findings show that although the NGOs provide education and training, essential services, and recreational activities for women, they steer clear of seeking fundamental changes to laws on women's rights. This approach is predicated on security considerations. NGO activists are keenly cognisant of state sensitivities and the risk to their work, registration and liberty. The NGOs' reluctance to seek fundamental changes to laws concerning women's status reflects palpable anxiety amongst activists over the possibility of political backlash. Rouhani's 'moderate' politics do not appear to have relaxed tensions between the government and civil society, which were at their peak under his predecessor. The focus of contemporary NGOs on achieving behavioural, attitudinal and procedural change is significant, and has the potential to make a real difference in women's lives.

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## Introduction

Popular media and some academic literature tend to view Iran's political landscape through a dichotomous lens: one is either pro-regime and operating within the system, or an anti-regime activist calling for major socio-political upheaval. In reality there is a range of actors operating in a 'grey zone', where working in sanctioned spaces and working in unsanctioned spaces are not mutually exclusive. Registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Iran, known as *Saazman-e-Mardom Nahad* (people-based organisations), operate in a 'grey zone' that is neither fully outside nor fully under the control of government and the policy-making realms.

Iranian women's NGOs straddle the presumed dichotomies between government and civil society, confrontation and cooperation, and invited versus popular spaces of engagement. If they succeed in passing a legal registration process with the Ministry of Interior, NGOs are permitted to undertake a range of activities including charitable, professional and

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advocacy work. Consequently, the Iranian government's official view of the NGO sector fluctuates with changing administrations. The NGO community flourished under the presidency of Muhammad Khatami (1997–2005), who undertook a range of initiatives to increase the capacity of civil society to provide checks and balances on power. However, many were shut down during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013). Under the current leadership of President Hassan Rouhani, government encroachments into society have eased and women's NGOs have cautiously (re)-emerged.

Yet even registered NGOs are never far from the gaze of the security agencies and the politically conservative and risk-averse judiciary, which views NGOs as a cover for political dissent. Operating in the grey zone as a registered NGO does not necessarily offer protection against crackdowns. Registered NGOs can be deregistered and suffer persecution if the authorities deem them too 'threatening' to ruling mores. The constant threat of security crackdowns makes NGOs very conscious of the fine line they need to walk and makes them ultra-attentive to the way they operate. Rostami-Povey (2016, 28) has argued that even under the extreme confines of this operating environment, Iranian women's NGOs have played a critical role in sustaining demands for democracy, compatibility of Islam and modernity, and Islam and women's rights. Despite the importance of these claims to prospects for political and cultural opening in the Islamic Republic, the academic literature on Iranian women's NGOs is sparse and very little is known about them. This article aims to shed light on Iran's grey zone, through an exploration of how registered women's NGOs are advocating for women under the Rouhani administration.

## Approach to the research

We do not attempt to measure whether or not change has occurred as a (direct or indirect) result of NGO advocacy efforts. Rather, we seek to explore *the kind of change that is pursued* and the *type of activities aimed at achieving change* in a restricted operating environment where all-out legislative change is extremely rare. Here, we are drawing on Jones and Villar's (2008) suggestion that legal reforms are only one indication of progress, and that other crucial signs of change include shifts in attitudes (by affecting the awareness of decision makers or beneficiaries), behaviours (through programmes that make a real difference in people's lives) and procedures (such as spaces for dialogue and debate). Applying this conceptual framework to the Islamic Republic of Iran means that we need to be mindful of how security risks faced by NGOs frame the scope of activity and vision of social activism. The literature on the Iranian system of government has documented the closed nature of politics, yet NGOs continue to operate by walking a tightrope. Registered NGOs that pursue their activities in the open, and endeavour to affect social change without violating redlines set by the regime, manage to push for incremental change in public attitude and behaviour on specific issues while avoiding an ambitious agenda for legislative change that could subject them to crackdowns. This pragmatic choice to focus on issue-specific problems and work at the grassroots level for attitude and behavioural change has allowed registered women's NGOs to continue their operations to a large extent. But as this research revealed, the risk of arbitrary deregistration and closure is ever present.

