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# Islamic Sociology Versus Secular Sociology in Iran

Analysing Intellectual Debates in the Context of  
the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement

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## Abstract

This article explores the intellectual debate in Iranian sociology between Islamic and secular frameworks, particularly in relation to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022. The study traces the evolution of sociology in Iran, emphasizing the tension between adopting global scientific paradigms and developing an indigenous framework that aligns with Iran's cultural and ideological contexts. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, efforts to Islamize sociology emerged, but these have faced challenges, including methodological weaknesses and difficulties in establishing a coherent alternative to Western sociology.

The article critically examines the positions of Iranian sociologists on both sides of the debate. Islamic sociology, which often relies on religious principles, struggles to provide a robust framework for analyzing contemporary social movements like "Woman, Life, Freedom." Conversely, secular sociologists have offered more nuanced and empirically grounded analyses, resonating with local and global discourses on social justice and gender rights. The study concludes that for Islamic sociology to become a rigorous discipline, it must innovate theoretically and develop culturally relevant frameworks that address the complexities of Iranian society.



## Introduction

The intellectual and academic landscape of sociology in Iran is intricately interwoven with the fabric of cultural, political, and ideological transformations. This field's development traces back to the establishment of the Institute for Social Studies and Research, marking a significant milestone in the introduction of modern social sciences into the nation's academic sphere.<sup>1</sup> This development occurred within the broader context of Reza Shah Pahlavi's modernization agenda, which sought to integrate Western scientific principles into the Iranian educational and academic frameworks. The founding of the University of Tehran in 1934 marked another significant milestone in this process, as it became a central hub for the dissemination of Western social scientific paradigms.<sup>2</sup> However, the evolution of sociology in Iran has been far from linear, characterized by a persistent tension between the adoption of global scientific paradigms and the cultivation of an indigenous framework that resonates with Iran's unique cultural, historical, and ideological contexts.

The victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 brought about a dramatic shift in Iran's intellectual landscape, fundamentally altering the trajectory of social sciences in the country. The subsequent Cultural Revolution (1979-1982) aimed at Islamizing the humanities, including sociology, became a critical turning point in the nation's academic and intellectual history.<sup>3</sup> The revolutionaries, motivated by an ideology that sought to merge Islamic philosophy with modern scientific disciplines, embarked on an ambitious project to reform the social sciences to better align with Islamic values and the political objectives of the new regime. This period saw the introduction of the concept of Islamic sociology, which aimed to develop a sociology grounded in Islamic epistemology and ethics. The idea was inspired by Ali Shariati whose works were instrumental in shaping the early discourse around local sociology, emphasizing the need for a social science paradigm that could address the unique challenges and conditions of the Iranian society.<sup>4</sup>

However, the project of Islamizing the humanities has been fraught with challenges and controversies.<sup>5</sup> One of the main criticisms has been its methodological limitations, particularly the difficulties in developing a coherent and systematic alternative to Western sociology. The initial enthusiasm for Islamic sociology gradually gave way to a more critical evaluation of its intellectual and practical viability. Critics have pointed out that Islamic sociology, in its current form, has failed to provide a robust framework for analysing contemporary social phenomena, especially in a rapidly changing world where the boundaries between tradition and modernity are increasingly blurred.

1 M. Esmailnia, A. Kazemi, and B. Sedighi, "The Paradoxical Situation of the First Social Science Institution in Iran: The Institute of Social Studies and Research from Its Inception to the Islamic Revolution," *Sociological Review* 26, no. 2 (Fall and Winter 2020): 10.

2 P. Akhgar, "Tehran University: A Contested Terrain," *Fabrications* 32, no. 3 (2022): 369, <https://bit.ly/40eaNuL>.

3 Paola Rivetti, "Student Movements in the Islamic Republic: Shaping Iran's Politics through the Campus," in *Iran: A Revolutionary Republic in Transition*, ed. Rouzbeh Parsi (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2012), 84.

4 S.J. Miri, "Revisiting Indigenization of Sociology in Iran: An Inquiry into Shariati's Distinction Between Subject and Indigenous," *Tajseer* 2, no. 1 (2020): 126, Qatar University Press, <https://bit.ly/4fYkIKL>.

5 N. Nimrouzi Navakhi, "Examining the Possibility of an Islamic Sociology Paradigm," *Quarterly Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 5, no. 4 (2013): 115–116, <https://bit.ly/40vEUPw>.

This perceived failure to produce a comprehensive and effective alternative to Western sociology has fuelled ongoing debates within Iran's academic and intellectual circles.<sup>6</sup>

The enduring discussion between proponents of Islamic sociology and advocates of secular, Western-oriented social sciences has shed light on the sociological landscape in Iran. Scholars such as Hossein Kachouyan have been at the forefront of advocating for a paradigm that integrates Islamic principles with scientific inquiry. They argue that Islamic sociology offers a more holistic and culturally relevant approach to understanding social phenomena in Islamic societies. For instance, Kachouyan has focused on developing a methodological framework for Islamic sociology that can be applied to various social contexts, arguing that it provides a more nuanced understanding of social reality in the Islamic world.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, other scholars like Azad Armaki have critiqued the feasibility of Islamic sociology, questioning its ability to provide a rigorous and objective framework for analysing social phenomena.<sup>8</sup> They argue that Islamic sociology, in its current form, is often more concerned with ideological conformity than with empirical investigation and theoretical innovation. Armaki, for instance, has pointed out the epistemological challenges of integrating religious principles with scientific inquiry, arguing that such an approach often leads to a form of epistemological relativism that undermines the objectivity of social science research.

This article explores the analytic power of Islamic sociology in relation to significant social phenomena, such as the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. We analysed how Iranian sociologists from both sides (supporters of Islamic sociology and critics) use their theoretical frameworks and methodological toolboxes to examine socio-political phenomena, drawing on interviews and articles authored by these scholars.

This movement, which emerged in response to the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, has become a focal point for discussions on women's rights and social justice in Iran. By examining the perspectives of leading Iranian sociologists, this study sheds light on the intellectual tensions between universal scientific principles and the imperatives of cultural specificity. It also contributes to the broader discourse on the localization of social sciences in non-Western contexts, where the interplay between global paradigms and local traditions remains a critical area of inquiry.

In doing so, this article not only addresses the specific challenges and debates surrounding Islamic sociology in Iran but also engages with broader questions about the role of sociology in non-Western societies. How can social sciences be localized without losing their analytical rigour? Is integrating religious principles into scientific inquiry possible? These are some of the key questions that this

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6 M. R. Taleban, "Islamic Sociology: A Grand Project with Limited Capabilities," *Book of the Month*, no. 67–68 (2003).

7 H. Kachouyan, "A Discussion on the Humanities with a Focus on Islamic Sociology," *Social Sciences: Journal of the Growth of Social Sciences Education* no. 18 (1994): 32–34, <https://bit.ly/4glvSV3>.

