

The Role of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Promoting Women's Labour Rights Across Countries, with Particular Emphasis on the Iranian Legal System

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Abstract

This article examines the role of international organizations in promoting women workers' rights, with particular emphasis on the Iranian legal system. The central research question concerns the extent to which the normative and supervisory mechanisms of these organizations, particularly the International Labour Organization (ILO), have influenced the formation and development of legal rules governing women's employment in different countries and the degree to which Iran's legal system has aligned itself with these standards. To this end, using descriptive-analytical and comparative approaches, the article first explains the concepts of labour law, women workers' rights, employment discrimination, and gender equality. It then examines the status of ILO conventions and recommendations and their relationship with human rights instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Subsequently, the role of international organizations at the global level is analyzed in relation to three principal areas: standard-setting, supervision and follow-up, and influencing legislative and policy reforms. Finally, the Iranian legal system is evaluated in terms of the prohibition of discrimination, the protection of women workers, and accession to key ILO conventions. The findings indicate that although Iran has achieved a certain degree of normative convergence with international standards by recognizing principles such as the equality of women and men in the Constitution, equal remuneration for work of equal value under the Labour Law, and accession to conventions concerning non-discrimination and equal remuneration, substantial implementation gaps remain. These include the absence of comprehensive legislation prohibiting discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, the restrictive effects of certain family laws on women's right to employment, the weakness of supervisory institutions and independent labour organizations, and cultural and structural barriers within the labour market. Drawing on the capacities of Islamic jurisprudence, the Iranian Constitution, and ILO standards, the article concludes by proposing legislative reforms, the strengthening of implementing institutions, and measures to enhance the legal and social status of women workers.

Keywords: International organizations; International Labour Organization (ILO); women workers' rights; employment discrimination; gender equality; international labour standards; conventions and recommendations; Iranian legal system; decent work.

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1. Introduction

Women's employment and their position in the labour market constitute some of the most important indicators of human development and social justice. Nevertheless, the situation of employed women, particularly women workers, remains marginalized in many countries, including Iran. Women face the disregard of certain fundamental human and occupational rights, discrimination in access to opportunities, exclusion from career advancement, the failure to provide equal remuneration for work of equal value, restrictions on access to managerial positions, and, in some cases, sexual harassment and violence. These forms of discrimination, together with the absence of strategic policymaking and research aimed at removing structural barriers, underscore the need for a comprehensive reconsideration of the legal and institutional frameworks designed to protect women workers.

At the practical level, many employers, without sufficient regard for the instruments adopted by the International Labour Organization, the principles of international labour law, or even domestic legislation, create working environments for women that fall short of minimum occupational safety and health standards. Long working hours, the absence of safe equipment, polluted workplaces, inadequate training, and the weakness of independent workers' organizations effectively deprive women of their most basic occupational and human rights and reproduce cycles of poverty, gender inequality, and declining national productivity. Under such circumstances, a comparative examination of protective systems and the use of international experience and standards may provide guidance for reforming domestic laws and policies.

Following the Industrial Revolution and the large-scale entry of women into the labour market, the protection of women workers became one of the principal concerns of emerging international institutions. The establishment of the International Labour Organization and the adoption of numerous conventions and recommendations concerning non-discrimination, safe working conditions, maternity protection, and the guarantee of "equal remuneration for work of equal value" represented the international community's institutional response to this historical necessity. Although labour law emerged in Iran later than in industrialized countries, it has gradually moved closer to international norms under the influence of these global developments and aspirations for social justice. The formation of workers' and employers' organizations, the establishment of Islamic labour councils, the protective intervention of the state, the acceptance of certain key ILO conventions, and the Constitution's emphasis on the rejection of discrimination and the protection of human dignity are indications of this development.

Nevertheless, the available evidence demonstrates that a substantial gap remains in the practical realization of international labour standards relating to women. Formal and informal restrictions on access to managerial and specialized occupations, employment insecurity, difficulties in using protest and trade-union mechanisms, low wages relative to living costs, and restrictions arising from marital status indicate that the transition from "legal text" to "social reality" has not been completed. At the same time, the jurisprudential and normative foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, through their recognition of the permissibility of women's economic participation and their rejection of "being male" as a condition for the legitimacy of economic activity, provide important capacities for strengthening the protection of women workers. These capacities, however, have not yet been fully embodied in binding rules and effective enforcement mechanisms.