We selected five case studies of registered NGOs that have advocated change for women under the Rouhani administration (below, we will discuss further the significance of being

a 'registered' versus an 'unregistered' organisation in Iran). Whilst there is a wealth of literature on NGOs operating under the Rafsanjani, Khatami and Ahmadinejad governments (see Kar 2014; Hoodfar and Sadr 2010; Pfau and Rial 2012; Pournik 2013; Rostami-Povey 2004), there is relatively little information presently available on the work of NGOs in Rouhani's Iran (two notable exceptions are Chubin 2020 and Rivetti 2020). This paper is a contribution to filling that gap. Focussing on the Rouhani era allowed us to take the pulse of NGO work in today's Iran. Where NGO activity was in its infancy under Rafsanjani (1989–1997), it flourished under reformist President Khatami (1997–2004) and was reduced to ashes under the hardline rule of President Ahmadinejad (2005–2013). Rouhani came to office in August 2013, elected on a platform of moderation. Has his so-called 'moderate' politics translated into a revival of the NGO sector and its ability to make change? This paper aims to shed light on that question.

Our reasons for focussing exclusively on registered NGOs are twofold. The first is analytical. We are interested in shedding light on how agents of change operate in Iran's grey zone, where they are neither government insiders nor anti-state activists. The second reason is practical. There is no single source, such as a government database, that lists all (registered and unregistered) NGOs in Iran. However, registered NGOs enjoy some degree of transparency and maintain an active online presence, thus facilitating research using secondary sources. But why focus exclusively on *women's* NGOs? The status of women is widely considered a blueprint for democracy. Women in Iran are among the Middle East's most educated, but continue to face severe discrimination in both law and practice. In the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, Iran scored near the bottom, ranking 148th out of 153 countries (World Economic Forum (WEF)) 2020, 9). And yet, as an extension of the vibrant Iranian Women's Movement, women's NGOs have been challenging institutional power in Iran for decades. Just as NGOs in general have proven to be a force for democracy in Iran – as demonstrated during the reform years (1997–2004) – women's NGOs specifically have been a force for gender-specific access and influence (Rostami-Povey 2004, 254). In a historical overview of the Iranian women's movement, Elaheh Rostami-Povey (2016, 28) argues that Iranian women's NGOs have 'played a crucial role in challenging the State, sustaining the demand for democracy, and raising the issue of compatibility of Islam and modernity, Islam and women's rights, and Islam and democracy'. We are interested in how, and how well, women's NGOs are challenging discrimination against women in Iran precisely because this provides some indication as to the progress of society as a whole.

We conducted this study in early 2019 using a combination of qualitative methods, namely qualitative analysis of the NGO websites, personal communication with the NGO leaders, and secondary analysis of other studies on Iran's NGO community. For the safety and security of the women we spoke with, we do not reveal any names. Our criteria for the selection of NGOs was twofold: they must maintain public information on a website (allowing access to information for research); and they must be engaged in policy- or issue-based advocacy concerning women's status, as opposed to being engaged exclusively in charity efforts. It is worth noting that this second criterion restricted the selection of NGOs significantly, as any simple Google search will indicate that most NGOs in Iran confine their activities to charity work. Issue advocacy is about raising awareness about a broad problem or issue, whereas policy advocacy goes further by analysing the cause of problems and helping to present solutions that will contribute to meaningful change (O'Connell, n.d., 6). In this respect, and as outlined above, we see change as occurring along a spectrum that includes attitudinal, behavioural and procedural change (as well as all-out legislative change) (Jones

and Villar 2008). Using our two criteria, we reached out to nine NGOs to ask whether they were willing and able to participate in our study. Of those, five accepted the invitation.[1] They are:

1. *The NGO Foundation*: Registered in 2004 under the Khatami administration, a group of four non-political and non-religious legal entities (in Canada, Greece, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Aims to support young women who are victims of sexual, physical or mental abuse by raising their self-worth and building practical skills for self-determination through online and in-person training programmes focussing on self-empowerment.
2. *The Mehr-o Mah Centre for the Empowerment of Women and Children*: Registered in 2012 under the Ahmadinejad administration in Tehran. Aims to improve the status of women and children who have experienced discrimination through education, empowerment and social work.
3. The *Hamian-e-Banovan-e-Sharif Forum*: Registered in Mash'had in 2013 under the Rouhani administration. Amis to provide training and consulting services to women, especially those who have been exposed to violence and trauma.
4. *Atena Foundation*: Registered in Tehran in 2014 under the Rouhani administration. Aims to promote quality of life for vulnerable and marginalised women and children in Iran through the provision of education and training.
5. *The Association of Women's Policy Planning Measures*: Registered in Tehran 2015 under the Rouhani administration. Aims to enhance women's leadership skills in the family, in society and in the workplace.

## Situating the study: the evolution of women's NGOs

An overview of the NGO landscape generally, women's NGOs specifically and the general condition of women's status since the Islamic revolution will help to contextualise our findings on women's NGOs in Rouhani's Iran.

The Iranian NGO sector is both formal and informal. Some self-described NGOs are not formally registered with the Ministry of Interior. Others undertake the formal registration process with the ministry and commit to following the regulations of NGO operation. Essentially, government regulations bind NGOs to limit their objectives to non-profit and non-political work. They cannot engage in any form of social or political activity that challenges, or can be construed as challenging, the state (Katirai 2005). There are advantages and disadvantages to achieving formal NGO registration in Iran. Unregistered NGOs deal with controversial issues and often lead the way in broaching taboo topics. The unregistered feminist group *Bidarzani* (Wake Up), for example, has a reputation for challenging domestic violence in Iran, in terms of both culture change and protesting patriarchal laws.[2] *Bidarzani* operates under difficult circumstances and its members have historically been targeted by security forces. Meetings are often held in secret and in private homes, rather than being publicised or held in public spaces.[3] Registered NGOs, on the other hand, are somewhat more constrained in terms of the issues they can broach and the scope of their work, lest they risk losing their legal entitlements. Many operate as charity organisations and do not

engage in advocacy work. Anecdotally, however, they enjoy a greater degree of freedom from government harassment and better access to resources.

The decades since the Islamic revolution have seen significant change in the NGO sector. Not only has the number of women's NGOs fluctuated since 1979, but there has also been a considerable shift in terms of their objectives and activities for change. Women's NGOs in the immediate post-revolutionary years were primarily focussed on service provision and promoting women's roles in the public sphere within the newly institutionalised Islamic framework. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic includes clauses on individual rights and freedoms, and recognises equality between men and women in conformity with 'Islamic criteria'. Exactly how those criteria are interpreted and applied has proved highly problematic for women.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini was notable for promising women's rights to participate fully and equally in Iranian society. In 1979, one week before returning to Iran from exile in Paris, he said: 'Women have taken part in the recent struggle in Iran to the same degree as men. [Therefore] we will give women every kind of freedom … there is no difference between men and women' (Hanna 2020). In reality, however, the Guardian Council – the body of clerics responsible for vetting legislation in Iran – used the wording of the Constitution to limit women's participation in society, rather than expand it. The new theocracy purged women from government positions; all women were forced to observe hijab (Islamic dress code); and family laws that protected women in marriage divorce, custody and inheritance were rolled back (Esfandiari 2010). In short, Khomeini's regime took strong measures to enforce its view that men were the 'breadwinners' who held a rightful place in public life, and women were homemakers and caretakers whose natural place was in the private realm.

