

Beyond Secularism: A Framework for Women Activism in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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Abstract

The discourse of women's agency is frequently defined within a binary framework: patriarchal traditionalism of pre-modern societies versus the individualistic emancipatory promise of Western secularism. Post-revolutionary Iran presents a noteworthy case study that challenges this binarism by articulating an indigenous, state-sponsored model of women's empowerment rooted in Shiite political thought. Although this model has been central to the identity project of the Islamic Republic, international scholarship has often examined it through a secular-liberal lens and has largely overlooked the internal logic and strategic rationale of its framework. A systematic analysis of this alternative paradigm of agency remains a significant gap in the research literature. The present study seeks to answer the following question: What are the foundational components and operational mechanisms of the non-secular framework for women's agency that has been developed in post-revolutionary Iran, particularly within the political thought of its Leadership? Adopting a qualitative approach, this article undertakes a discourse analysis of the statements and writings of Ayatollah Khamenei as the principal architect of this model. The key analytical concepts employed are sexual complementarity, cultural resistance, and discursive agency. The core idea is that the Iranian model proposes a "resistance-oriented agency" and positions women not as subjects seeking liberation from religion, but rather as strategic actors who are empowered through a religious framework to participate in a civilizational struggle against Western cultural hegemony. The findings reveal a coherent framework in which women are designated as primary agents in the reproduction of religious identity and the perpetuation of the "culture of resistance." Their conscious socio-

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political participation is deemed essential for national sovereignty and cultural authenticity. By offering a nuanced analysis of an influential non-Western model of women's empowerment, this study provides a critical alternative to the universalist claims of secular feminism and contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender, religion, and politics in the contemporary world.

Keywords

Women agency, post-Revolutionary Iran, political Islam, cultural resistance, cultural hegemony.

1. Introduction

The issue of women's agency in the contemporary world is often defined within the framework of a binarism: on one side, traditionalism that confines women to the private sphere, and on the other, the liberal feminist model that regards emancipation as contingent upon transcending religious structures and embracing secular individualism. This binarism has made it difficult to comprehend alternative and indigenous models of empowerment that are defined not in opposition to religion, but from within it. Post-revolutionary Iran constitutes an exceptional case study for challenging this dominant framework. Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic has sought to present a "third" model of women's social participation that distances itself both from "traditional seclusion" and from "secular assimilation." This model, rooted in Shiite political theology, has been systematically formulated in the thought and policy-making of its Leadership and focuses on redefining the role of women in modern society. Despite the strategic importance of this model for the identity and stability of Iran's political system, the existing academic literature—particularly at the international level—has often suffered from a serious gap in its analysis. Many studies have either viewed this model solely through a security and control lens or measured it against the standards of secular feminism, thereby neglecting its internal logic, philosophical grounds, and civilizational objectives. A systematic analysis that examines this model as a "positive, coherent framework for agency" has yet to be sufficiently developed. To fill this gap, this article addresses the following fundamental question: What are the principal components and operational mechanisms of the non-secular framework for women's agency in post-revolutionary Iran? The central idea of this study is that this model proposes a "resistance-oriented agency" in which women are not subjects seeking liberation from religion, but rather strategic actors who are empowered through a religious framework to participate in a civilizational struggle against Western cultural hegemony. To substantiate this idea, the present article adopts a qualitative approach based on discourse analysis to examine the statements and writings of Ayatollah Khamenei as the principal architect of this model. The article first elucidates the theological and historical foundations of the model, then describes the multiple dimensions of women's agency (political, civilizational, and symbolic), and finally analyzes its operational mechanisms, challenges, and proposed solutions. The contribution of this study is to provide a systematic analysis of an influential non-Western model of empowerment that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between

gender, religion, and politics in the contemporary world.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study constructs a theoretical framework for analyzing the model of women's agency in post-revolutionary Iran at the intersection of critical discourse analysis, postcolonial gender studies, and political theology. These fields have been selected because the model under examination is inherently a counter-hegemonic project that simultaneously challenges two dominant discourses: on the one hand, the discourse of patriarchal traditionalism and, on the other, the discourse of secular-liberal feminism. Accordingly, the analytical tools must be capable of examining this multifaceted discursive struggle. This study, drawing inspiration from postcolonial and post-structuralist theorists (such as Foucault and Spivak), regards "discourse" not merely as a semantic system, but as an arena of hegemonic struggle. In this arena, dominant narratives such as secularism seek to universalize themselves, while alternative narratives strive for legitimacy and recognition. Discourses consolidate power relations by producing "subjects"—such as the "secular liberated woman" or the "resistant Muslim woman"—and by defining norms. In this research, discourse analysis serves as a tool to examine how the official discourse in post-revolutionary Iran seeks to construct an "alternative female subject" that demarcates itself from both the traditional and the secular models. In this framework, "discourse construction" is defined as a deliberate and strategic identity engineering. This process is not merely propagandistic; rather, it involves the creation of cultural, educational, and media infrastructures for the production and institutionalization of a non-Western collective identity. In the political thought of Ayatollah Khamenei, discourse construction constitutes a "political technology" for countering the West's soft power. This technology seeks to present a coherent and rational narrative that offers a model of life and agency capable of resisting the attractions of the liberal discourse and securing societal loyalty.