Against this background, the central research question is: "What role has the International Labour Organization played in promoting women workers' rights in different countries, and to what extent has the Iranian legal system succeeded in aligning itself with these standards and benefiting from international experience?" By focusing on ILO conventions, recommendations, and programmes concerning women workers, this study examines examples of the implementation of these instruments in other countries. It also investigates their acceptance and implementation, as well as the challenges and obstacles affecting their application within the Iranian legal system. Finally, it proposes practical strategies based on international experience and the capacities of Islamic law for enhancing the protection of women workers' rights in Iran.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Framework

This section explains the four concepts of “labour law,” “women workers’ rights,” “employment discrimination,” and “gender equality” as the principal conceptual framework of the study, thereby establishing the basis for the subsequent comparative and legal analysis.

2.1. *Labour Law*

In its broad sense, labour law refers to a body of mandatory and protective rules governing subordinate employment relationships between workers and employers, conditions of employment, occupational safety and health, working and rest hours, wages and benefits, workers’ organization, and mechanisms for supervision and dispute resolution. At the international level, these rules are embodied in “international labour standards,” which the International Labour Organization characterizes as a comprehensive system of legal instruments in the fields of labour and social policy and as the legal pillar of its strategy for achieving “decent work” ([International Labour Organization, 2014](#)).

From this perspective, labour law is not merely a collection of technical rules governing employment contracts; rather, it seeks to establish a balance between the logic of the market and the requirements of social justice. Its formation and development are therefore closely connected with the concepts of “social justice” and “lasting peace” contained in the foundational instruments of the International Labour Organization. In many countries, labour law has also become increasingly intertwined with the discourse of human rights and constitutional rights ([International Labour Organization, 2014](#)).

2.2. *Women Workers’ Rights*

“Women workers’ rights” may be defined as a specialized field of labour law concerned with the particular situation of women at two levels: the “right to work” and “rights at work.” This field addresses both the structural barriers restricting women’s access to the labour market, including gender stereotypes, legal and cultural restrictions on entering certain occupations, and disparities in education and skills, and the rights of women after entering employment. These rights include the right to fair and safe working conditions, maternity protection, freedom from wage discrimination, access to social security, and the rights to organize and engage in collective bargaining. Analytical guidance concerning women’s right to work and rights at work indicates that women workers’ rights are defined through three principal categories of international instruments: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and a body of ILO conventions and recommendations addressing discrimination, equal remuneration, maternity protection, occupational safety and health, and social protection ([International Labour Organization, 2007](#)).

Within this framework, women’s “right to work” is regarded as an inherent right inseparable from human dignity. It encompasses the right to access work that is “freely chosen or accepted” on an equal basis with men. This right is expressly recognized in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and is connected with rights relating to education, skills development, access to productive resources, and social protection ([International Labour Organization, 2007](#)). At the level of “rights at work,” a range of obligations is imposed on states and employers to guarantee safe and humane working conditions, prohibit wage discrimination, protect pregnant women and working mothers, prevent harassment and violence, and ensure equal access to social security ([International Labour Organization, 2007](#)).

2.3. *Employment Discrimination*

“Employment discrimination,” or discrimination in employment and occupation, is classically understood in ILO instruments, particularly the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), as any distinction, exclusion, or preference based on characteristics such as race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, or social origin that nullifies or impairs equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation ([International Labour](#)

Organization, 1958). The global report *Time for Equality at Work*, relying on the same definition, emphasizes that employment discrimination may be either “direct,” where a worker is denied employment, promotion, or training solely because of sex or another identity-related characteristic, or “indirect,” where apparently neutral rules disproportionately disadvantage particular groups, such as women (International Labour Organization, 2003).

From the perspective of labour law, employment discrimination is not merely a violation of a formal rule; it is also regarded as a threat to the foundations of social justice and the integrity of the labour-law system. It results in the unequal distribution of opportunities, the concentration of women in insecure and low-paid occupations, and restrictions on their access to education, skills development, and career advancement. Accordingly, the specialized literature emphasizes the need to identify and address “multiple” and “intersectional” forms of discrimination simultaneously, such as discrimination against migrant women or rural women (International Labour Organization, 2003).