8 Taghi Azad Armaki, "Islamic Sociology Cannot Be Derived from Ibn Khaldun," interview by Khodadad Khadem, *Farhang-e Emrooz*, September 8, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3Wipqff>.



article seeks to address, with the aim of contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between sociology and culture in the Islamic world. Through this exploration, the article hopes to offer insights into the potential and limitations of Islamic sociology as a distinctive approach to understanding social phenomena in Iran and beyond.

## Literature Review

The development of Islamic sociology cannot be understood in isolation from broader intellectual movements in Iran. The pre-revolutionary intellectual tradition, represented by figures like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad and Ali Shariati, was characterized by a "dual cultural critique" that simultaneously criticized both Westernization and traditionalism. This critique laid the groundwork for post-revolutionary efforts to indigenize social sciences.

Al-e-Ahmad and Shariati's critique of both Westernization and traditionalism represented a unique intellectual position that sought to carve out a "third way" for Iranian society. Shariati, in particular, was critical of what he saw as the uncritical adoption of Western intellectual trends by Iranian intellectuals, as well as the stagnation of traditional practices. He advocated for a path that would allow Iran to engage with modernity on its own terms, without succumbing to either Western hegemony or cultural regression.<sup>9</sup>

The dual cultural critique founded by Al-e-Ahmad became a cornerstone of the intellectual project to indigenize social sciences in Iran. It provided a framework for thinking about how Iranian society could modernize while remaining true to its cultural and religious roots.<sup>10</sup> However, post-revolutionary efforts to indigenize social sciences, particularly through the Islamization of sociology, represented a break from this intellectual tradition. Instead of a balanced engagement with modernity, the post-revolutionary approach was characterized by a more one-sided emphasis on religious monoculture.

The post-revolutionary period saw a polarization of the intellectual landscape in Iran. On one side were those who unilaterally supported the Islamization of social sciences, viewing it as a means of resisting Western intellectual domination. Conversely, those who endorsed Western social sciences as objective and neutral knowledge argued that efforts to indigenize social sciences were ideologically driven and lacked empirical rigor.

This polarization was reflected in academic and intellectual responses to the indigenization projects. Scholars like Farasatkah have described the approach of Iranian academics to indigenization during this period as characterized by a "pseudo-modern and pseudo-positivist taboo and phobia." This environment, according to Farasatkah, was closed off to new discussions that criticized positivist

<sup>9</sup> A. Ali-Asghari Sadri and S. J. Miri, "Ali Shariati and the Indigenization of Sciences," *Research Journal of Science and Religion, Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall and Winter 2012): 95–96, <https://bit.ly/3DSlgnX>.

<sup>10</sup> N. Bahrami Komeil, "The Challenge of Tradition and Modernization in Jalal Al-e Ahmad's Perspective," *Social Sciences Quarterly* 20, no. 61 (September 2013): 197, <https://bit.ly/40zglBu>.

approaches and addressed the context-bound nature of knowledge or the relationship between science and its social production contexts.<sup>11</sup>

The efforts to indigenize social sciences in post-revolutionary Iran have faced significant criticism, both from within the academic community and from external observers. Critics like Fazeli argue that the indigenization projects have been overly focused on ideological conformity at the expense of empirical and theoretical innovation.<sup>12</sup> Fazeli suggests that instead of imposing pre-determined policies and ideologies, there should be an emphasis on professional self-awareness and the importance of thinking globally while acting locally.

These critiques are echoed by other scholars who have pointed out the lack of a clear methodological framework in the indigenization projects. The reliance on traditional Islamic texts and the focus on Islamizing society have, according to these critics, led to a narrowing of intellectual inquiry and a neglect of the broader global context in which social sciences operate.

When it comes to categorizing different stances in regard to Islamic sociology and even Islamic science in Iran, Qasem Zaeri and Ali Eskandari Naddaf point to the positivist approach, the continental-postmodern perspective, and the Islamic philosophy school as Iran's social science tradition.

What is common among these three approaches and their supporters is the emphasis on the importance of social science and sociology, addressing the specific issues and characteristics of each society, particularly the historical and identity-specific aspects of Iranian society.

The first group believes that the principles and theoretical foundations of modern science are universal and should be used to understand and solve the local issues of Iranian society.

However, the second group argues that these principles vary for each society and culture, and understanding Iranian society requires identifying the unique cultural and historical principles specific to it. The third group, like the first, believes in the universal nature of science but considers the secular theoretical foundations of modern science to be flawed and advocates for alternative foundations aligned with Islamic philosophy for developing indigenous social science.<sup>13</sup>

Gholam-Abbas Tavassoli, referring to the dichotomy between local sociology and global sociology, has suggested conducting systematic national research focused on theory development and the de-ideologization of sociology regarding Islam and Iranian history. He also advocates for adopting a long-term perspective in the development of Indigenous sociology, avoiding the reduction of indigenization to mere localization, to prevent ignoring global sociology.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M. Farastkhah, "Comparison of Three Epistemological Pathways Regarding 'Indigenous Knowledge' in Iran with Emphasis on Conceptual, Structural, and Functional Transformations of Science," *Iranian Journal of Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 101.

<sup>12</sup> N. Fazeli, "The Discourse of Indigenous Issues: The Issue of Indigenization of Social Sciences from the Perspective of Cultural Studies," *Iranian Journal of Social Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 86, <https://bit.ly/4fUFDhJ>.

<sup>13</sup> Q. Zaeri and A. Eskandari Naddaf, "Analysis and Evaluation of Opinions of Supporters and Opponents of Indigenous Social Science in Iran," *Quarterly Journal of Theoretical Social Sciences of Muslim Thinkers* 12, no. 3 (Mehr 2022): 9, <https://bit.ly/4hpcOnx>.

<sup>14</sup> G. A. Tavassoli, "An Evaluation of Indigenization in Iranian Sociology," presented at the Iranian Sociological Association Meeting (Tehran: Iranian Sociological Association, 2006).





Tavassoli views the prevalent project of Islamization in the social sciences as more ideological and normative rather than scientific. In other words, what is referred to as Islamic sociology is considered more of a normative effort rather than a descriptive science.

In his attempt to present an alternative to global sociology, Taghi Azad Armaki, a proponent of indigenous or Iranian sociology, categorizes sociology in Iran into four types: global sociology, development-oriented sociology, ideological sociology, and indigenous sociology.<sup>15</sup> He argues that ideological sociology, whether right-leaning (Islamic sociology) or left-leaning, is not truly sociology but rather an ideological approach to social issues. Azad Armaki believes that Islamic sociology, as a form of ideological sociology, lacks the capacity to understand social phenomena in Iran. In contrast, indigenous sociology, which focuses on social history, cultural history, social transformations, and contemporary Iranian society, produces work that is valuable for both Iranian and international audiences, providing a comprehensive narrative of Iranian society.

