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## **Societal Security of Iranian Women: A Challenge of Subjectivity vs. Objectivity**

By Hamid Sajadi<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Critical theories in the field of security have revealed the incompatibility of government-based approaches to security studies and the nature of domination and repression structures in society. The Copenhagen and Welsh Schools of security studies have made many attempts to reconceive the concept of security and security studies by criticizing the neglect of domestic security issues and the ignorance of the community and individuals. The formation of the concept of societal security, and in particular women's security, is one of the achievements of these theoretical developments. Assuming that the acceptance of new approaches in developing societies is strongly influenced by the norms of the political systems, the present article aims to identify the formulation of women's societal security in Iran. Adopting a critical approach, the author discusses how the concept of women's societal security in Iran is constructed and tries to explain how the Iranian political system deals with the issue of women's societal security. Data has been collected from secondary resources including books, papers, and archive collections of online newspapers in the last ten years. By systematically reviewing the sources and classifying the main themes, the author identifies the accepted and suppressed components in the area of women's societal security and in relation to the governing institution. The research results indicate the existence of a relationship between women's societal security model and the governing ideology, power, and institutions. The findings reveal how the traditions and the political system have manipulated the concept of women's security to achieve their own objectives by accepting and caring for some insecurities, marginalizing and abandoning a range of other insecurities, and suppressing or completely rejecting some aspects of insecurity. Ultimately it is concluded that the concept of women's societal security in Iran is shaped by the objectivity of women.

*Keywords:* Women's security, Value system, Police, Societal security, Objectivity, Subjectivity, Critical approach.

### **Introduction**

Critical theories in the field of security have revealed the inconsistency of government-based approaches to security studies. Subnational groups and individuals have made many attempts to revisit the concept of security and the field of security studies, criticizing the neglect of security issues and the ignorance of communities (Buzan 1991; Booth 1991; Buzan et al. 1998). Taking security out of the narrow confines of the external military approach, the introduction of societal security and individual security concepts, as well as the formation of the concept of women's security are among the achievements of these theoretical developments. In

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the new approach to security, theorists focus on individuals or groups who, in the state-centered approach to security studies, were marginalized and suppressed. In this regard, Buzan and Wæver defined societal security as the ability of society to maintain its core characteristics in changing circumstances or before potential or real threats (Buzan et al. 1998). With this explanation, the security of society is achieved when individuals, groups, and subcultures can easily express themselves and maintain and voice their ideas, desires, and values. In this context, the important issue in security will be the definition of a threat by society (Buzan & Wæver, 2003)

Although identity is only one of the most threatened values in the context of societal security, the definition of societal security and insecurity requires an answer to the question of ‘what concerns the social group in question has, and which of those concerns is of central importance?’. One group may be concerned with identity and another group may seek economic prosperity. In fact, considering identity threats as the only existential threat to society cannot be a convincing explanation for the wide range of security threats with a social aspect (McSweeney, 1999). The development of societal security concerns has been a big step towards the subjectivity of society; society has taken on the role of defining and explaining security. Theorists also considered other synonyms for this core concept such as the threat of cultural homogeneity or the threat to the welfare of the country as the basic nuclei of society. In this sense, societal security provides the proper analytical power to assess the factors that may pose a threat and potentially lead to a violent confrontation.

Critical security theory emphasizes the need to shift security studies from focusing on the military aspect of the government’s behavior to individuals, society, and identity (Smith, 2006: 43). The Welsh School adopts this approach with the aim of exposing the political nature of the construct of security which dominates the traditional security agenda. Hence, the best way to conceptualize security is to emphasize individuals and social groups instead of the state, and to define security in terms of emancipation. This perception of emancipation emphasizes the thoughts and struggles of people and social groups in different parts of the world.