2.1. Resistance-Oriented Agency: Beyond the Secular/Religious Binary

The key concept of this article is "resistance-oriented agency." This concept is employed to describe a model of empowerment whose objective is not the attainment of individual rights within a liberal framework, but rather participation in a collective civilizational project aimed at preserving cultural and political independence. In this model, agency is intertwined with religious identity, and resistance to cultural hegemony itself becomes a form of

emancipatory action. The article examines how women are positioned as the primary bearers and agents of this type of agency.

2.2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research plan to elucidate the non-secular framework of women's agency in the political thought of Ayatollah Khamenei. The selected approach is an interpretive case study that focuses on the discursive strategies of a key political leader in constructing an alternative model. For data analysis, a combination of two complementary techniques is employed: thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis.

The primary data for this study were collected from a deliberately selected corpus of official statements and writings by Ayatollah Khamenei covering the period from 1989–2023. The selection criteria for the texts were their explicit focus on themes that highlight the contrast between the Islamic model and other models, such as “the Muslim woman versus the Western woman,” “Islamic identity versus cultural domination,” and “Islamic progress versus Western development.” The data analysis process was conducted in two interconnected stages:

Stage One: Thematic analysis.

In this stage, themes related to the components of the women's agency model were identified and coded. The key themes included “sexual complementarity,” “the civilizational role of the family,” “cultural resistance,” and “jihad of clarification” (*jihād-i tabyīn*).

Stage Two: Critical discourse analysis.

In this stage, the extracted themes were subjected to critical discourse analysis to reveal the underlying power relations and ideology. The analysis focused on:

- ◆ how the discursive strategies used to demarcate boundaries with the secular-Western “other”;
- ◆ the legitimization strategies employed to validate the Islamic model;
- ◆ the manner in which the subject of the “resistant Muslim woman” is constructed in opposition to both the “passive traditional woman” and the “instrumentalized Western woman.”

The findings of this integrated analysis reveal the existence of a coherent and strategic framework in which women's agency is defined not as being in conflict with religion, but rather as a vital element for the survival and flourishing of a religious civilizational project in the modern world.

3. Theological and Historical Grounds: Foundations of a Non-Secular Agency

The model of women's agency articulated in the discourse of the Islamic Republic derives its legitimacy not from secular-liberal philosophical foundations, but from the foundational texts and historical practices of early Islam. This section analyzes the theological foundations that provide the basis for the concept of "woman as an active socio-political agent" within a religious framework. The analysis rests on two principal pillars: the foundational event of the pledge of allegiance (*bay'a*) as a political contract, and the normative Quranic principles of dignity (*karāma*) and justice (*'adāla*).

3.1. Pledge of Allegiance: Establishing Political Citizenship within the Religious Paradigm

In the history of early Islam, the pledge of allegiance was more than a mere expression of loyalty; it constituted a social-political contract that established the individual as a responsible and participating member of the nascent Islamic ummah. The fact that numerous women directly pledged allegiance to the Prophet Muḥammad represents a key historical event which, from the very beginning, recognizes women's civil and political personality within a religious framework (Karbalaee Nazar & et al., 2012, pp. 42–286). This pledge of allegiance was not a passive acceptance of authority, but an active commitment to the shared project of building a just and resilient society. This act demonstrated that women were recognized as "stakeholders" in society who bore both the right and the duty to participate in shaping the collective destiny. Their role extended beyond the private sphere; historical evidence confirms their participation in logistical support during wars, the transmission of information, and even the assumption of leadership roles in certain areas (Zakeri & et al., 2019, p. 48). Thus, women's pledge of allegiance functions as a foundational practice in Islamic political thought and legitimizes their agency not merely as "addressees" of the Sharia, but as active participants in constructing the Islamic socio-political order. From a discursive perspective, this event marks the point of entry of woman as a recognized agent into the foundational narrative of Islam.