Building on this critique of Islamic sociology, Nimrouzi Navakhi offers a framework to classify studies in this field. He suggests that research on Islamic sociology can be categorized into three main perspectives:

**Opponents of Religious Science:** This group includes scholars who either consider the concept of religious science impossible or view it as undesirable and unethical. Notable figures in this category include Mohammad Amin Qanei Rad and Mohammad Reza Taleban.

**Proponents of Religious Science:** This group is further divided based on their interpretations of religious science and how they approach the issue within the contemporary context in Iran. Scholars such as Hossein Nasr and Hossein Bostan fall into this category.

**Neutral Stance:** The third group does not have a clear stance regarding agreement or disagreement when addressing the issue of religious science. Gholam Abbas Tavassoli is mentioned in this group<sup>16</sup>. To simplify the categories, here we focus on opponents and proponents of Islamic sociology.

## 1. Opponents of Religious Science

In his article titled "A Critical Review of Iranian Efforts to Develop Alternative Sociologies," Mohammad Amin Ghanei Rad critically examines the endeavours aimed at indigenizing sociology in Iran, identifying two primary approaches. The first is the development of an Islamic sociology framework, grounded in religious and philosophical perspectives. This approach seeks to modify the ontological and anthropological assumptions of mainstream sociology and to reform its epistemological foundations, with the goal of providing scientific judgments on social issues based on religious texts, using empirical methods<sup>17</sup>. However, Ghanei Rad argues that this approach inadvertently

<sup>15</sup> T. Azad Armaki, "Strengths and Weaknesses of Sociology in Iran: Intellectualism Is an Obstacle to Science," interview by Khodad Khadem, *Mehr News Agency*, August 21, 2016, <https://bit.ly/4gPG4uT>.

<sup>16</sup> N. Nimrouzi Navakhi, "Examining the Possibility of an Islamic Sociology Paradigm," *Quarterly Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 5, no. 4 (2013): 109, <https://bit.ly/40vEUPw>.

<sup>17</sup> M. A. Ghanei Rad, "A Critical Review of Iranian Efforts to Develop Alternative Sociologies," *Iranian Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 1 (2010): 125.

falls into the trap of methodological positivism, leading to the acceptance of many epistemological, ideological, and anthropological assumptions inherent in empirical sociology.

The second approach involves a program of social and cultural engineering, supported by the government and state institutions. This program aims to utilize the theoretical content and methodologies of sociology to Islamize society and guide the transformation of its evolving values and norms. The objective is to apply existing sociological frameworks to the process of Islamizing society.

Alireza Shojaei Zand, a sociologist of religion, can be identified as a critic of Islamic sociology in the first approach Ghanei Rad mentioned and an advocate of social engineering programs designed to Islamize society. Shojaei Zand argues that religious science is neither necessary nor feasible. He contends that what can be integrated into the human sciences must be inherently scientific, with its rationality firmly established. Nonetheless, he is also critical of secular human sciences, accusing them of becoming ideologically driven.<sup>18</sup>

Mohammad Reza Taleban raises several questions to challenge the notion of Islamic sociology: If the values and foundational principles of science (including cosmological, anthropological, and epistemological foundations), as well as the criteria for evaluating propositions, are derived from religion, why do we still refer to this discipline as 'sociology'? Can new sociology be constructed with just a few verses and religious sayings about social matters and their interrelations, such as the association of oppression with destruction? Furthermore, for whom is this type of sociology intended? A science that relies primarily on the Quran and traditions attributed to the Prophet of Islam lacks validity and authority for non-Muslims.<sup>19</sup> Seyed Mahdi Etemadifard and Tayebeh Sadoughinia, in their article "Examining the Pattern of Impossibility of Islamic Theory of Sociology and Social Sciences in Iran," adopt a generally critical and skeptical stance toward Islamic sociology. While they acknowledge the interest in developing an Islamic sociology model, they express concerns about the lack of rigorous theoretical and methodological foundations in the current discourse. The authors emphasize that although there is significant debate surrounding Islamic social sciences, much of it remains vague, with insufficient attention to the necessary academic rigor, detailed analysis, and practical applicability.

Etemadifard and Sadoughinia suggest that the concept of Islamic sociology requires more substantial theoretical development and clearer methodological guidelines to be considered a viable and independent academic discipline. They are cautious about fully endorsing Islamic sociology in its current form, underscoring the need for deeper engagement with the foundational issues and challenges it faces. Ultimately, their position is that while Islamic sociology represents a noteworthy intellectual endeavor, it requires much more work to achieve academic credibility and practical relevance.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Shojaei-Zand, "Religious Science Is Neither Necessary nor Feasible," in the seminar *Islamic Humanities: From Delusions to Reality*, IQNA (Iranian Quran News Agency), September 10, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4hb6VBA>.

19 . M. R. Taleban, "Islamic Sociology: A Grand Project with Limited Capabilities," *Book of the Month*, no. 67–68 (2003): 30.

20 Seyed Mahdi Etemadifard and Tayebeh Sadoughinia, "Examining the Pattern of Impossibility of an Islamic Theory of Sociology and Social Sciences in Iran," *Islam and Social Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (Issue 18) (2017): 136, <https://bit.ly/3E4erzF>.



## 2. Proponents of Islamic Sociology

Hossein Bostan in an article titled "Islamic Sociology: Towards a Paradigm," tries to introduce the most important foundations of Islamic sociology within a paradigm comparable to existing paradigms. He bases the ontology of society on the relationship between humans and God and anchors anthropology on the principle of innate human nature (fitrah). The author considers the goals of research in the paradigm of Islamic sociology to include the causal explanation and semantics of behaviour, critique of social conditions, and teleology of human phenomena concerning their attribution to God. From a methodological perspective, while rejecting social determinism, he accepts a combination of methodological individualism and holism. He distinguishes between empirical and meta-empirical levels in this paradigm; at the empirical level, in the context of data collection, he primarily considers the method of jurisprudential-interpretive inference, and at the judgment stage, he emphasizes the empirical method. At the meta-empirical level, he utilizes revelatory, rational, and empirical methods. Finally, at the empirical level, he emphasizes avoiding the interference of values in the description and explanation of reality while advocating for the use of religious values to critique social conditions and provide solutions to achieve a desirable state at the meta-empirical level.<sup>21</sup>

Some proponents of Islamic social sciences, including Hamid Parsania, seek to define this science through religious or Islamic methodology – methods that, due to their religious nature, can validate their epistemic results. From this perspective, in understanding social phenomena, one can ultimately draw upon the validity of religion by employing these methods and expect reliable results. Sometimes, fundamental methods serve as the criteria for validating knowledge, where "the general rules of thought are pursued in conjunction with some presuppositions and principles in a specific subject matter; that is, the method of thinking about a particular epistemic domain is identified based on certain presuppositions. These presuppositions may be ontological and epistemological, which are discussed in their respective sciences... Based on Islamic epistemological and ontological assumptions, one can produce both a specific theory and method using reason, revelation, intuition, and experience".<sup>22</sup>

Hossein Kachouyan believes that to establish or formulate an ideal model, we must lay down the principles and presuppositions that validate subsequent models concerning social phenomena. Such presuppositions not only have intrinsic originality but can also provide the validity of the epistemological propositions of the desired social science. From this perspective, every science requires presuppositions that enable it connected to its subject. When it comes to Islamic social sciences, if such presuppositions are monotheistic, the science will automatically become religious. In Kachouyan's view, considering the metaphysical theoretical foundations of the Islamic intellectual system is the first necessary characteristic.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> H. Bostan, "Islamic Sociology: Towards a Paradigm," *Methodology of Humanities* 15, no. 61 (2009): 21, [https://method.rihu.ac.ir/article\\_375.html](https://method.rihu.ac.ir/article_375.html).