2.4. *Gender Equality in the World of Work*

“Gender equality” in the world of work means that women and men enjoy equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities in access to employment, decent working conditions, career advancement, remuneration, social security, and participation in workplace decision-making, without biological differences or traditional social roles being used as grounds for restricting women’s rights. In ILO literature, gender equality constitutes a major component of the broader concept of “equality of opportunity and treatment,” which is one of the principal areas covered by international labour standards (International Labour Organization, 2014).

Guidance developed for women’s rights in the Asia-Pacific region, through the combined interpretation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the fundamental ILO conventions, including Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration and Convention No. 111 on discrimination, defines gender equality at work not merely as equality of “opportunity” in entering the labour market, but also as equality of “outcome” in the actual enjoyment of fair remuneration, employment security, social protection, and the ability to reconcile family and occupational responsibilities (International Labour Organization, 2007). This interpretation is also consistent with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which pursue gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls under Goal 5 and the promotion of decent work and inclusive economic growth under Goal 8 as interconnected objectives.

Accordingly, this study considers labour law as the overarching legal framework governing employment relations, women workers’ rights as a specific and particularly sensitive component of that framework, employment discrimination as the principal structural obstacle to the realization of those rights, and gender equality as the normative objective and criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of legal systems. This conceptual distinction facilitates a more precise analysis of the role of international organizations, particularly the International Labour Organization, in promoting women workers’ rights, with emphasis on the status and capacities of the Iranian legal system.

3. **Overview of International Organizations Active in the Field of Labour, with Emphasis on the International Labour Organization**

Transformations in production structures, the expansion of global supply chains, and the cross-border movement of capital and labour in recent decades have demonstrated that exclusive reliance on national labour law is insufficient to guarantee minimum labour standards. In this context, international organizations play a central role in formulating norms, monitoring their implementation, and connecting labour rights with broader agendas such as sustainable development, corporate governance, and corporate social responsibility (Koliev, 2022). Among these organizations, the International Labour Organization is the oldest and most specialized institution in the field of labour relations. It was established in 1919 and became the first specialized agency incorporated into the United Nations system in 1946. Its central mission is the realization of “social justice” and its connection with global peace and security. As stated in the Preamble to the ILO Constitution, universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice (Maupain, 2005).

The distinctive institutional characteristic of the International Labour Organization is its tripartite structure, under which representatives of governments, workers, and employers all participate in decision-making. This structure gives ILO standards a particular form of social legitimacy and facilitates compromise between the logic of “economic competition” and the requirements of “social justice” (Standing, 2008). In practice, ILO tripartism is embodied in the annual International Labour Conference, the Governing Body, and specialized committees. This structure enables the Organization to function simultaneously as a “standard-setting institution,” a “technical expert,” and a “platform for dialogue and negotiation” (Baccaro & Mele, 2012).

Alongside the International Labour Organization, institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and regional organizations such as the European Union have also entered the field of labour and workers’ rights, although their involvement is based on different rationales and occurs to varying degrees. For example, the ILO Decent Work Agenda has become connected with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, while numerous United Nations human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, refer directly to labour rights, fair remuneration, safe working conditions, and the right to form and join trade unions (Alston, 2004; Koliev, 2022).

Since the 1990s, the OECD has published reports on trade and core labour standards in an effort to demonstrate the relationship between freedom of association, the prohibition of forced labour and child labour, employment discrimination, and the free-trade regime. Through this process, it has sought to integrate ILO norms into trade and investment policies (Alston, 2005). In recent years, the World Bank has approached labour issues primarily from the perspectives of corporate governance, the business environment, and poverty reduction, using the concept of decent work as an indicator for evaluating the quality of economic growth. Critics, however, regard the subordination of social criteria to the logic of market efficiency as a major weakness of this approach (Alston, 2004; Baccaro & Mele, 2012).

Contemporary scholarship on “global labour governance” generally recognizes that the ILO stands at the centre of a multilevel network of international, regional, and private institutions that influence the conduct of governments and employers through treaties, corporate codes of conduct, trade conditionality mechanisms, and environmental, social, and governance criteria (Baccaro & Mele, 2012; Koliev, 2022). Within this network, ILO standards remain the principal point of reference. Numerous non-state regimes, including the United Nations Global Compact, the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and environmental, social, and governance reporting standards, refer directly to ILO conventions and fundamental principles when defining their social components (International Labour Organization, 2023).