3.2. Dignity and Justice: The Quranic Foundation of Equality versus Secular Sameness

The concept of women's agency in Islam rests on the Quranic principle of the inherent dignity of the human being, which is granted to all persons

irrespective of gender. The Noble Quran repeatedly affirms the equal spiritual and moral status of women and men before God and calls them to the same standards of faith and righteous action. This “theological egalitarianism” provides a solid foundation for social and legal equality (Parsa, 2015, p. 54; Ahmadi-Nejad & Amin al-Ra’aya, 2020, p. 418). The crucial point that distinguishes this model from secular ones is the distinction between “equality” and “sameness.” Whereas the liberal discourse frequently pursues equality in the form of identical roles and sameness, the Islamic framework, while fully recognizing the natural and functional differences between the two sexes, rejects any notion of inherent superiority or inferiority. The ideal of Islam is “justice,” which entails granting each individual rights and responsibilities that are proportionate and appropriate, in a manner that leads to personal flourishing and social harmony. This model stands in opposition to the “assimilationist” model that disregards meaningful differences. The Prophetic tradition likewise offers a practical interpretation of these principles; the Prophet’s interactions with women consistently demonstrated respect and recognition of their intellectual and social participation. Consequently, this theological framework regards women’s participation in public life not merely as “permitted,” but as an ethical and social necessity for the realization of a just society.

4. The Multidimensional Model of Agency: An Alternative to the Tradition and Secularism

The Islamic framework, particularly as articulated in post-revolutionary Iran, conceptualizes the social role of women not as a single-dimensional identity, but as a multidimensional form of agency. This model transcends common binarisms and delineates a participation that rests on an interconnected set of theological and social principles. This agency can be analyzed along three principal dimensions which, taken together, propose a “third way” between traditional seclusion and secular-liberal individualism: the socio-political dimension, the familial-civilizational dimension, and the ethical-symbolic dimension.

4.1. Social-Political Dimension: Beyond Traditional Seclusion

In contrast to traditionalist interpretations that confine women to the private sphere, the model under discussion emphasizes their active and essential presence in public life. This dimension rests on the principle that women possess equal rights to security, education, freedom, and socio-political

participation. Their participation is regarded not merely as permissible, but as vital for the integrity and progress of society. In this perspective, women are framed as constructive social agents who bear responsibility in policy-making, social reform, and the realization of justice (Alasvand, 2023, p. 594). This view transforms them into indispensable actors in building the nation's social and political capital and explicitly demarcates itself from the seclusionist traditional discourse.

4.2. Familial-Civilizational Dimension: Beyond Secular Individualism

This framework, while affirming the public role of women, simultaneously elevates their familial role to a foundational position of civilizational significance. The roles of wife and mother are conceptualized not as domestic constraints, but as essential functions for ensuring the stability and continuity of the society's civilization (Alaei Rahmani & Motamad Langaroodi, 2015, p. 157). The mother, in particular, is regarded as the "first educator" of the next generation and the primary agent in the transmission of cultural and religious values (Hamedanian, 2011, p. 2). From this perspective, the family is viewed as a microcosm of the ideal society, and the woman, as its manager, bears the strategic responsibility of raising resilient, value-oriented citizens. This emphasis on the civilizational role of the family explicitly demarcates itself from the secular individualist discourse, which often regards the institution of the family as weakened.

4.3. Ethical-Symbolic Dimension: Agency Through a Distinct Identity

This dimension refers to the role of women as living symbols of the society's foundational ethical values. Concepts such as "hijab" and "ifāf" (chastity or modesty) are framed not as instruments of repression, but as instruments of empowerment and social critique. In this discourse, hijab performs a symbolic function as a marker of religious identity and a public act of resistance against the "commodification" and "sexualization" of women in Western liberal culture. It is argued that hijab, by "desexualizing the public space," enables women to participate in social and professional life on the basis of their intellect, skills, and character rather than their physical appearance. This symbolic capital allows the Muslim woman to embody an alternative modernity and actively challenge the norms of global consumer culture. These three dimensions are not separate from one another; rather, they form a holistic and integrated model. The ethical-symbolic integrity of women reinforces their credibility and effectiveness in the socio-political sphere, while their

civilizational role in the family lends a forward-looking depth to their public actions. Taken together, these dimensions construct a distinctive paradigm of women's agency that seeks to chart a third path between patriarchal restrictions and secular-liberal individualism.

5. The Philosophical Framework of Agency: The Principle of Complementarity and Strategic Drivers

The Islamic discourse on the social role of women, particularly in the context of post-revolutionary Iran, rests on a distinctive philosophical framework that seeks to harmonize theological principles with the demands of modern social life. This framework rejects both the seclusionist models of patriarchal traditionalism and the individualistic models of Western secular feminism. In their place, it advances the paradigm of "gender complementarity" as its foundational principle, according to which women and men possess equal value but hold distinct, mutually reinforcing roles in the pursuit of societal well-being.

5.1. The Principle of Complementarity as an Alternative to Secular Sameness

The core of this discourse lies in a nuanced understanding of the concept of "equality." While emphasizing the absolute equality of women and men in terms of human dignity, spiritual capacity, and fundamental rights (Norouzi & et al., 2019, p. 121), this framework recognizes psychological and physiological differences not as deficiencies, but as sources of functional diversity. It holds that these differences lead to complementary, rather than identical, social functions (Bankipourfard, 2017, pp. 33–34). This perspective positions itself as an alternative to the secular feminist discourse, which sometimes equates equality with the homogenization of identities and roles. The 1979 Islamic Revolution served as a historical turning point, bringing a generation of religious women into the public sphere. Their participation was not an imitation of Western models, but was grounded in an indigenous interpretation of Islamic teachings that regarded social responsibility as an obligation (Sadeghi, 2012, p. 72).