<sup>22</sup> H. Parsania, "Methodology of Humanities with an Islamic Approach," *Pajouhesh Journal* 1, no. 2 (Fall and Winter 2009): 50, <https://bit.ly/3DUymRO>.

<sup>23</sup> H. Kachouyan, "A Discussion on the Transformation in the Humanities," *Newsletter of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution*, May 7, 2012.

In an article titled "Value-Based Principles of Islamic Sociology," Mahmoud Rajabi and Hossein Bostan defend Islamic sociology versus secular sociology by arguing that sociology cannot be value-neutral and must be explicitly guided by certain values and moral principles. The authors contend that Islamic sociology integrates normative (value-based) and descriptive (factual) analyses, rejecting the separation of 'is' and 'ought' in social research. They criticize secular social sciences for their lack of ethical guidance and argue that without values, these approaches fail to address the full scope of human behaviour and society. Instead, they propose an Islamic sociology paradigm that is distinct from Western approaches, grounded in the innate nature of humans and capable of providing ethical and normative guidance for societal well-being and justice.<sup>24</sup>

## Theoretical Framework: Iranian Sociology in a Global Context

The emergence of Islamic sociology in Iran is an intellectual pursuit that seeks to navigate the tension between the dominance of Western social science paradigms and the necessity of constructing a sociological discipline that is both culturally relevant and epistemologically sound. This framework is informed by the critical perspectives of Syed Farid Alatas, Nasser Fakouhi, and Thomas Kuhn, offering a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and possibilities inherent in this quest. The framework is particularly relevant to understanding the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, a critical social phenomenon that tests the theoretical robustness of Islamic sociology.

### 1. Alatas's Critique of Academic Dependency and Advocacy for Alternative Discourses

Syed Farid Alatas proposes two key concepts in social sciences: alternative discourses and academic dependency.<sup>25</sup> Academic dependency refers to the unequal relationship between Western and Third World social scientists, wherein the social sciences in peripheral countries are conditioned by developments in the center. This inequality is reflected in the global division of labor within social sciences, where First World social scientists engage in both theoretical and empirical research, studying their own and other countries, and often conducting comparative and cross-national studies. In contrast, research in the Third World is primarily empirical, focused on single-case studies within their own countries.<sup>26</sup> The challenge for Islamic sociology lies in avoiding what Alatas warns against – intellectual primitivism or reverse Orientalism – wherein Indigenous perspectives are elevated without critical engagement with broader global discourses.<sup>27</sup> The quest for an Islamic sociology, therefore, is not merely about indigenization but about contributing to the global pool of social science knowledge. Alatas's framework emphasizes the creation of a discipline that resonates

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24 M. Rajabi and H. Bostan, "Value-Based Principles of Islamic Sociology," *Islam and Social Sciences* 2, no. 3 (Spring & Summer 2010): 19–20.

25 S. F. Alatas, "Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences," *Current Sociology* 51, no. 6 (2003): 599–613.

26 M. A. Ghanei Rad, "A Critical Review of Iranian Efforts to Develop Alternative Sociologies," *Iranian Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 1 (2010): 131–133.

27 S. F. Alatas, "The Theme of Relevance in Third World Human Sciences," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 16, no. 2 (1995): 123–140.



with both local realities and universal principles, thus participating in the globalization of social sciences in a way that challenges the prevailing Eurocentrism.<sup>28</sup>

A key point in Alatas's concept of alternative discourses is the need for independence from the state, avoiding becoming a tool for colonizing civil life. The independence of scientific institutions is a concern repeatedly emphasized by Iranian sociologists. This independence includes both political and economic autonomy. Lahsaeizadeh and Mahdavi attribute the lack of progress in Iranian sociology to the absence of independent capital from the government, while Tavassoli points to the inefficiency of social sciences in Iran due to the lack of a healthy social environment and opportunities for free discussions independent of power.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. Fakouhi's Critique of Indigenization and Advocacy for the Global-Local Dialectic

Nasser Fakouhi, like Alatas, warns against the risks of naive indigenization, arguing that simplistic binaries between Western and non-Western knowledge often obscure the complex interconnections between global and local epistemologies. In the Iranian context, Fakouhi critiques official efforts at indigenization that often result in a superficial rejection of Western social sciences without offering a viable alternative.<sup>30</sup>

Fakouhi's approach suggests that the development of Islamic sociology should involve an integration of local and global knowledge systems. This integration does not imply a rejection of Western sociology but rather a critical engagement with it, incorporating Islamic epistemological principles to address the specific needs of Iranian society. This perspective aligns with the broader discourse on the decolonization of knowledge, which seeks to dismantle epistemic hierarchies while acknowledging the importance of intellectual exchange across cultures.

Applying Fakouhi's critique to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, one must consider whether Islamic sociology can provide a theoretical framework that both engages with global discourses on gender and social justice and remains true to Islamic and Iranian cultural contexts. The movement, with its focus on women's rights and social justice, challenges Islamic sociology to develop theories that are not only culturally relevant but also resonate with broader global concerns.

## 3. Kuhn's Paradigm Shifts and the Challenges of Establishing a New Sociological Discipline

Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts offers a compelling lens through which to view the development of Islamic sociology as an attempt to inaugurate a new sociological paradigm. According to Kuhn, paradigm shifts occur when existing frameworks fail to account for new empirical realities, leading to the emergence of a new paradigm that better explains these phenomena.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> S. F. Alatas, *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science: Responses to Eurocentrism* (London: Sage Publications, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> A. A. Mahdi and A. Lahsaeizadeh, *Sociology in Iran* (Iran: Jahan Book Company, 1992); G. A. Tavassoli, "An Evaluation of Indigenization in Iranian Sociology," presented at the Iranian Sociological Association Meeting (Tehran: Iranian Sociological Association, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Nasser Fakouhi and Marzieh Ebrahimi, "The Iranian Scientific Diaspora and Its Role in the Localization of Social Sciences in Iran," *Journal of Iranian Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 116–117, accessed August 15, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4jbhAOm>.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., enlarged, ed. Otto Neurath, with associate editors Rudolf Carnap and Charles Morris, *Foundations of the Unity of Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 33.