Nevertheless, critical scholarship emphasizes that the mere “expansion of institutions” does not necessarily result in the effective realization of workers’ rights, particularly the rights of women workers and workers in global supply chains. Some scholars argue that reducing labour standards to a limited set of “core rights” and placing excessive emphasis on soft, dialogue-based instruments may marginalize other dimensions of labour law, such as employment security, adequate remuneration, and social-security protection (Alston, 2004; Langille, 2005). By contrast, other scholars demonstrate that a focus on fundamental rights, including freedom of association and non-discrimination, may strengthen the capacity of workers, particularly women, to claim other rights and participate in decision-making processes, thereby enabling the labour-law system to facilitate the realization of other social rights (Langille, 2005; Maupain, 2005).

Overall, international organizations active in the field of labour, particularly the International Labour Organization, form part of a broader institutional architecture that seeks to guarantee minimum levels of equality and human dignity in the world of work through the formulation of global standards, the establishment of supervisory mechanisms, and connections with other human rights and development regimes. For countries such as Iran, which possess distinctive jurisprudential and legal traditions while also being members of the ILO and parties to some of its conventions, this normative framework creates both opportunities and challenges: an opportunity to promote workers’ rights, particularly those of women, and a challenge concerning the reconciliation of international requirements with domestic considerations.

4. The Status of Conventions and Recommendations in International Labour Law

The international labour-law system is based on two principal categories of normative instruments: conventions and recommendations. Conventions are multilateral treaties that, following their adoption by the International Labour Conference and ratification by states, become binding on the ratifying countries. They create specific obligations in areas such as freedom of association, the prohibition of forced labour, the minimum age for employment, equality in employment and occupation, occupational safety and health, and maternity protection ([International Labour Organization, 2019](#)). Recommendations, by contrast, are more flexible instruments designed to “guide and direct” national policymaking. They are frequently adopted alongside conventions and provide technical, procedural, or policy details ([International Labour Organization, 2014](#)).

Since the 1990s, significant changes have occurred in the ILO’s normative system, centred on the recognition of “fundamental principles and rights at work” in the 1998 Declaration and the designation of eight conventions as “fundamental” in four principal areas: freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the prohibition of forced labour, the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, and the prohibition of discrimination in employment and occupation. This development created a form of “central core” among the numerous ILO conventions and generated extensive debate regarding the relationship between “core rights” and other labour rights ([Alston, 2004](#)). Alston argues that the focus on fundamental conventions and reliance on the 1998 Declaration, particularly through its annual reporting mechanism and global reports, may marginalize other components of international labour law and create an implicit hierarchy among norms. Such a hierarchy may weaken states’ commitment to non-core conventions, including those concerning labour inspection, employment security, and the regulation of temporary contracts ([Alston, 2004](#)).

In response to this criticism, Langille maintains that, when understood within a precise conceptual framework, the notion of “core rights” does not threaten the ILO’s normative system. Rather, by highlighting enabling rights such as freedom of association and non-discrimination, it may strengthen workers’ capacity to claim other rights and promote the gradual development of protective standards ([Langille, 2005](#)). From this perspective, conventions and recommendations should not be regarded as a static list of rules, but as a “dynamic system” in which fundamental norms provide the foundation and driving force for the development of other labour rights.

Maupain’s reconsideration of the potential of the 1998 Declaration similarly demonstrates that, when properly applied, the Declaration and its follow-up mechanism may contribute to the “revitalization” of the ILO supervisory system and the gradual extension of standards even in the absence of formal ratification of certain conventions ([Maupain, 2005](#)). He emphasizes that a creative use of Article 19 of the ILO Constitution makes it possible to employ conventions and recommendations as “global models,” so that even states that have not ratified a particular convention may gradually move toward compliance with its standards through tripartite dialogue, technical-cooperation programmes, and normative pressure.