In this context, Kenneth Booth criticized the exclusive authority of the state in the notion of security, which was the basis of realism, and underlined the concept of ‘human emancipation’ and defined humankind as the reference of security (Smith, 2006). He explained that the security of the state does not equal the security of citizens; he claimed that states do not care about the security of all citizens and they can even become the greatest threat to their own people (Sheehan, 2005). In critical security studies, the ‘referent object of security’ (distinction between security for states, elites, and societies) is the individual and social groups; the ideal is that security should be created with the free participation of individuals and groups without being subjected to human and physical constraints (Jacoby and Sasley, 2002).

Formulating a sense of security—as a subjective aspect accompanying its objective aspect—has had an important impact on highlighting the subject in security studies. Besides, the emotional aspect of security is defined as the feeling of freedom from fear, or the feeling of security, which is considered one of the two conceptual foundations of security (Mandel, 1994; Schneier, 2008). The change in security theories in society, the one’s personal “feeling” of security are a good basis for assessing the security and of women in different societies and in this case study of Iranian society in particular. This makes it possible to draw a model for women’s societal security in relation to ideology, power, and institutions. Therefore, identifying a range of factors related to women’s security and insecurity is a good basis for identifying the value system that limits and defines women's security in Iranian society.

## **Women's Societal Security in Iran**

The results of research in the field of societal security in different communities indicate the different vulnerabilities of social and gender groups in the face of threats and insecurities. For example, according to Stanko's Theory of Fear of Crime, women are three times more afraid of crime than men. This difference is explained by various reasons such as women's physical strength, early life experiences, maternal duties, fear of the outside world, and their other reasonable fears (Stanko, 1995). In line with this general approach, in the case study of Iran, gender has been raised as the most influential variable in the feeling of insecurity. Women feel more insecure than men in the face of social harm and threats in society and more vulnerability has been recorded (Lerni, 2004; Danesh et al., 2015). Confirmation of the relationship between these two factors in several studies indicates the need to pay more attention to women's security.

Security is presented in two dimensions: objective and subjective. The objective dimension emphasizes external, observable, and measurable conditions, and the subjective dimension is more internal, perceptual, and emotional, and must be measured through certain measures. The objective threat is defined as the insecurity and fear felt in various circumstances like when alone on the street, especially at night, passing by empty and semi-constructed spaces in the city, poor economic situation, street harassment, spousal abuse, and domestic and physical violence (Bemanian et al., 2009; Bayat 2009, 119). Women's insecurity in the subjective approach refers to the threat of values and the feeling of fear that such values will be attacked, including the fear and threat to legitimate rights and freedoms, confidence and peace of mind, experience of insecurity and crime, the feeling of vulnerability, fear of harassment outside home, fear of crime, lack of trust in strangers, and hearing bad news about harassment and abuse of women and girls. In other terms, security in the subjective approach means peace of mind for women from a range of insecurities, including fear of rape, sexual assault, or violence within urban spaces (Azam et al., 2016).

In general, women's sense of security and societal security can be expressed concerning a wide range of variables and economic, health, environmental, cultural, political, legal and judicial, occupational, emotional, moral, and financial factors. Iranian women's societal security is also closely related to ideology, power, and institutions, and its mapping requires identifying the area of influence of the political system on societal security. Which definition of societal security in the context of women is politically viable and which definition is rejected or suppressed is a guiding question. By identifying the extent of women's societal insecurities in Iran, the excluded and the marginalized components are drawn based on traditional values and political system.

## **Sources of Insecurity**

In a general view, the concept of women's security in Iran is put forth and developed under the general concept of the safety of society, so it is very similar to security in the social, economic, and cultural aspects. Variables of insecurity are defined quantitatively and based on statistics. These variables include kidnapping and murder, internal conflicts, crime and delinquency rate, drug distribution and use, armed robbery, coercion, individualism, intense competition, inequality in opportunities for living, disruption of social norms, inflation and the rising cost of living, job insecurity, and uncertainty about living expenses; these are all social and economic issues. Recognizing the insecurities of this area, the country's security managers,

especially the police and the Ministry of Interior, have put confronting them at the top of their agenda.