Islamic sociology aspires to represent such a paradigm shift, moving away from the secular, positivist foundations of Western sociology towards a framework grounded in Islamic epistemology. However, Kuhn's concept of incommensurability – the idea that different paradigms may be so fundamentally different that they are not directly comparable – poses a significant challenge. Islamic sociology must demonstrate that it cannot only stand independently but also engage in meaningful dialogue with Western sociology.

The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement serves as a critical test case for this potential paradigm shift. The movement's focus on women's rights and its implications for Islamic sociology raise important questions: Can Islamic sociology provide a robust theoretical and empirical analysis of the movement that challenges the explanatory power of Western sociological paradigms? Or does the movement expose the limitations of Islamic sociology, suggesting that it is still in its developmental stages and not yet capable of serving as a mature paradigm?

The theoretical insights of Alatas, Fakouhi, and Kuhn offer a multi-layered framework for analyzing the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. This movement, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, has become a focal point for debates on women's rights, social justice, and the role of Islam in public life in Iran.

Alatas's critique of academic dependency prompts an examination of whether Islamic sociology can offer an alternative analysis of the movement, one that is not constrained by either the intellectual paradigms of the West or state power. Fakouhi's emphasis on the global-local dialectic encourages consideration of how Islamic sociology can engage with global discourses on gender while maintaining its cultural specificity. Kuhn's concept of paradigm shifts invites reflection on the future of Islamic sociology: Will it evolve into a new paradigm that can address contemporary social issues like those raised by the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, or will it remain a fledgling discipline struggling for intellectual legitimacy?

## Problem Statement

The discourse surrounding the development of an indigenous social science in Iran, particularly Islamic sociology, has been a focal point of intellectual and academic debate since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. While the proponents of Islamic sociology argue that it offers a culturally relevant and epistemologically sound alternative to Western social science paradigms, critics highlight its methodological shortcomings and question its viability as a robust analytical framework. This debate is especially pertinent in the context of significant socio-political movements like the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, which emerged in response to the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022. This movement, centred on women's rights and social justice, challenges both the explanatory power of Islamic sociology and the capacity of Western-oriented frameworks to fully capture the nuances of Iranian society. The persistent tension between the adoption of global scientific paradigms and the

cultivation of an indigenous framework rooted in Islamic values raises critical questions about the future of social sciences in Iran.

### Research Questions

How do Iranian sociologists from both Islamic and secular perspectives use their theoretical frameworks to analyse significant socio-political phenomena, such as the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement?

What are the methodological strengths and limitations of Islamic sociology as proposed by its proponents, particularly in analysing contemporary social phenomena?

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a case study approach, to analyze the intellectual foundations and positions of Iranian sociologists in relation to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. The case study method was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex sociological phenomena within their real-life context, particularly how different schools of thought within Iranian sociology – Islamic and secular – engage with this significant social issue. The qualitative approach is justified as it enables a rich, detailed examination of the sociologists' perspectives, which are crucial for understanding the broader intellectual debates within Iran.

**Data Collection Methods.** The data for this study were collected from a combination of sources, including:

**Published Articles and Books:** Works authored by key Iranian sociologists, particularly those who have written extensively on Islamic sociology and secular sociology, were reviewed. These include academic papers, book chapters, articles, and books published in Iranian journals.

**Content Analysis of Media Coverage:** The study also incorporates content analysis of media coverage, public statements, and interviews conducted with these sociologists, particularly in the context of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, to understand how their theories were applied in public discourse.

**Criteria for Inclusion.** The sources included works that directly address Islamic sociology or secular sociology in the Iranian context.

The sociologists whose works were analyzed had to have a significant academic or public presence in Iranian sociology and be recognized as either proponents or critics of Islamic sociology.

The content selected for analysis was required to have a clear focus on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement or related socio-political phenomena in Iran.

**Sampling Strategy.** The sampling strategy for this study was purposive, focusing on Iranian sociologists who have contributed to the debate on Islamic sociology versus secular sociology and who simultaneously had a sociological or political stance toward the "Woman, Life, Freedom"

movement. The study identified a balanced sample of sociologists who either support or oppose Islamic sociology. This approach ensured that both perspectives were adequately represented in the analysis. The sampling included:

**Proponents of Islamic Sociology:** Sociologists known for their work in developing or advocating for Islamic sociology, such as Hossein Kachouyan, Meysam Mahdiar, and Alireza Shojaei Zand.<sup>32</sup>

**Opponents of Islamic Sociology:** Sociologists critical of Islamic sociology, such as Hamid Reza Jalaei Pour, Taghi Azad Armaki, and Nasser Fakouhi, have argued for the continued relevance of secular, Western-oriented sociological frameworks.

**Analytical Techniques.** The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, which involved coding and categorizing the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and discourses. Thematic analysis was employed to explore how different sociologists conceptualize and interpret the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. The analysis focused on:

**Methodological Approaches:** Examining the methods these sociologists use to analyze the movement, whether they rely on Islamic jurisprudence, classical sociological theories, or alternative frameworks.

**Debates Analysis:** Analysing the content of the debates between proponents and critics of Islamic sociology to understand the key points of contention and areas of convergence.

**Limitations.** The study acknowledges several limitations:

- **Potential Bias in Published Works:** The reliance on published articles and interviews may introduce bias, as these works are often influenced by the authors' personal or ideological positions. Efforts were made to mitigate this by cross-referencing multiple sources.
- **Scope of Analysis:** The focus on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement as a case study may not fully capture the broader applicability of Islamic sociology across different social phenomena. The study is, therefore, specific to this context and may not be generalizable to other movements or issues in Iranian society.

## Findings

### 1. Secular sociologists' perspective on "Woman, Life Freedom" movement

#### Analytical Framework for Jalaeipour's Views on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement

Hamidreza Jalaeipour's analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement situates it within the broader framework of Iranian social theory, emphasizing the unique characteristics of Iranian society

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<sup>32</sup> Shojaei Zand criticizes the notion of Islamic science however he falls in the second category of Ghanei Rad in which scholars try to use secular sociology to engineer society and enforce Islamic rules, rather than alter epistemological or ontological principles of sociology.





as an unstable and movement-driven entity.<sup>33</sup> His perspective aligns with the view that Iranian society is characterized by significant imbalances and rapid changes, which, while not leading to a full-scale revolution, have resulted in persistent protest movements. This interpretation draws on the concept of social anomie, reflecting a society in which the established norms have lost their hold over individuals, leading to instability and continuous social movements.

Jalaeipour's use of the theory of social anomie is critical to understanding the ongoing unrest in Iran.<sup>34</sup> By identifying the political divide – particularly the gap between the state and the people – as the most significant divide in Iranian society, he emphasizes a key source of social instability. The closure of polling institutions and the government's failure to address these divides further exacerbate the situation, contributing to the cycle of protest and unrest.