5.2. Necessity of Social Participation as a Religious Obligation

Based on the principle of complementarity, Islam not only permits but actively encourages women's participation in all dimensions of public life. This encouragement is not a modern concession, but is rooted in the foundational

Islamic texts and practices. The Quran and the Prophetic tradition are interpreted in such a way as to define a shared responsibility for women and men in building a just and virtuous society (Larijani & et al., 2018, p. 108). This responsibility encompasses active participation in education, politics, media, and civil society. The effective presence of women at key historical moments, as recorded in sacred history, is presented as a normative practice rather than as historical exceptions (Rabi-Nataj & Ruhollahzadeh Andevvari, 2010, p. 32).

5.3. Strategic Drivers of Non-Secular Agency

The Islamic imperative for the active participation of women is guided by an interconnected set of strategic rationales that encompass theological, socio-functional, and teleological dimensions:

1) Theological driver: Inherent dignity. The primary driver is the theological principle of the equal inherent dignity of all human beings. Since the ultimate criterion for human worth is God-wariness (*taqwā*) and righteous action, gender has no bearing on an individual's spiritual and moral standing. This principle provides the foundational justification for equal opportunities in all spheres that contribute to moral and social growth.

2) Socio-functional driver: Foundational roles. Women perform vital roles as mothers, wives, and educators that are essential for social cohesion and civilizational continuity. These roles are not viewed as being in conflict with public participation; rather, they are regarded as a unique foundation for it. Family stability is considered the cornerstone of a stable society, placing women, from a functional perspective, at the very center of the entire social edifice.

3) Teleological driver: Individual and collective flourishing. Social participation is regarded as a vital path for the personal growth and self-realization of women. By employing their talents and abilities in service to society, women not only attain individual fulfillment but also share in the collective salvation and flourishing (*falāḥ*) of the ummah (Nosrat-Talab Haghi, 2020, p. 45). The progress of a society is directly linked to the degree to which all its members, including women, are empowered to reach their full potential (Eghbali Mahdiabadi, 2008, p. 57).

Ultimately, the lives of key female figures in Islamic history, such as Lady Fāṭima al-Zahrā' and Lady Zaynab, are presented as normative exemplars. They are not merely venerable personalities but outstanding models of wisdom, political courage, and responsibility that provide a powerful

paradigm for contemporary Muslim women (Bankipourfard, 2017, pp. 33–34).

6. Challenges and Strategies of Empowerment: Realization of a Non-Secular Model

Despite the robust theological framework supporting women's agency, its full realization in Muslim societies faces serious obstacles. The discourse endorsed by Ayatollah Khamenei is not merely a statement of ideals, but also serves as a roadmap for overcoming these challenges. This section first analyzes the principal barriers to women's social participation and then elucidates the strategic solutions proposed for their empowerment within a non-secular model.

6.1. Three Challenges for the Realization of the Model

The obstacles to women's full social and political participation can be categorized into three interconnected levels: cultural, structural, and individual agency-related. At the **cultural level**, one of the most deep-rooted challenges is the persistence of patriarchal norms that, in the name of tradition, confine women to the domestic sphere and regard their public presence as a deviation. These entrenched attitudes, often reinforced by misinterpretations of religion, create significant psychological and social barriers and restrict women's horizons for advancement. At the **structural level**, systemic discrimination manifests in the form of laws, unequal policies, and biased institutional practices that obstruct progress. These barriers may appear as a "glass ceiling" in career advancement (Fallahi, 2023, p. 56), unequal access to resources, or hidden biases that undermine women's self-confidence. Consequently, at the **level of individual agency**, a lack of "awareness of rights" and legal literacy among many women constitutes a key obstacle. Insufficient education about civil rights and personal capabilities often leads to passive acceptance of the status quo and prevents the emergence of proactive social demands (Hakimzadeh Khoei & et al., 2021, p. 37).

6.2. Empowerment Strategies from the Perspective of a Local Paradigm

Overcoming these obstacles requires a multifaceted strategic approach that simultaneously targets cultural norms, legal structures, and individual capacities. The proposed framework for empowerment, which emerges from the internal logic of this very non-secular paradigm, rests on three pillars: First, cultural and normative reforms that, through cultural and educational

planning, confront discriminatory mindsets. The media, the educational system, and religious institutions are identified as key arenas for redefining and promoting a balanced and respectful understanding of women's role in society. Second, structural and legal reforms that involve reviewing and implementing supportive laws to ensure gender equality in employment, education, and political participation. These legal reforms must be accompanied by robust oversight mechanisms to guarantee their effective implementation and the elimination of systemic discrimination. Third, capacity-building and networking that necessitate direct investment in women's skills and knowledge. This includes specialized workshops, training courses in leadership and communication, and the promotion of legal literacy. Establishing supportive networks—such as women's cooperatives, professional associations, and mentoring programs—is essential for fostering solidarity and providing a platform for collective action. In addition, this strategy emphasizes the importance of men's accompaniment and support, recognizing that transforming patriarchal structures requires the active participation and backing of men in promoting gender justice.