In addition to this general aspect, certain factors are identified and addressed exclusively in the field of Iranian women's security in society, such as peace of mind or women's feeling of fear and anxiety in the community, fear of sexual and physical harassment in the public, fear of victimization, fear of theft, child deception, assault, and fear of rape, feeling of threat by others, harassment in the workplace, the possibility of domestic harassment, family disputes or the use of physical punishment and aggression, feeling of danger when traveling around the city especially at night, the perceived presence of evil people in society, and the level of trust in strangers (Nowruzi & Fooladi Sepehr, 2009). Despite the political system identifying these elements as the causes of women's insecurity, little action has been taken to deal with them systematically. Iranian society sees these insecurities as an individual's problem, so self-care and individual restrictions are the only recommended solutions to avoid these insecurities. Although in some cases limited measures are taken by NGOs to raise awareness and provide psychological counseling, generally, women are expected to impose restrictions on themselves in order to achieve a better sense of security.

In this sense, two levels of societal security for Iranian women can be identified. First, women's societal security is equivalent to social order and public order. In this sense, the political system strictly pursues the fight against societal insecurities and the prevention of crimes. The second level is where the sources of women's insecurity are shifted to the individual and to some extent social spheres when it comes to women's presence in a high-risk society. Concerned women should address insecurities through self-care, accepting restrictions. Ultimately, women generally perceive societal security in terms of social control and personal care, which imposes a range of constraints on them to be safe.

## **Security Discourse in Iran**

### *Police and Tackling Insecurity*

Considering the equivalence of women's societal security with social order and public order, the positioning of the police as an indisputable security agent in the field of women's security is predictable. With this explanation, factors such as access to the police, number of police stations, police performance in creating order in the society, police treatment of criminals, trust in the police, desirable and satisfactory police actions, decisive treatment of crimes and anomalies, regular police patrols, timely and urgent presence of police in emergencies, improving the level of transportation safety, expansion of information centers, social monitoring, quick identification of thieves and intruders, surveillance over parks and resorts, prevention of social anomalies and crimes, as well as the establishment and maintenance of social order, are among the most important variables affecting the provision of security.

However, the extent to which the police been able to provide societal security for women by equating societal insecurity with crime and security, and by creating social order and control, the extent to which women actually feel that their security is ensured in this way—especially where a wide range of the sources of societal insecurity are explained by variables beyond this limited definition—has never been addressed.

### *Value System as the Security Provider*

Studies of societal security in Iran are deeply linked to religious values and beliefs, which has led this concept to take a normative approach with a concentration on what women should

and should not do according to religious ideas about their proper behavior. Religious and Islamic variables that are influential in Iranian societal security studies are not concerned with connecting to the real community of women, instead they rely substantially on religious texts and assumptions and use these values to form the system of societal security. That is why the provision of security under the value system pays attention to the anomalies, while the questioning of values, non-observance of customs, and weakening of beliefs are introduced as the causes of insecurity.

Furthermore, in providing societal security under a value system, women are defined in the role of the mother within the family institution, and women's security is assessed in relation to factors such as parents' attachment to social customs and traditions, emotional solidarity, companionship of family members, peace in the family environment, willingness to marry, and so on. The listed factors give women less space for activism in ensuring their security; in other words, women are the objects of societal security yet have least determining role in it. Security created under the value system is based more on religious traditions and prescribed regulations, rather than on the actual sense of security felt by women. Some instances are the religious rules for sex separation and controlling relationships between men and women or the hijab laws. Enforcing the implementation of such rules in society is in some cases, essentially in clear contrast with freedom and security for women. In short, societal security under this value system is unlikely to ensure women's emancipation and subjectivity; women's societal security is addressed only through implementation of these religious/cultural values. Because of this, women's insecurity is believed to be a result of weak religious beliefs on their part (Taskhiri, 2008). Many believe that the hijab provides women with peace of mind and maintains their security (Tajri & Ansari, 2014); essentially, many believe societal security can be maintained if women remain covered in a hijab (Kazemi Sahlavani, 2013).