In his analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, Jalaeipour refutes the notion that it is a "blind uprising," instead presenting it as a movement with specific demands that are deeply rooted in existing social movements within Iranian society. This perspective is significant because it underscores the movement's legitimacy and depth, situating it within the broader context of Iran's socio-political landscape. Jalaeipour's analysis identifies eight existing social movements that have contributed to the widespread and prolonged nature of the protests following Mahsa Amini's death. This framework is essential for understanding the movement's dynamics and its potential to effect change within Iranian society.

Jalaeipour's identification of four major mistakes made by the government – cultural engineering from above, tightening the circle of governance, economic inefficiency, and a foreign policy that creates enemies – provides a comprehensive critique of the state's role in exacerbating the crisis. His distinction between non-violent civil forces and regime change advocates outside the country further complicates the narrative, highlighting the diverse and sometimes conflicting forces at play within the movement.

Jalaeipour's analysis of the future of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement is rooted in sociological theories that emphasize the importance of addressing underlying social issues to prevent escalation. His identification of three potential future scenarios – government suppression, systematic insecurity, and the possibility of compromise – reflects a nuanced understanding of the complex socio-political dynamics in Iran. Jalaeipour's emphasis on the need for political and administrative openness to address societal demands aligns with broader sociological theories that advocate for the inclusion of diverse social groups in the political process to maintain stability and prevent unrest.

While Jalaeipour provides a thorough analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, his approach can be critiqued for its reliance on traditional sociological frameworks that may not fully capture the

<sup>33</sup> H. Jalaeipour, "What Is the Mahsa Movement, and What Is Its Future? Hamidreza Jalaeipour's Sociological Analysis of the Factors and Consequences of Recent Protests," interview by *Etemad Newspaper*, issue 5375, December 13, 2022, <https://bit.ly/4fXWTTf>.

<sup>34</sup> H. Jalaeipour, *Iranian Social Theory: Debate between Hamidreza Jalaeipour and Alireza Shojaee-Zand*, held on January 20, 2024, *Shiveh Television Program on IRIB*, <https://bit.ly/4j6helV>.

Azad Armaki's critique of the Islamic Republic's handling of social change has significant implications for both Iranian society and the broader field of sociology. His analysis suggests that the state's failure to engage with the rational, life-centered concerns of its citizens has contributed to a growing disconnect between the government and the people, leading to instability and unrest. Furthermore, his critique of state and opposition media for their focus on propaganda rather than transparency highlights the limitations of ideologically driven narratives in addressing complex social phenomena.

Armaki's call for national reconciliation, centred on ethics, culture, and Iranian religion, offers a potential pathway for bridging the deep divides within Iranian society. However, his analysis also underscores the challenges facing any attempt to reconcile the ideological commitments of the Islamic Republic with the practical demands of its citizens. The implication is that without significant structural changes, the current trajectory of unrest and instability is likely to continue, posing a significant challenge to the viability of both the Islamic understanding of sociology and the broader political system in Iran.

### **Nasser Fakouhi's stance on "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement**

Nasser Fakouhi's analysis of Iranian society post-Mahsa Amini's death and the ensuing protests is deeply embedded within the broader trajectory of Iran's social and political developments.<sup>36</sup> Fakouhi places these protests within the continuum of discontent that has been building over the past two to three decades, particularly highlighting the radicalization of demands since 2009. His perspective is that the persistent social unrest reflects a longstanding tension between the Iranian state's ideological rigidity and the population's growing demand for a normal life, free from excessive political and ideological interference. Fakouhi argues that the life of Iranian citizens has become intensely politicized, not by choice, but by the state's pervasive interference in private lives and its failure to address fundamental economic and social needs.

Fakouhi sees the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement as a reflection of the broader societal demand for a return to normalcy – a life characterized by basic human dignity, economic stability, and personal freedom. He interprets the movement as an extension of the Iranian public's frustration with a state that has increasingly failed to meet these basic needs. The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" encapsulates the essential demands for a life unencumbered by the state's ideological impositions and the daily hardships brought on by economic mismanagement and international isolation. For Fakouhi, this movement is not an isolated or sudden occurrence but the culmination of years of unresolved social grievances that have now reached a boiling point.

Fakouhi's analysis draws on sociological theories related to the politicization of life and the social consequences of state overreach. He discusses how the persistent interference of the state in the private lives of citizens has turned everyday life into a political act. According to Fakouhi, when

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<sup>36</sup> N. Fakouhi, "Iranians' Lives Have Been Politicized," interview published in *Mofaghiat Magazine*, April 7, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3DV455h>.



unique dynamics of Iranian society. His analysis, while insightful, may benefit from a more critical engagement with alternative sociological paradigms, to provide a more holistic understanding of the movement.

The implications of Jalaeipour's analysis are significant for both Iranian and global sociological discourse. His emphasis on the importance of addressing social divides and the need for political openness resonates with broader debates on the role of sociology in analysing and addressing social unrest. However, his analysis also highlights the limitations of traditional sociological theories in fully capturing the complexities of social movements in non-Western contexts.

### **Taghi Azad Armaki's view of "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement**

Taghi Azad Armaki's analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement is deeply embedded in the broader discourse of Iranian social theory. His perspective underscores the disconnect between the Islamic Republic's ideological framework and the practical, rational demands of Iranian society, particularly those of the middle class<sup>35</sup>. Armaki's critique is situated within a long-standing debate in Iranian sociology regarding the viability of Islamic sociology that aligns with the realities of contemporary society. He argues that the Islamic Republic has invested heavily in emotional and religious rhetoric, failing to align its governance with the rational, life-centred concerns of the people. This misalignment, according to Armaki, has contributed to the instability and unrest observed in recent protests.

Azad Armaki identifies the "Woman, Life, Freedom" slogan as a deeply rooted expression of middle-class demands in Iran. This interpretation challenges narratives that dismiss the movement as reactionary or externally influenced, instead positioning it as a genuine and organic expression of widespread societal grievances. Armaki's assessment underscores the movement's significance within the broader context of Iranian social and political life, suggesting that it represents more than just a transient protest. Instead, it is indicative of a broader, more profound desire for change within Iranian society, driven by the middle class's unmet demands for rights and freedoms.

In his analysis, Armaki critiques the Islamic Republic's approach to governance, particularly its reliance on ideologized knowledge and its failure to deliver on grand promises. This critique aligns with the broader scepticism within Iranian sociology regarding the applicability of Islamic sociology in addressing contemporary social issues. Armaki suggests that the Islamic Republic's failure to adapt to the rational and practical needs of its citizens, particularly those of the middle class, has led to a loss of legitimacy and increasing social unrest. His emphasis on the need for a more responsive and rational governance framework reflects a broader trend in Iranian sociology that questions the effectiveness of ideologically driven approaches in a rapidly changing society.