7. Women as Agents of Resistance: From Historical Agency to Discursive Strategy

The theoretical framework of women's agency in Islam finds its most powerful political manifestation in the "discourse of resistance." Within this framework, women are not positioned as passive subjects but as pivotal and dynamic actors in the historical and contemporary struggles against injustice, imperialism, and cultural hegemony. Their roles transcend traditional stereotypes, transforming them into key figures in preserving identity and mobilizing for social and political change. This section analyzes the multifaceted roles of women in the culture of resistance, drawing on historical practices and the strategic insights of Ayatollah Khamenei.

7.1. Historical Archetypes and Normative Models

Islam does not permit the Islamic society to remain indifferent toward the domineering and tyrannical ambitions of the arrogant powers (Siyahsar & et al., 2020, p. 493). The historical participation of Muslim women in anti-colonial and anti-despotic movements provides the empirical foundation for their contemporary role. From the Algerian War of Independence—in which women served as intelligence agents and logistical pillars—to the Islamic Revolution of Iran, where figures such as Marzieh Hadidchi (Dabagh) became

enduring symbols of revolutionary agency both at home and abroad (Ettehadiyeh & et al., 2011, p. 14), women have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity for strategic participation. Nevertheless, within the discourse of the Islamic Republic, these historical actions are elevated beyond mere “activism”; they are framed as manifestations of profound Islamic principles. The steadfastness of women in these struggles is regarded as an extension of normative archetypes drawn from sacred history—most notably the figures of Lady Fatima al-Zahra and Lady Zaynab (peace be upon them), who embody exceptional and distinguished qualities (Ghanbari, 2024, p. 72). These personalities are not simply venerated; they are presented as exemplars of a distinctly feminine form of political agency that fuses spiritual faith with public courage and strategic communication. This historical narrative legitimizes the agency of contemporary women and inspires them to see themselves as inheritors of a long-standing tradition of resistance.

7.2. Women as Guardians of Islamic Values and Cultural Identity

In the thought of Ayatollah Khamenei, the modern battlefield is primarily a cultural and ideological arena. Consequently, women are positioned as the frontline defenders in this “soft war.” Their principal role is to serve as guardians of Islamic values and identity against what is described as the tide of Western cultural globalization. This guardianship is exercised through multiple mechanisms: Embodiment of symbolic resistance: Through committed observance of hijab and modesty, women perform a public act that affirms their identity. This is framed not as a restriction but as a powerful declaration of cultural independence and a rejection of the objectification of women prevalent in consumerist societies. Cultural production within the family: As the primary educators of the next generation, mothers bear the responsibility of institutionalizing the values of faith, steadfastness, and justice. This role is regarded as a form of “silent yet highly effective jihad” that builds the human foundation of a resilient society (Faghihi, 2017, p. 156). Preservation of social cohesion: By strengthening the institution of the family—considered the fundamental nucleus of society in Islamic thought—women act as a bulwark against social disintegration and the erosion of traditional ethical structures. As Ayatollah Khamenei has emphasized: “The Iranian Muslim woman has opened a new chapter before the eyes of the world’s women: one can be a woman, chaste, veiled, dignified—and yet stand at the very center of events.” (2014, March 6) This vision presents an alternative paradigm of the empowered woman—one who is active and influential yet firmly rooted in a

distinctive ethical framework. Throughout all the major events and public issues in Iran, women have consistently taken the lead (Safari, 1995, pp. 46–139) and have demonstrated profound self-confidence in their approach (Amraei, 2023, p. 241).

Table 1 – Thematic Analysis of the Leader’s Statements Regarding the Representation of the Muslim Woman’s Identity Discourse