The confines of the operating environment were exacerbated by the devastation brought on by an eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988). In the first decade of the Islamic Republic, therefore, a very small number of women's NGOs emerged, and they focussed on apolitical charity-based work (Khosravi and Shahsavari Fard 2016, 195). The *Bonyad-e Zeinab Kobra* (Zeinab Kobra Foundation, established 1979), for instance, formed as a charitable body to provide financial support for orphaned and disadvantaged children, and for women facing significant economic hardship. Iran's acceptance of United Nations Resolution 598 to end the Iran–Iraq War, and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1990–1998), represented the beginning of a new era in Iran known as the 'era of reconstruction'.[4] According to Rostami-Povey (2016, 28), the reconstruction period involved a 'move towards integration into the global economy, neo-liberalism, privatisation and "NGO-isation"'. In 1995 Fatemeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, the eldest daughter of President Rafsanjani, founded one of the most prominent NGOs in Iran, *Anjoman-e Hambastegi-e Zanan* (the Women's Solidarity Association, WSA). Fatemeh Rafsanjani's goal was to challenge common international perceptions that Iranian women were simply 'victims' of the revolution by finding creative ways for them to maintain space in public affairs. The WSA's perspective advocated that women's 'unique qualities' would allow them to contribute positively to society and social well-being (Entekhab News Agency 2013).

Fatemeh Rafsanjani's NGO emerged in a context where the government of the day took a pragmatic stance on women's roles in society. Hashemi Rafsanjani's government eased social controls over women and encouraged their participation in schools and universities. Perhaps most impactful on women's freedoms was the implementation of a national family planning programme that reversed the Islamic Republic's policy of encouraging large families

and curbed Iran's alarmingly rapid rate of population growth. The total fertility rate (the average number of births per woman) dropped from 5.6 in the early 1980s to 2.0 in 2000, and then to 1.9 births per woman in 2006 (Esfandiari 2010).

It was arguably due to these relaxations of restrictions on women's freedoms that women were able to play a determining role in bringing about Iran's experiment with reform in the late 1990s. In 1997 President Muhammad Khatami won an overwhelming victory at the election polls, ushering in a period of significant progressive change and an unprecedented expansion of civil society. One of Khatami's first moves as president was to establish the Office for Women's Participation and appoint well-known women's rights advocate Zahra Shojaei as his women's affairs advisor – thus signalling his government's recognition of the importance of addressing discrimination against women in Iran (RFE/RL 2005). Khatami's attitude on gender issues was summarised in a 4 July 2005 statement in Tehran, when he told Fars News Agency:

> We should have a comprehensive view of the role of women and before anything else, should not regard women as second-class citizens. We should all believe that both men and women have the capability to be active in all fields, and I emphasize, in all fields. (RFE/RL 2005)

Drawing on data from the Ministry of Interior in Iran, Saeidi claims that the number of women's NGOs rose from 13 in 1976–1986 to 158 registered and an estimated 92 unregistered NGOs by 2000 (Saeidi 2005, 30). Lawyer Mehrangiz Kar has argued that in this time women's NGOs 'took on a more active role in addressing the needs of society and women' and shifted their focus from charitable activities and service provision to advocating for women's human rights (Kar 2014). Poya's (1999, 260) research echoes this claim and shows that during the Khatami years, women's NGOs contributed to important reforms relating to marriage, divorce, custody and women's right to work as judges. *Markaz-e Farhangi-ye Zanan* (the Women's Cultural Centre), for example, which was formally registered on International Women's Day (8 March) in 2001, pursued a multi-faceted agenda to raise awareness on women's rights and oppose discriminatory laws. Goli Emami (2005, 3), former General Manager of Farzan Publishing House, recounts an instance where protests held by the Women's Cultural Centre against a film that appeared to promote polygamy prompted Iran's state television network to reconsider its programming: '[The protests] proved so influential that later, state television held its own roundtable debating the ethics of polygamy'. In the later years of the reform movement, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh founded *Anjoman-e Rooznameh Negaran-e Zan* (the Association of Women Writers and Journalists) to support women journalists and media personalities who were left unemployed after a backlash against civil society. Abbasgholizadeh organised projects and exhibitions that showcased the work and contribution of women journalists. She unapologetically raised the issue of women's right to work and the undemocratic nature of the media outlet closures (Rostami-Povey 2004).