From the perspective of international law, ILO conventions constitute multilateral treaties that create specific and reviewable obligations following their adoption and ratification. Recommendations, by contrast, may be categorized as “soft law.” Although they are not legally binding, they play an important role in interpreting conventions, guiding domestic legislation, and shaping the legitimate expectations of relevant actors ([de Wet, 2008](#)). In practice, these two types of instruments complement one another: conventions establish “minimum rules,” while recommendations facilitate their effective implementation in national contexts by providing technical and policy solutions.

More recent research on “global labour governance” indicates that ILO standards, in both conventional and recommendatory forms, have gradually been incorporated into a broader architecture of human rights, trade, and financial regimes. This includes human rights conditionality mechanisms in European Union trade agreements, World Bank lending policies, and the social criteria employed in environmental, social, and governance ratings ([Koliev, 2022](#)). In this context, the fundamental ILO conventions are frequently used as “minimum criteria” for evaluating the conduct of states and corporations, while recommendations provide more detailed policy pathways for realizing decent work, gender equality, and occupational safety and health.

For countries such as Iran, the status of conventions and recommendations within international labour law has important practical implications. On the one hand, ratification of fundamental conventions such as Convention No. 111 concerning discrimination in employment and occupation creates clear obligations to prohibit gender discrimination in the labour market

and may provide a basis for reforming laws and practices that discriminate against women workers. On the other hand, recommendations relating to the protection of employed women, decent work, and social dialogue offer a range of flexible policy measures that may be reconciled with Islamic principles and the Constitution. The principal challenge lies not in the absence of international norms, but in translating those standards into domestic legislation and policy, strengthening supervisory institutions, and eliminating cultural and structural obstacles to the practical realization of workers' rights, particularly those of women. In this respect, a creative connection between conventions, recommendations, and the endogenous capacities of Iran's legal and jurisprudential system may provide an effective way forward.

5. The Role of International Organizations in Promoting Women Workers' Rights at the Global Level

In contemporary labour-law scholarship, the promotion of women workers' rights is understood as the outcome of a "multilayered normative regime" in which the International Labour Organization, the United Nations human rights system, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, specialized institutions such as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank simultaneously formulate standards, conduct supervision, and exert soft pressure for legislative reform. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the ILO has placed gender equality at work and the concept of "decent work for women and men" at the centre of its mission. In global reports such as *Time for Equality at Work* and documents concerning the achievement of gender equality at work, it has demonstrated that gender discrimination in recruitment, career advancement, remuneration, and employment security is not merely a violation of human rights, but also a major obstacle to economic growth and productivity ([International Labour Organization, 2003](#)).

At the human rights level, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, particularly Article 11, emphasizes the right to work, equality in conditions of employment, protection during pregnancy and childbirth, and the prohibition of dismissal or discrimination on the grounds of marital status or maternity. It requires states to eliminate structural discrimination in the labour market. Comparative studies indicate that ratification of the Convention, particularly when accompanied by active supervision by the Committee through periodic reports, concluding observations, and general recommendations, has contributed in many countries to labour-law reforms, the adoption of legislation prohibiting employment discrimination, and the expansion of maternity leave and protection for working mothers ([Englehart & Miller, 2014](#); [Raday, 2012](#)).

Through publications such as the second edition of *ABC of Women Workers' Rights and Gender Equality*, issued in 2007, the International Labour Organization has sought to present key concepts relating to women workers' rights, ranging from equal remuneration and non-discrimination to sexual harassment, domestic work, part-time work, home-based work, and family responsibilities, in the form of a systematic "conceptual glossary" for policymakers, trade unions, and researchers. In doing so, it has translated international standards into practical and policy-oriented language ([International Labour Organization, 2007](#)).

Alongside the ILO and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, institutions such as the World Bank have played a complementary role by focusing on the "economic empowerment of women" and connecting it with the Sustainable Development Goals and the agendas of major industrialized economies. The World Bank's analysis demonstrates that gender discrimination in the labour market not only wastes human capital and reduces women's economic participation, but also weakens long-term growth and poverty reduction. Reforming labour-law frameworks and labour-market policies in favour of gender equality is therefore a developmental necessity, rather than merely a human rights obligation ([World Bank, 2014](#)).

At the same time, interinstitutional cooperation among the ILO, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and specialized regional groups has consolidated labour standards and women's rights within the discourse of global policymaking. For example, the report *Empowering Women at Work: Government Laws and Policies for Gender Equality*, prepared by the ILO with a focus on the Group of Seven countries and certain emerging economies, reviews national laws and policies on equal remuneration, parental leave, the prohibition of sexual harassment, and work-life balance.