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Semantic system of the discourse of resistance and the revival of Muslim women’s identity in social arenas	Redefining women’s social roles from the perspective of the Islamic Revolution’s nature-centered (fitrah-oriented) approach	“Women who blended the pinnacle of feminine sentiment, tenderness, and mercy with the spirit of jihad, martyrdom, and resistance, and conquered the most masculine of battlefields” (March 6, 2013)
	The elite role of women in reproducing Islamic identity and providing social and cultural cohesion within the framework of cultural resistance	“The efforts of elite women throughout the Islamic world to revive Islamic identity constitute the greatest service to the Islamic Ummah” (July 12, 2012)
The strategic role of women in transforming communicative capacities and intellectual synergy into effective actions for constructing the culture of Islamic resistance	The social role of women in organizing collective movements, building cultural institutions, and sustaining effective actions within the Islamic Ummah	“Do not content yourselves with merely sitting together and conversing for a few days; make this gathering the prelude to a great and enduring movement” (July 12, 2012)
The Iranian Muslim woman as an active agent of the discourse of resistance and an identity model for women worldwide	Presenting the civilization-building model of the Iranian Muslim woman in opposition to the instrumental Western model of womanhood	“The Iranian Muslim woman has opened a new chapter before the eyes of the world’s women: one can be a woman, chaste, veiled, dignified—and yet stand at the very center of events” (March 6, 2013)
Recreating the Muslim woman’s identity within the Islamic discourse of resistance	Discursive clarification and correction of the image of the Muslim woman; correcting public perception; women’s gatherings as platforms for content production; education/awareness-raising; epistemic penetration	“Secondly, regarding the issue of the Iranian and Muslim woman... important and necessary matters should be raised ... so that they may effectively correct public perception” (May 11, 2013)
	Supporting social participation; employment and civil activity; utilizing women’s human capital; participatory equality	“I support all forms of social participation... Women constitute half of society, and it is very good... that we make use of this half of society” (January 4, 2012)
	The necessity of theoretical research; the family as a scholarly issue; development of discussion-based approaches	“The issue of women and family ... remains an important, discussable, and expandable topic in intellectual deliberation” (May 22, 2011)
Women as producers of theory and facilitators of translating theory into practice within the structure of resistance culture	Intellectual empowerment; problem-solving capacity; elite role and provision of solutions	“You (women) can think, engage in intellectual work, study... and, in practice, offer executable solutions” (May 22, 2011)

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Empowering elite women to consolidate and expand the discourse of resistance	Religious education of women; training in jurisprudence and research; development of women's seminars	"The phenomenon of female seminary students is a tremendously blessed and momentous development... thousands of scholars and researchers... should be trained in women's seminars" (October 20, 2010)
Activating women's social capital through Quranic activities to broaden the discourse of resistance	Quranic/religious activity; creation of religious role models; cultural penetration through religious practitioners	"To all the respected ladies... active in Quranic work throughout the country... your presence... will inspire the women of the nation" (October 20, 2009)
Women as the social pivot in consolidating and expanding the cultural and Quranic discourse of resistance	Countering the Western model; correcting the public image; women's cultural responsibility	"Today the responsibility of our country's women is heavy... the erroneous view of the Western world... you must correct this view" (July 4, 2007)
Modeling successful women to extend the will and culture of resistance in society	Sports as a model; strengthening resolve and morale; behavioral modeling	"Another dimension of this work (sports) is its spiritual and psychological aspect... it manifests the firm resolve of women and prepares the ground for strengthening will in society" (November 21, 2005)
Strengthening and consolidating the discourse of resistance through women's active participation	Historical presence in the Revolution; practical and field-level roles; creation of epics	"The role of women in the Revolution was immense... the Revolution opened a field, and women created more epics than men" (February 2, 1999)
Activating women in scientific and social arenas to reinforce the discourse of resistance	University as a field of growth; scientific flourishing of women; scholarly self-confidence	"The entry of girls into university is in itself a good thing... women gain flourishing and the courage to engage with scholarly matters" (October 10, 1998)
Female elites as the axis of producing and directing the identity-resistance discourse	Recovering true identity; the role of educated women in reconstructing symbols; intellectual leadership	"I urge women of knowledge and education to undertake a correct and serious movement to recover the true personality of the Muslim woman" (July 21, 1997)
Linking resistant reconstruction with recognition of women's social role	The importance of women's human capital; consequences of erroneous attitudes for development; necessity of revising attitudes	"In the era of reconstruction... the greatest reliance is on human resources... half the country's population are women; if there exists a mistaken view regarding women, reconstruction... will not be possible" (March 10, 1997)
Constructing a secure educational environment to activate half of the nation's human capital and strengthen the foundations of cultural resistance	Security of the university environment; opportunities for academic growth; grounds for women's advancement	"Today the university environment is not one that a young Muslim girl should fear... the field is one of growth and progress" (November 29, 1993)
Utilizing the symbolic capital of elite women to legitimize and expand the resistance discourse	The existence of female scholarly capital; celebration of scientific achievements; signs of progress	"Today how many outstanding female scholars and scientists we have in various disciplines in our society... distinguished top-tier physicians!" (December 15, 1992)
Activating women's scholarly capital as the core of producing and promoting the discourse of resistance	Support for training female scientists; utilization of talents; educational policy-making	"Knowledge is something extremely precious, and I am in favor of women... becoming scientists in all disciplines" (December 25, 1991)

Overarching Themes	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Women as messengers and structural agents in constructing the culture of resistance discourse	The global message of the Iranian woman; praxis-oriented modeling; integration of knowledge and ethics	"You ladies have a message for the world... the message is above all a practical one... the women of Iran must practically demonstrate that pursuing knowledge does not conflict with observing ethical standards" (January 16, 1990)