Indeed, even under the relative freedom experienced under Khatami's administration, women's NGOs faced significant constraints that inhibited their capacity to achieve deep change (Saeidi 2005, 33). Drawing on her own experience as a lawyer and women's rights activist, Kar (2014) believes there were several issues confronting the women's NGO sector during the reform years. These included internal problems such as lack of expertise and an absence of well-defined goals (especially on issues such as violence against women, legal rights and criminal justice), along with external problems such as a long and arduous registration process and a lack of government neutrality, which undermined the NGO sector's

development and threatened its independence (Kar 2014, 316). These challenges were exacerbated following the election of hardline figure Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Ahmadinejad took a hardline position against political and social reforms, and according to Esfandiari (2010) the momentum for women's empowerment that had been building during the period of reform 'virtually evaporated'. Ahmadinejad signalled his stance on women when he renamed the Office for Women's Participation, henceforth to be known as the Office for Women and Family Affairs. His government closed down *Zanan*, the country's leading feminist magazine, and removed the budget for family planning (Esfandiari 2010).

Furthermore, Ahmadinejad referred to NGOs as a 'Western phenomenon' and a risk to national security, and actively sought to suppress their activities by stopping government funding that had been provided to civil society organisations under the Khatami administration (Freedom House 2018). Many NGOs were forcibly closed down and their employees arrested. Private funders withdrew their support, and the volunteer population, so crucial to NGO operations, diminished due to fear of retribution. Amongst the most notable NGOs that met their demise during this period of social oppression were the Centre for the Defenders of Human Rights, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner and leading women's movement figure Shirin Ebadi. In fact, in the months and years following the Green Movement uprising of 2009, which protested the controversial re-election of Ahmadinejad for a second term, Ebadi and a swathe of other prominent women's rights activists were forced into 'voluntary' exile.

Since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in June 2013, the situation for civil society actors has eased to some extent, and women's NGOs have experienced a cautious resurgence (Barlow and Akbarzadeh 2018). Rouhani was elected on a platform of political 'moderation'. According to Esfandiari (2010), early in his first term Rouhani was able to rein in the powers of the police and went so far as to instruct them to enforce the law rather than Islam. In 2013 he secured the release from prison of eight women's rights activists, including Nasrin Sotoudeh, a renowned human rights lawyer and close colleague of Shirin Ebadi. This was widely interpreted as a strong signal of Rouhani's more tolerant stance on gender equality compared to that of his predecessor, Ahmadinejad. In 2015 Tehran-based writer for the *Financial Times* Monavar Khalaj (2015) claimed that Rouhani was taking a 'softer stance' towards the NGO sector, leading to a 30% increase in NGOs since the previous year, taking the number of registered NGOs to 7000. And in July 2019 Vice President of Iran for Women and Family Affairs Massoumeh Ebtekar publicly emphasised the importance of women's NGOs in different stages of policymaking and decision-making processes in Iran.

Khalaj conceded, however, that most of the registered NGOs in Rouhani's Iran were focussing on 'health, environment and entrepreneurship – avoiding more controversial topics such as human rights' (Khalaj 2015). Registered women's NGOs are neither anti-regime activists, nor government insiders. They are working from the 'bottom up' (at the grassroots) and on the 'inside track' (in sanctioned and invited spaces) towards incremental change within the constraints of the system. And those constraints are very real. Despite Rouhani's apparently 'softer stance' towards civil society, the administrative and security hurdles that confronted women's NGOs during the Ahmadinejad years remain. There are no independent laws to govern the operation of NGOs or guarantee them certain rights. Anecdotally, there are still exceedingly long wait periods for registration, and heavy surveillance operations remain in place.[5]

Reports received by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran 'demonstrate a continued trend of restricting freedom and ongoing discrimination against … women' (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2019, 3). Such restrictions include the presence of security forces at, and close monitoring of, women's meetings and protests, and in online gatherings and networks. According to the 2019 Iran Country Report from the United States Bureau of Democracy, Rights and Labour, 'Judicial harassments, intimidation, detention and smear campaigns significantly challenged the ability of civil society organisations to fight for and protect women's rights' (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2019, 40–41). Arrests, trials, and long prison terms for women activists and advocates have continued under the Rouhani government. In 2018, in fact, Sotoudeh was re-arrested and sentenced to 148 lashes and 38 years in prison for her work defending women who protested hijab.