To sum up, the variables providing security for women in Iran have been strongly influenced by the value system and ideology. In other words, women's societal security in Iran is recognized by referring to religious rulings, with the hijab being highlighted as the most important source in ensuring security for women. With this explanation, religion, and in particular, religious attire, is considered to be the organizing elements of security.

### **Government-based Approach to Women's Societal Security**

In equating societal security with crime and delinquency reduction, women's security studies in Iran have begun referring less to society, and because of this, studies are distanced from real concerns of society. In a general assessment, society is not considered an active subject in the Iranian societal security studies, though it is the entity that feels security or insecurity. This shortcoming continues to the extent that in Iranian societal security studies, religion is the security provider institution, and dealing with the insecurities is the responsibility of law enforcement. It is noteworthy that in the police-oriented approach, societal security is summed up as the absence of threats, crimes, violations, and the complete immunity of the lives, property, and honor of the people from any aggression.

In both of the above definitions, i.e. security under the value system and with police agency, providing societal security for women is more compatible with the government-oriented approach than with the community-based approach that considers the ability of society to maintain its identity and core values. In short, societal security in Iran is formulated by accepting

the superiority of the political sphere and the objectivity of society along with the security-providing role of the police force.

In an overview, the dominance of the government-centered approach with the agency of the police force could be identified in the definition and formulation of conceptions of women's societal security in Iran. Establishing societal security is one of the tasks of the police force, however, the question remains whether the police have been able to provide societal security for women, or whether the attitude of the police has increased women's social fears. According to the state-centered and power-oriented approach, security is defined as the situation created by the power to protect society from external threats. Meanwhile, the government establishes societal security through direct (such as the police and the judiciary) and indirect ways (family and mainly through the education system). With this explanation, the subjectivity and agency of the police force and the state-centered nature of this approach largely obscures the concept of societal security, identified with the idea of society's ability to maintain its identity and core values.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

### *Objectivity of Women*

Societal security is dubbed as the subjectivity, emancipation, and the ability of individuals and social groups to maintain their basic characteristics in the face of changing circumstances and real and potential threats, so that society can survive and sustain itself while there are interactions and acceptable conditions for groups and individuals. In other words, societal security is society's ability to protect its group identity against objective or subjective threats. Nonetheless, the formulation of women's societal security in Iran underlines the objectivity of women in the field of societal security, and women are less likely to have any subjectivity in ensuring security for a wide range of their concerns and insecurities.

In this context, most studies on this subject try to explain the role of various factors in women's societal security, while women have been introduced as objects who could be influenced by such factors. The following examples confirm this objectivity; using the same discourse, they all discuss how women's security/insecurity is influenced by various variables: the workplace and family (Manafi Mollayousefi, 2003), the socio-economic base (Nowruzi & Fooladi Sepehr, 2009), economic factors, environmental factors, the impact of residence on security and family, social support, religious affiliation, sexual harassment in the workplace, income, social class, working women's education level, domestic violence, addiction in the family and community, poverty, and fear of sexual and/or physical harassment.

### *Conceptual Reduction*

The definition of societal security in Iran under the value system and political system has caused this concept to simply denote social harms and deviations, and anything other than this meaning is rejected and marginalized. The police force is the agent for dealing with social insecurities which are reduced to crimes and social harms. And with women being viewed as mothers meant to stay within the institution of the family, a wide range of women's security issues in the public sphere have been rejected. The dominance of the police-agency attitude in dealing with insecurity and considering the culture/value system as the basis for security policies, Iran has reduced women's societal security to individual security. In the same way, societal security is sometimes considered synonymous with community-based policing, and in some

cases even the expression of women's demands and concerns, are identified and suppressed as a cause of insecurity. Besides, societal security with a religious approach has been reduced to a kind of individual security and has failed to identify social groups that are the source of societal security.