It demonstrates how international labour standards have become reference criteria for evaluating governmental progress in the field of women workers' rights ([International Labour Organization, 2020](#)).

Specialized legal scholarship has likewise demonstrated that the combined operation of ILO instruments, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and related supervisory practices has gradually created a “normative network” for the protection of women workers. This network renders states accountable to public opinion, human rights institutions, and workers' organizations even where domestic implementation remains incomplete ([International Labour Organization, 2020](#)). The cumulative effect of these developments is that the role of international organizations in promoting women workers' rights has moved beyond “soft recommendations.” Through treaty obligations, supervisory practices, technical programmes, and the production of specialized knowledge, these organizations have become genuine instruments for reforming national legislation, strengthening trade unions, and transforming gender norms in the workplace.

6. Standard-Setting: Principal Conventions and Recommendations Relating to Women Workers

The core of international standards concerning women workers' rights consists of a body of ILO conventions and recommendations that either directly address gender discrimination or have a particularly substantial practical impact on women workers. The most prominent of these instruments are the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), both of which are classified as fundamental ILO conventions and establish the principle of equality of opportunity and treatment at work. Convention No. 100 requires states to ensure equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value, without discrimination based on sex, and to apply this principle across all systems of wage determination, including legislation, job-evaluation systems, and collective bargaining ([International Labour Organization, 1951](#)).

Convention No. 111 defines discrimination as any distinction, exclusion, or preference based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, social origin, or other prescribed grounds that impairs equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation. It requires member states to formulate and implement a comprehensive national policy for eliminating discrimination throughout the employment cycle, from vocational training to working conditions and career advancement ([International Labour Organization, 1958](#)). Together with the supplementary Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Recommendation, 1958 (No. 111), these conventions form the foundation of international labour law concerning the prohibition of gender discrimination and equal remuneration. They are continuously interpreted in an evolutionary manner through ILO supervisory reports, particularly general surveys on discrimination in employment and occupation ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

A second major cluster of standards concerns “maternity protection and family responsibilities.” The Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183), and its accompanying Recommendation No. 191 are the most recent and comprehensive instruments in this area. They establish minimum standards for maternity leave, including at least 14 weeks of leave, cash benefits amounting to at least two-thirds of previous earnings, protection of maternal and child health, the right to return to the same or an equivalent position, and the prohibition of discrimination or dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy ([International Labour Organization, 2000](#)). Comparative studies indicate that countries applying the principles of Conventions Nos. 100, 111, and 183 generally provide broader maternity-leave coverage, stronger employment security for mothers, and more effective opportunities to return to work after childbirth than countries relying exclusively on limited domestic standards ([International Labour Organization, 2020](#)).

The Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156), and Recommendation No. 165 were among the first instruments to conceptualize “work–family reconciliation” as a legal obligation of states and employers. They emphasize that women and men with family responsibilities, particularly responsibilities for the care of children and older persons, must not be discriminated against in access to employment, vocational training, career advancement, or working conditions. States are required to facilitate equal participation through the development of public services, the regulation of working hours, and parental-leave policies ([International Labour Organization, 1981](#)).

Another category of standards addresses groups of workers whose composition is predominantly female, including domestic workers, part-time workers, home-based workers, and workers in the informal economy. The Domestic Workers Convention,

2011 (No. 189), recognizes the particular conditions of domestic work, including employment in private households, irregular working hours, and limited access to labour inspection and trade unions. It establishes standards relating to minimum wages, weekly rest, limitations on working hours, written contracts, social-security coverage, and inspection mechanisms ([International Labour Organization, 2007](#)). Because the majority of domestic workers worldwide are women and girls, this convention constitutes one of the most important instruments for addressing gendered and racialized exploitation in this sector.

Finally, the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), and Recommendation No. 206 represent a turning point in the recognition of women workers' rights to protection from sexual and gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace. Convention No. 190 defines violence and harassment in the world of work as a violation of human rights and a threat to equal opportunity and decent work. It requires states to protect workers, with particular attention to women and groups at heightened risk, through criminal and administrative legislation, safe complaint mechanisms, education, labour inspection, and social dialogue ([International Labour Organization, 2019](#)).