An examination of the statements of the Supreme Leader clearly demonstrates that His thought on women's agency offers a coherent, resistance-centered framework that originates from profound identity-based, religious, and civilizational foundations and, through a thoroughly non-secular approach, redefines the position of women within the context of the Islamic Revolution. In this framework, the Muslim woman is recognized not only as a "reproducer of religious and value-based identity" but also as an "active agent of resistance" who plays a decisive role in social, cultural, and even political arenas. Drawing upon the primacy of human nature (*fiṭra*), human dignity, and gender complementarity, she presents an identity-based and civilizational alternative to secular Western models. This paradigm does not confine women's participation solely to the domestic sphere; rather, through diverse mechanisms—cultural discourse construction, religious and scholarly institution-building, symbolic narrative production, and action-oriented organization—it creates the necessary conditions for their purposeful and dynamic presence in the domain of resistance. Thus, the Leader's thought, by integrating identity-related, epistemic, and operational dimensions, offers a comprehensive model of women's social role in shaping and strengthening the discourse of resistance—one that is not merely a theoretical response to contemporary challenges but also delineates, at the level of concrete agency, specific mechanisms for the realization of this model.

7.3. Women as Strategic Agents in Fighting the Global Hegemony

Women are called upon to go far beyond their defensive role and to become active, strategic agents in the global anti-hegemonic struggle. This requires a transition from the position of "objects of discourse" to that of "producers of discourse." Ayatollah Khamenei describes this role as "the greatest service to the Islamic Ummah" and urges elite women to take the lead in the effort to "revive Islamic identity" (2021, January 17). This strategic agency is multifaceted:

Political mobilization: As witnessed in the Islamic Revolution and the "Islamic Awakening," women's participation lends moral legitimacy and

popular depth to political movements. Their presence transforms protests into broad, society-wide demands.

Public diplomacy and “jihad of clarification”: Educated and articulate women are encouraged to engage in intellectual forums and media spaces to present an authentic narrative of Islam and to challenge the West’s distorted representations. This constitutes a key component of the “jihad of clarification.” Building transnational networks: By forging connections with Muslim women across the world, women contribute to the formation of a transnational “front of resistance,” integrating local struggles into a unified global movement. The call for the 2011 International Congress on “Women and the Islamic Awakening” exemplifies the launching of a great and enduring movement. Within this framework, women are the indispensable driving force of the discourse of resistance. Their active and conscious participation endows the movement with an ethical compass, cultural resilience, and the strategic capacity for long-term success.

8. Mechanisms and Strategies of Agency: The Practical Realization of a Non-Secular Framework

Within Ayatollah Khamenei’s intellectual framework, women are not merely the audience of the discourse of resistance; they are its primary architects. They deploy an array of mechanisms to construct, sustain, and disseminate the culture of resistance, thereby transforming abstract values into lived social realities.

8.1. Mechanisms of Discourse Construction: Tools for an Alternative Agency

Women’s discursive agency operates through four key mechanisms:

1. Normative framing of sacrifice and martyrdom: Women are positioned as the primary narrators and ethical interpreters of the concepts of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. By recounting the lives of martyrs and framing sacrifice as a “rational, value-driven choice” (Nasiri & Bakhtiari, 2022, p. 56), they transform personal loss into a source of collective pride and ideological endurance. This narrative act is essential for sustaining the emotional and moral energy of the resistance movement.

2. Institutional reproduction of identity within the family: The family is conceptualized as the foundational institution and the “principal stronghold” of resistance. As managers of this institution, women bear the responsibility of inter-generational transmission of resistance values. Through child-rearing,

they reproduce the identity of the “resistant citizen” and guarantee the long-term continuity of the discourse.

3. Cultural production and counter-hegemonic narratives: Women actively participate in cultural production—through literature, art, and media—to create and disseminate counter-hegemonic narratives. By crafting women-centered stories of resistance, they challenge dominant Western representations and construct new identity paradigms that resonate deeply with Islamic values.

4. Social-political mobilization: Through participation in elections, non-governmental organizations, and social activism, women translate discursive principles into tangible political action. Their engagement is rooted in demands for justice, empowerment, and the implementation of indigenous solutions to social problems (Faraji Sabokbar & et al., 2021, p. 62).