#### *Marginalized Areas in Women's Security*

A sense of security (absence of fear from any attacks or danger against human values) is applicable to the absence of fear against the legitimate rights and freedoms and peace of mind at both individual and collective levels. From the point of view of collective identity, security is defined as freedom from threats against collective and group identity and the ability of different groups—social, ethnic, local, etc.—to maintain their core values and identity. In this sense, societal security is considered would mean the elimination of threats against the unifying element of members of women's society, which is their gender. Women's sense of societal security is identified in terms of its collective and political identity with features such as freedom of expression, individual freedoms, privacy, and the right to choose, all of which indicate the subjectivity and emancipation of women. Despite this, the above-mentioned issues have rarely been recognized in the formulation of women's societal security policies in Iran. Similarly, the political system has neglected women's ideas and concerns regarding the legal (judicial) system and the executive branch of government. In fact, the societal security of women in the Iranian social system has been suppressed in the conflict between the objectivity of women and suppression, and finally it is defined and limited by the government.

#### *Abandoned Areas in Women's Security*

The sense of security in the economic field means sufficient income, the proportion of income to cost, hope for a better economic future, the ability to receive and repay banking facilities and the like. In particular, women's sense of societal security in the economic aspect is subject to two indicators of income and employment. In the income index, the extent to which women are concerned about their financial situation, income and living expenses, and in the employment index, women's sense of security in terms of their career future, job environment and job security are considered. Some of the components mentioned in the societal security system of women in Iran have been abandoned due to the economic weakness of society while others are suppressed or marginalized under the influence of the value system and the view that women belong in domesticity. The lack of planning to address these concerns and insecurities implies the abandonment of women's concerns on employment, income security, social opportunities, social connections, and ultimately their marginalization.

In addition to the above, there are a wide range of factors causing insecurities that the political system has refused to take seriously and are considered commonplace. People have to face these sources of insecurity on their own. Among such cases, we can mention insecurities caused by public spaces, urban furniture, urban compaction, defenseless spaces, insecure neighborhoods, rundown urban areas, and hygiene levels. In urban areas, a sense of security means that citizens can move freely, interact with their fellow citizens, and engage in social activities without being threatened or subjected to violence or any physical, mental, or gender inequality (Azam, et al., 2016). The weak protection of women's security in urban spaces limits their participation in society (Khorasani & Esmaili, 2010). In particular, since the effects of fear of crime and victimization are more severe on women, such experiences can extremely limit their presence and participation in society.

## Results

Societal security is characterized by the basic components of emancipation and the preservation of identity and fundamental values, which, above all, indicate the subjectivity of society. However, with the decisive agency of the police and the reduction of societal insecurity to crimes implemented by the Iranian political system, on the one hand, and with limiting women's role in the family to the mother imposed by the value system on the other hand, women's objectivity and the agency of police as security providers is understood. This is while women face a wide range of insecurities in Iran that have either been abandoned, marginalized, or systematically rejected and repressed.

In general, Iranian women's societal security, on the one hand, has emerged in the concept of social order with the agency of police and coercive force, and on the other hand, under the influence of the system of religious values, has created many restrictions to recognize the causes of security/insecurity for women. However, according to critical theories in the field of security, including societal security and individual security, emancipation, the ability to preserve collective identity and the fundamental values, and in one word, the subjectivity of women has been emphasized.

Ultimately, in response to the question of how the political system and traditional values affect the concept of women's societal security in Iran, the present study emphasizes the role of ideology, power, and institutions in the Iranian women's societal security model. Iran's value system defines women's role as mothers in the family structure, and societal security is equated with social order, and insecurity with crime and social harms; the political system emphasizes the objectivity of women while ceding the security agency to the police. The results of the study revealed that tradition and the political system have manipulated the concept of security to achieve their goal. Furthermore, the results reveal the existence of assumptions that have been inherited as a dominant cultural view of the past while the political system protects them in the face of new developments of the modern world. In contrast, it has abandoned and marginalized important levels of women's societal security demands, including a range of mental and economic insecurities, and left them on their own in these areas. Eventually, it has fundamentally rejected levels of women's societal security related to their emancipation, identity, and subjectivity.

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