<sup>35</sup> T. Azad Armaki, *The Issue of the Morality Police and Iran's Social Crises: Debate between Taghi Azad Armaki and Ebrahim Fayyaz*, held on September 23, 2022, *Shiveh Television Program on IRIB*, <https://bit.ly/40gOnL6>.

the state oversteps its bounds by imposing ideological mandates on lifestyle choices, it inevitably politicizes those aspects of life that should remain private, thereby radicalizing even the most basic demands for normalcy. His argument aligns with theories of state-society relations where excessive control and lack of responsiveness lead to social unrest. Fakouhi also touches on the broader impacts of globalization, suggesting that Iranian society's awareness of global standards of living has intensified the demand for a life that meets these standards, further fuelling the protests.

Fakouhi is critical of the Iranian state's failure to adapt to the changing needs and demands of its citizens. He argues that the state's inability to provide a "normal life" – defined as one with basic economic stability, personal freedom, and dignity – has led to the radicalization of societal demands. This critique is rooted in his observation that the state's response to these demands has often been counterproductive, escalating tensions rather than resolving them. Fakouhi warns that the current trajectory is unsustainable; continued state interference and the failure to address the basic needs of the population will only lead to further instability and social unrest.

Fakouhi's examination provides profound insights into the prospective trajectory of Iranian social structures. He suggests that social unrest will continue to grow unless the state fundamentally reevaluates its approach – shifting from ideological rigidity to a more flexible, responsive governance model. The state's focus on controlling the narrative and imposing its ideology at the expense of addressing real social and economic issues is seen as a major flaw. Fakouhi implies that a return to rational governance, where the state prioritizes the welfare and basic rights of its citizens, is the only viable path to stability. If this shift does not occur, the cycle of protest and repression is likely to continue, with increasingly severe consequences for Iranian society.

## 2. Islamist sociologists' perspective on "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement

### Alireza Shojaei Zand's perspective about on "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement

At first glance, Alireza Shojaei-Zand does not appear to endorse Islamic Sociology; however, he posits that sociology can be utilized to further Islamic governance. He is also known for his critique of secularization in Iran.

Shojaei-Zand's analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement is embedded in a broader narrative that attributes Iran's social unrest primarily to external influences and conspiracies rather than engaging with the domestic grievances that drive such movements.<sup>37</sup> His perspective reflects a tendency to view social movements through the lens of foreign intervention and global ideological conflicts, rather than acknowledging the internal dynamics and legitimate concerns fuelling these protests. This approach aligns with a broader pattern within certain segments of Iranian intellectual

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<sup>37</sup> Shojaei-Zand, "Protests Cannot Be Sustained," in the *Dialogue Path* seminar, *Mehr News Agency*, November 20, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3PxqAzS>.



discourse, where domestic issues are often externalized, and the role of foreign states is exaggerated to explain internal dissent.

Shojaei-Zand's interpretation of the movement, as rooted in modernism, secularism, and liberalism, serves to delegitimize it by framing it as a product of Western ideological imposition rather than a genuine expression of Iranian social and political realities. This perspective diminishes the agency of the protestors and overlooks the complex socio-political factors within Iran that have contributed to the emergence of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. By linking the movement to these ideologies, Shujaei-Zand attempts to delegitimize it as a foreign import, lacking in intellectual substance and disconnected from Iran's cultural and historical context.

### **Assessment of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement**

Shojaei -Zand's assessment of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement is marked by a reliance on conspiracy theories and the notion of foreign involvement as central explanatory factors. He suggests that the movement cannot be sustained due to its lack of a cohesive intellectual or discursive foundation yet fails to provide a substantive theory of his own to explain the movement's origins, motivations, or goals. Instead, he repeatedly emphasizes the influence of external factors, particularly through virtual spaces controlled from outside Iran, as the primary drivers of the unrest. This explanation is overly simplistic and reductive, failing to engage with the deeper social, economic, and political issues that have catalysed the movement.

Shojaei -Zand's focus on the supposed role of foreign states and modernist ideologies in shaping the movement diverts attention from the legitimate grievances of the Iranian people, particularly regarding women's rights and social justice.<sup>38</sup> His assertion that the movement lacks intellectual substance and is merely a reflection of Western influence undermines the protestors' demands and dismisses the movement's potential to effect meaningful change within Iranian society. By attributing the movement to external forces, Shujaei-Zand effectively absolves the Iranian political system of responsibility for the underlying issues that have led to widespread discontent.

A significant critique of Shojaei -Zand's analysis is his failure to present a coherent theory that adequately explains the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. While he is quick to dismiss the movement as unsustainable and driven by foreign influences, he does not offer a robust theoretical framework to analyse or understand it. Instead, his analysis relies on generalized critiques of modernism and secularism, without delving into the specific socio-political context of Iran that has given rise to the movement.

Shojaei -Zand's reliance on conspiracy theories and externalization of social unrest suggests an intellectual approach that is more focused on defending the status quo than on critically engaging

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<sup>38</sup> A. Shojaee-Zand, *Iranian Social Theory: Debate between Hamidreza Jalaeipour and Alireza Shojaee-Zand*, held on January 20, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4heDka7>.

with the realities of Iranian society. This lack of theoretical innovation or depth in his analysis undermines the credibility of his arguments and reflects a broader issue within certain strands of Iranian sociological thought, where complex social phenomena are often reduced to simplistic explanations involving foreign meddling.

The implications of Shujaei-Zand's analysis are problematic for both Iranian and global sociological discourse. His tendency to resort to conspiracy theories and external explanations for domestic social movements contributes to a narrative that delegitimizes genuine social grievances and discourages critical engagement with the underlying issues facing Iranian society. By focusing on the supposed role of foreign states and ideologies, Shujaei-Zand's analysis risks obscuring the internal dynamics that are essential for understanding the roots of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

Moreover, his failure to present a coherent theory that explains the movement highlights a significant gap in his intellectual approach. Without a robust theoretical framework, his analysis lacks the depth and rigour needed to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on social movements in Iran. This limitation not only weakens his critique of the movement but also suggests a broader reluctance within certain intellectual circles to confront the realities of social unrest in Iran head-on.

### **Hossein Kachouyan's analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement**

Hossein Kachouyan's perspective on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement reflects his broader alignment with the principles of Islamic sociology, particularly the emphasis on the role of religion in shaping social and political life in Iran.<sup>39</sup> His analysis is situated within a framework that prioritizes the Islamic Revolution as the defining social movement in Iranian history, viewing it as the culmination of 150 years of struggle against secularism and Western influence. Kachouyan's approach reflects a deep commitment to the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic, particularly the concept of Velayat-e Faqih, and a scepticism towards movements that do not align with this framework.