In the following section we turn our attention to case studies of five NGOs in Rouhani's Iran, exploring their core objectives and activities for change. Our findings suggest that although Rouhani was elected on a platform of political 'moderation', his presidency has not led to an all-out relaxation for the NGO sector. Fears of crackdown and security repercussions still govern NGO activities. The women's NGOs in this study provide essential services to some of Iran's most vulnerable and marginalised populations, but they stop short of pursuing systemic change for women's status, for fear of retribution.

## Women's NGOs in Rouhani's Iran: strategies, objectives, context and constraints

The arrival of Hassan Rouhani to office lifted some of the extreme restrictions on women's activism that characterised Ahmadinejad's presidency. Iran has witnessed a gentle re-emergence of women's NGOs, even though the judiciary remains hostile to them. This revival, however, has not translated into a return to the overt activism that signified NGO activity during the reform years. NGOs are never far from the gaze of the security agencies and the politically conservative and risk-averse judiciary, which views NGOs – registered and unregistered alike – as a cover for political dissent. Operating in the grey zone as a registered NGO does not necessarily offer protection against crackdowns. Registered NGOs can be deregistered and suffer persecution if the authorities deem them too threatening. When we asked the NGO leaders what they saw as their biggest challenges, the unpredictability of the political landscape was a common response (personal communication with Mehr-o Mah Centre, Sharif Forum February 2020).

*Bonyad-e OMID-e Mehr* (the OMID Foundation), for example, was deregistered in August 2019, only a few months after we spoke with their leaders about this research. In a follow-up interview, OMID leadership lamented that since deregistration, 'the government has engaged in a campaign to portray OMID as an agent of Western interests in Iran' (personal communication with OMID Foundation). This is a typical experience, with far-reaching impact. Registered NGOs have worked deliberately and carefully to stay away from sensitive political issues. The OMID Foundation was registered in 2004 under the Khatami administration. Founded by Marjaneh Halati, a London-based social psychologist and psychotherapist, the OMID Foundation was 'a group of four non-political, non-religious legal entities' in Iran, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States that collaborated to support Iranian women who had suffered physical, mental or emotional abuse (OMID Foundation 2019).

The Iran programme included awareness-raising activities, training and education programmes, and support services for women in Tehran. The training and education programmes were broad in scope, and included classes on information technology, English language, graphic arts, accounting, tourism, creative writing, family planning and financial literacy. Tehran's OMID Foundation also hosted recreational activities designed for team-building and to improve women's self-confidence. These includes martial arts classes, mountaineering trips and athletics programmes.[6] The deregistration of the OMID Foundation's Tehran office came without any warning and demonstrates the uncertain and arbitrary environment within which NGOs operate (Afshin-Jam 2019).

The constant threat of security crackdowns makes NGOs very conscious of the fine line they need to walk and makes them ultra-attentive to the way they operate. For instance, the NGO leaders we spoke with identified cultural sensitivity as a major inhibiting factor in their work, especially regarding women's bodies and sexuality (personal communication with the OMID Foundation and Mehr-o Mah Centre, February 2020). Furthermore, the NGOs in our study all frame their target beneficiaries as 'victims', 'marginalised', 'disadvantaged' or 'vulnerable'. This framing of women and the consequent focus on assisting those in need is crucial and commendable, but also far less threatening to those in positions of power than it is to frame women as powerful social agents with the capacity to fundamentally transform family, social, economic and political life at large. To ensure they are not seen as a threat, most registered NGOs seek to work with relevant government agencies, often city municipal offices, state welfare organisations, the police and the judiciary. According to the Sharif representative: 'this is our insurance. We have to show the authorities that we want to work with them. That we are not against them' (personal communication with Sharif Forum).

*Moasese Kheirieh Erteghaye Keifiate Zendegi-e Zanan- Atena* (the Atena Foundation), for example, focuses on empowering 'vulnerable and marginalised women and girls' in Tehran through education and training programmes. The Atena Foundation was formally registered in 2014 under the Rouhani administration. The foundation's health and well-being workshops are targeted to women struggling with addiction issues. The foundation's 'marriage workshops' are open to all unmarried women and focus on the prevention of early marriage (Atena Foundation 2020). The Atena Foundation's 'Purple Girls' Project' specifically supports girls 12 to 18 years old who come from female-headed households of lower socio-economic status. The participants are nominated by their schools and have the opportunity to engage in life-skills classes, with a focus on financial literacy (Atena Foundation 2020).