The gap between the Supreme Leader’s vision and the tangible reality experienced by women in Iran stems from a complex, overlapping set of obstacles: the failure to translate theory into concrete, measurable objectives, indicators, and time-bound programs, coupled with the breakdown of the policy cycle in clearly separating the roles of designer, implementer, and overseer; institutional fragmentation and lack of coordination among state organs, leading to duplicated efforts and contradictory incentives; structural constraints in the labor market and a chronic shortage of employment opportunities for women; the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and the absence of practical support services for working mothers; contradictions between official messaging and actual implementation practices, which erode public trust; the pervasive influence of competing narratives and role models in traditional and social media; restricted civic space and insufficient infrastructure for meaningful activism; interpretive disagreements even among committed revolutionary elites; and the scarcity of reliable, monitorable data and performance metrics. Thus, the fundamental problem lies far less in the content of the theory itself than in the “deficiencies of the implementation system”—that is, the absence of coordinated mechanisms, adequate resource allocation, and proper benchmarking required to transform discourse into effective policy. Without these, even the most elevated strategic principles inevitably fail to produce tangible change.

8.2. Overcoming the Obstacles: A Strategic Framework for Realizing the Model

Realizing this model faces significant challenges, including structural

discrimination, external cultural pressures, and insufficient institutional support. A strategic framework to overcome these obstacles comprises the following components:

Structural reforms: Implementing policies that guarantee equal access to education, employment, and decision-making positions is essential for dismantling systemic barriers and fully unlocking women's potential. This necessarily includes confronting phenomena such as the "glass ceiling" (Fallahi, 2023, p. 56).

Cultural reinforcement: Countering Western cultural penetration requires proactive cultural production. This entails creating and promoting high-quality media content (films, podcasts, books) that presents an authentic and compelling narrative of the Islamic way of life and its values.

Empowerment and capacity-building: Strengthening women's agency demands deliberate investment in their social capital through targeted education, support for civil-society initiatives, and a critical re-examination of traditional attitudes. The objective is to empower women to become more effective negotiators and leaders within existing social structures (Mir Torabi & et al., 2021, p. 152).

Table 2 – Challenges and Proposed Solutions for the Empowerment and Support of Socially Active Women in Constructing the Culture of Resistance Discourse

No.	Challenges	Proposed Solutions
1	Gender discrimination in education, employment, and decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating equal educational and employment opportunities • Ensuring women's participation in high-level decision-making • Enacting supportive legislation
2	Cultural assaults (Western lifestyle, promotion of unveiling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening religious education and insight-building programs • Producing resistance-oriented artistic content • Critiquing deviant cultural currents
3	Lack of financial resources and facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing financial support for women-led projects • Establishing specialized associations • Harnessing grassroots capacities
4	Social restrictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing workshops on raising resilient children • Establishing family counseling centers • Promoting successful female role models
5	Risks and harms of cyberspace for active women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming purposeful virtual networks • Utilizing international platforms • Coordinating cultural institutions
6	Psychological and security threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a safe environment for women's activism • Offering legal support to female activists • Strengthening the spirit of jihad and resilience

No.	Challenges	Proposed Solutions
7	Insufficient attractive resistance-oriented content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Producing impactful films and podcasts • Publishing resistance-themed fiction books • Designing educational computer games
8	Marginal presence in global media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launching multilingual media outlets • Documenting the experiences of women strugglers • Collaborating with aligned international media
9	Challenges in raising a resistant generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing specialized curricula for mothers • Establishing model resistance schools • Designing educational mobile applications
10	Legal and juridical obstacles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drafting bills to support active women • Creating free legal aid offices • Teaching citizenship rights

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that the intellectual framework developed in post-revolutionary Iran offers a coherent, sophisticated, and strategically oriented model of non-secular women's agency that operates well beyond the familiar binary of "traditionalism versus liberal feminism." In this paradigm, systematically articulated in the thought of Ayatollah Khamenei, women are not passive subjects confined to the private sphere; rather, they are the principal discursive agents in a larger civilizational project. Their responsibility is to preserve Islamic identity, resist Western cultural hegemony, and ensure the inter-generational continuity of the revolutionary enterprise. Their agency is multidimensional, encompassing the familial, cultural, and political domains, and is framed not as a concession to modernity but as the authentic manifestation of Islamic principles themselves. The findings demonstrate that women serve as the vital link between the private sphere of faith and family and the public sphere of politics and society. They are discursive architects who lay the foundations of a resilient society within the home and ambassadors who defend its values in the public arena. Their conscious, purposeful, and effective participation is regarded as a necessary condition for the success of the discourse of resistance; without their active role, this project would lose both its moral authority and its social depth. Historical experiences—from anti-colonial struggles to the Islamic Revolution and the Sacred Defense (Iranian defense against Iraqi invasion)—are, within this framework, reinterpreted as strategic lessons for the contemporary era.

The contribution of this research to the academic literature lies in offering a nuanced analysis of an indigenous, non-Western model of women's empowerment. This article challenges the simplistic binary of "oppression

versus secular liberation” and instead presents a sophisticated, strategically elaborated framework in which women’s agency is inextricably bound to a collective project of civilizational resistance. Understanding this paradigm is not only essential for grasping the socio-political dynamics of contemporary Iran but also provides a valuable case study for recognizing the diverse ways in which women’s agency is being redefined and enacted across the world in response to the pressures of globalization.

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