Kachouyan assesses the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement through a lens that largely dismisses its significance as a social movement. He argues that the recent protests lack the organizational structure, leadership, and intellectual foundation necessary to constitute a true social movement. By comparing the protests unfavourably to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Kachouyan seeks to delegitimize the movement, framing it as a chaotic and disorganized expression of discontent rather than a coherent effort to effect meaningful change. His characterization of the protests as "Daesh-like chaos" and "mafia-like riots" further underscores his dismissal of the movement's legitimacy.

In applying sociological theories to his analysis, Kachouyan draws on a traditional understanding of social movements that emphasizes the need for a strong intellectual foundation, clear leadership, and

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<sup>39</sup> H. Kachouyan, "Social Movements or Mafia Uprisings?" interview on *Jahan Ara* TV programme, Ofogh Channel, IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), October 3, 2022, <https://bit.ly/40dC9Rx>.



a unifying ideology. His reference to the Islamic Revolution as the gold standard of social movements highlights his belief in the necessity of religious forces as the primary drivers of revolutionary change. This perspective is consistent with the principles of Islamic sociology, which prioritize religious and ideological cohesion as essential components of social and political transformation.

Kachouyan's analysis also reflects a broader critique of secularism and Western influence in Iranian society. He argues that secularists, with the backing of Western powers, have historically undermined religious forces in Iran, particularly after the success of revolutions. This narrative serves to reinforce the Islamic Republic's ideological stance and to delegitimize movements that do not align with its religious and political framework.

Kachouyan's analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement can be critiqued for its narrow focus on religious ideology as the sole driver of legitimate social movements. By dismissing the recent protests as chaotic and leaderless, Kachouyan overlooks the genuine grievances and demands that have fuelled the movement. His analysis fails to account for the evolving nature of social movements in the modern context, where decentralized leadership and diverse forms of organization can also lead to significant social and political change.

The implications of Kachouyan's perspective are significant for both Iranian society and the broader field of sociology. His dismissal of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement reflects a broader reluctance within certain segments of Iranian intellectual discourse to engage with the complexities of contemporary social phenomena that challenge the status quo. By framing the protests as illegitimate and lacking in intellectual substance, Kachouyan's analysis reinforces the ideological rigidity of the Islamic Republic and limits the potential for meaningful dialogue and reform.

### **Meisam Mahdiar's perspective on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement**

Meysam Mahdiar's critique of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" slogan is driven by his perspective on how Western ideologies, particularly those related to feminism and capitalism, have influenced Iranian society. He situates his argument within the context of Iranian social theory by examining the historical trajectory of feminist movements in the West and their subsequent impact on Iranian thought. According to Mahdiar, the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" is an extension of Western capitalist and liberal ideologies that have been absorbed by Iranian feminism, leading to a distorted understanding of women's roles in society. He argues that this adoption aligns women's roles more with Western notions of individualism and consumption rather than with traditional and collectivist values that are more appropriate for Iranian society.

Mahdiar critiques the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement by asserting that it embodies a masculine ideology rather than a feminine one. He claims that the movement's slogan is steeped in classical feminist ideals, which aim to masculinize women by encouraging them to adopt roles traditionally associated with men. According to Mahdiar, this approach neglects the intrinsic differences between

men and women, differences that should be acknowledged and valued rather than erased. He argues that the movement, instead of empowering women by recognizing their unique qualities, is pushing them toward a form of freedom that aligns more with capitalist exploitation than with true liberation.

Mahdiar applies sociological theories related to capitalism, individualism, and feminism to critique the "Woman, Life, Freedom" slogan. He draws on theories of late capitalism to argue that the slogan, despite its surface-level advocacy for women's rights, actually perpetuates the commodification and exploitation of women within a capitalist framework. By likening the movement to classical feminism, Mahdiar suggests that it continues the legacy of "similarity feminism," which seeks to make women more like men, particularly in their roles as workers and consumers. He contrasts this with newer feminist theories, which recognize and celebrate the differences between men and women, advocating for roles that align with women's natural dispositions.

Mahdiar's critique of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement is rooted in his belief that the movement is fundamentally flawed because it does not challenge the underlying capitalist structures that oppress women. Instead, it reinforces these structures by promoting a form of feminism that aligns with Western liberal and capitalist values. He argues that the movement's focus on individualism and freedom, as defined by capitalist ideology, detracts from the collectivist values that should underpin Iranian society.

However, despite his critique of Western influences, Mahdiar himself paradoxically relies heavily on Western theories to substantiate his arguments. As a proponent of Islamic sociology, this reliance on Western frameworks may undermine his critique, as it suggests a failure to provide a robust Islamic analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Instead of offering an alternative rooted in Islamic thought, Mahdiar's analysis appears to mirror the very Western paradigms he critiques, thus raising questions about the consistency and originality of his approach. The implication here is that without a solid Islamic sociological foundation, critiques like Mahdiar's risk being seen as derivative rather than genuinely transformative within the Iranian intellectual discourse.

## Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article suggests a significant divide within Iranian sociology, particularly in the context of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Proponents of Islamic sociology (or critics of secular sociology like Shojaei-Zand) have largely struggled to offer a coherent and empirically grounded methodology or theory to conceptualize and analyze this significant socio-political phenomenon. Instead of developing an indigenous sociological framework rooted in Islamic principles, many Islamic sociologists have either leaned on Western theoretical paradigms or resorted to political conspiracy theories that externalize the causes of the unrest, attributing it to foreign intervention rather than addressing the legitimate social and economic grievances that have fuelled the movement.





This reliance on external explanations and Western theories paradoxically undermines the very goal of Islamic sociology – to offer a culturally relevant and epistemologically distinct framework for understanding social phenomena in Iran. The failure to provide a robust, social science-based analysis of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement exposes the limitations of Islamic sociology as it currently stands, particularly in its ability to engage with contemporary social realities in a meaningful and analytically rigorous way.

In contrast, secular sociology – despite its shortcomings – in Iran has demonstrated a more effective use of their theoretical and methodological tools in analysing the protests and the broader socio-political context. By employing established sociological frameworks and engaging critically with the specific conditions of Iranian society, secular scholars have provided nuanced and empirically grounded analyses that resonate with both the local realities and global discourses on social justice, gender rights, and political change. Their ability to draw on a diverse theoretical toolbox – ranging from theories of social anomie to state-society relations – has enabled them to offer more comprehensive and insightful explanations for the dynamics of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

The juxtaposition of these two approaches underscores the ongoing challenges and debates within Iranian sociology. The failure of Islamic sociology to provide a compelling alternative to secular frameworks highlights the need for a re-evaluation of its theoretical foundations and methodological approaches. As Iran continues to grapple with significant social and political transformations, the future of its sociology – whether Islamic or secular – will depend on its ability to develop frameworks that are both analytically rigorous and culturally resonant. Islamic sociology, in particular, must engage more deeply with theoretical details and innovative approaches to carve a meaningful path forward in the evolving landscape of Iranian sociology. Only through such intellectual evolution can Iranian sociology hope to offer meaningful contributions to the understanding of the complex and evolving realities of Iranian society.

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