Financial literacy, in fact, emerged as a major theme of NGO activities in our research. Over the course of Rouhani's presidency, political tensions between the US and Iran and strict sanctions have targeted Iran's economy (see Dubowitz and Nader 2020). More recently, the 2019–2020 nationwide protests in Iran, which initially occurred following the 50% fuel price hike, have revealed some degree of instability in the country. According to one NGO leader: 'Poverty rates are increasing in our country. The middle class is getting poorer and our target community is getting bigger, but we are unable to keep up with demand'. The NGO leaders we spoke with identified extreme financial difficulties as one of the main problems inhibiting their work (personal communication with Mehr-o Mah Centre, and Sharif Forum, February 2020).

Like the Atena Foundation, *Anjoman-e Nirouye Tadbir-e Zanan* (the Association of Women's Policy Planning Measures) runs capacity-building classes for disadvantaged women. The association was registered in 2015 under the Rouhani administration, and aims to increase women's leadership in the family through programmes on financial literacy, mental health

and well-being, and parenting skills. The association focuses primarily on supporting single mothers to gain financial independence (Women's Policy Planning Measures 2018).

*Anjoman-e Hamian-e Banovan-e Sharif* (the Hamian-e-Banovan-e-Sharif Forum) provides support services to victims of domestic violence in the city of Mash'had, in Iran's north-east (Hamian-e Banovan-e Sharif Forum 2019). Formally registered in 2013 under the Rouhani administration, the Sharif Forum runs skills-based training for women who have escaped abusive relationships, including sewing and embroidery classes, which aim to support women towards self-employment. The Sharif Forum also provides free health checks and counselling services for domestic violence victims. Government statistics indicate that 66% of Iranian women have experienced domestic violence at least once in their lifetime (Radio Zamaneh 2018). Of those, 37.8% have experienced physical violence, 52.7% have experienced psychological and verbal abuse, and 27.7% have been prevented from participating freely in education, employment and social life (Psych News 2018). In 2017 a draft bill criminalising domestic violence was approved by the government. It is now awaiting judicial confirmation before being taken to a parliamentary vote. If passed, the bill will transform the policy landscape surrounding domestic violence in Iran by specifying that all forms of violence are included in the definition of 'domestic violence' and that violence against women is punishable by law. The bill specifies a range of measures that the government will undertake to address domestic violence, including working with civil society organisations to develop and improve emergency response mechanisms and public education around the issue (Khaneh Amn, 2017). Shahnaz Sadjadi, an assistant to Iran's Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, has recently said that after the death of 14-year-old Romina Ashrafi, who was a victim of honour killing on 21 May 2020, the bill has been given priority by the government (Shahrara News 2020).

Finally, *Moasese Tavanmand Sazi-e Zanan va Koodakan-e Mehr-o Mah* (Mehr-o Mah Centre for the Empowerment of Women and Children) works with ethnic minority and migrant women and children in the poorer areas of Tehran, including Farahzad, providing a range of education and training programmes on English language and literacy, anger management, parenting skills, and – like the other NGOs in our study – financial literacy (Mehr-o Mah Centre for the Empowerment of Women and Children, 2019). Mehr-o Mah was registered in 2012 during the Ahmadinejad administration. In addition to their capacity-building programmes, they also provide support services to those most in need, including distribution of food packages, and free health checks and counselling with volunteer doctors, psychologists and social workers who are present at the institute on a regular basis (Mehr-o Mah Centre for the Empowerment of Women and Children 2019, 19). Like the OMID Foundation (when it was still active), Mehr-o Mah hosts recreational events designed to build women's self-confidence and provide space for dialogue, including informal women's gatherings in Mash'had and camping trips outside the city. According to the representative of Mehr-o Mah 'women need their own spaces to support each other, but this can be risky because people might think we are gathering to talk about the government' (personal communication with Mehr-o Mah). Finding spaces for women's expression and dialogue is not easy; that is why private residences are often the easiest option for small groups. Each NGO leader that we spoke with identified a lack of public space for women as a major factor inhibiting their work (personal communication with Mehr-o Mah Centre, OMID Foundation and Sharif Forum, February 2020). This may be why several NGOs in our study include coordinated recreational activities in their programming.

## Conclusion

For those NGOs that make it through the arduous registration process in Iran, this status provides some freedom to work within the system. Yet their status as registered NGOs is tenuous and very much reliant on their ability to steer clear of issues that may be seen as political by the authorities. The registered women's NGOs in this study have been very conscious of the redlines. They have avoided engaging in the challenge around institutional access and influence for women, instead providing education and support services for those most desperate and in need.

The core activities of the five registered NGOs examined in this research fall into three broad categories:

- *Education and training*, focussing on capacity-building in a wide range of areas, with a strong focus on financial literacy.
- *Support services*, such as health checks and counselling.
- *Recreational activities* designed to increase women's self-confidence, enhance team-building, and provide safe spaces for women to discuss issues of importance to them.

The target beneficiaries of those programmes similarly fall into three broad categories:

- Victims of violence.
- Single mothers.
- Ethnic minority and migrant women.

A focus on supporting those who are most vulnerable and marginalised in the community is, in some ways, a return to the more benign kinds of activities that women's NGOs undertook in Iran's pre-reform years, and the benign nature of the above programmes contrasts sharply with the more controversial grassroots initiatives for progressive change in Iran that have targeted the Islamic legal code through re-interpreting Islam's holy texts (see Afshar 2002; Mir-Hosseini 2006; Najmabadi 1998), or advocating international human rights standards (see Moghissi 1993; Mojab 2001; Barlow 2012). The move away from pursuing controversial rights-based or democratic reforms can be largely explained by anxieties within the NGO community over the ever-present but unpredictable prospect of backlash against their activities. The historical precedents discussed in this paper show that such backlash always has the potential to include harsh measures such as harassment, arrest and persecution. This is the case *even within* the operating environment of a self-proclaimed 'moderate' government, and *even for* those operating above-board as licensed organisations. Rouhani's 'moderate' politics do not appear to have relaxed tensions between the regime and civil society.

However, this is not to say that the work of registered NGOs in Rouhani's Iran is insignificant, or non-impactful. To the contrary, although the NGOs we examined were unable to set their sights on higher-order systemic change (including legislative change), they appear able to contribute substantially to attitudinal change – by affecting the awareness of their target beneficiaries; behavioural change – by implementing programmes that make a real difference in women's everyday lives; and procedural change – by providing important and safe spaces for dialogue amongst women. Furthermore, the ongoing work of the NGOs we

examined demonstrates the stamina and tenacity of Iranian women advocates in a highly constrained operating environment, where challenges around cultural sensitivity, prohibitions on women's gatherings, and political backlash are an ever-present reality.

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## Notes

1. The four remaining organisations that were unwilling or unable to participate in our study were: Mehr-Taha, the Centre for Women's Citizenship, the Institute of Young Seedlings, and Hami: Association for Protection of Refugee Women & Children.
2. Bidarzani is a combination of Bidarsazi (Awakening) and Zan (Woman), which expresses the group's aspiration to awaken society to gender discrimination and women's issues. For more information see Bidarzani, 'Home', https://bidarzani.com/
3. Personal observations of the authors.
4. The term is used by Rafsanjani's supporters to describe his economic adjustment programmes and policies after the eight-year-long war with Iraq (1980–1988). This has been discussed at length in other works. See Hossein Azimi, 'Madarhay-e toseeh nayaftegi dar eghtesad-e Iran' [The Circles of Underdevelopment in the Economy of Iran]; Elaheh Koolaee & Yousef Mazarei, 'Modernisation and Political Parties.
5. Personal observations of the authors, who are in contact with a range of registered and unregistered Iranian women's NGOs.
6. This information is no longer available on the OMID Foundation's website, due to the shutdown.

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