Accordingly, the body of ILO conventions and recommendations, together with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other human rights instruments, provides a relatively comprehensive framework for women workers' rights. This framework encompasses equal remuneration and opportunity, maternity protection, family responsibilities, domestic work, and protection against violence and harassment.

7. Supervision and Follow-Up: Reporting, Evaluation, and Tripartite Dialogue Mechanisms

The effectiveness of international labour standards does not depend solely on the texts of conventions; it also rests on the complex supervisory system based on "tripartite dialogue" that the ILO has developed over the course of a century. According to *Rules of the Game: A Brief Introduction to International Labour Standards*, the principal supervisory mechanism consists of regular state reporting on the implementation of ratified conventions, examination of those reports by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, and subsequent consideration of selected matters by the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards at the International Labour Conference ([International Labour Organization, 2014](#)).

States that have ratified conventions relevant to women, such as Conventions Nos. 100, 111, 156, 183, 189, and 190, are required to submit reports at prescribed intervals concerning their legislation, policies, and practical implementation. Drawing on supplementary information provided by workers' and employers' organizations, women's organizations, and, in some cases, human rights institutions, the Committee of Experts issues "observations" and "direct requests." These identify legislative gaps, such as the absence of a clear definition of discrimination or limited maternity-leave coverage, as well as implementation deficiencies, including inadequate labour inspection and the absence of sex-disaggregated data ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

At the annual International Labour Conference, the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards, composed of government, employer, and worker representatives, considers cases involving countries regarded as having serious difficulties in implementing conventions, including those relating to discrimination and gender equality. This mechanism enables public consideration of concerns such as wage discrimination, legal barriers to women's employment, and failures to address sexual harassment in the workplace. Its deliberations are frequently accompanied by recommendations for legislative reform, stronger supervisory institutions, and technical assistance ([International Labour Organization, 2014](#)).

In addition to regular supervision, the representation procedure under Article 24 of the ILO Constitution and the complaint procedure under Article 26 permit workers' and employers' organizations to bring complaints against member states in cases of serious or persistent violations of international labour standards. Although these mechanisms have most frequently been used in relation to freedom of association and collective bargaining, complaints have also increasingly addressed gender discrimination in employment, violations of the rights of domestic workers, most of whom are women, and ineffective enforcement of rules against sexual harassment ([International Labour Organization, 2019](#)).

These supervisory mechanisms overlap and interact with the reporting procedures established under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other United Nations treaty bodies. In its concluding observations, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has repeatedly called upon states to ratify

key ILO conventions relating to gender equality and maternity protection or to strengthen their implementation. In areas such as sexual harassment, ILO findings, including those relating to Convention No. 190, may also serve as supplementary interpretive sources ([Englehart & Miller, 2014](#); [Raday, 2012](#)).

Another important feature is the “tripartite character” of the ILO, namely, the institutional participation of workers’ and employers’ representatives alongside governments at every stage, from standard-setting to supervision. Consequently, issues such as wage discrimination, sexual harassment, and domestic workers’ rights are considered not only from the perspective of public law, but also through the lenses of industrial relations and collective bargaining. Research by the World Bank and the ILO suggests that where independent unions and women workers’ representatives participate more actively in reporting and tripartite dialogue, legislative reforms proceed more rapidly and greater attention is paid to the effective implementation of gender-equality standards ([International Labour Organization, 2014](#); [World Bank, 2014](#)). Overall, this multilayered supervisory system moves international standards beyond the level of “symbolic texts” by subjecting them to regular evaluation, legal criticism, peer pressure, and social dialogue. Nevertheless, the effective implementation of recommendations continues to depend on domestic political will, the strength of supervisory institutions, and the capacity of trade unions and women’s movements.

8. General Examples of the Influence of Standards on Legislative and Policy Reform

Empirical literature from recent decades demonstrates that ILO conventions and recommendations, together with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international instruments, have had a tangible impact on national legislative and policy reforms concerning women workers’ rights. This influence, however, has varied across countries and regions and remains dependent on political and institutional contexts.

In the field of equal remuneration, numerous European legal systems have incorporated the principle of “equal remuneration for work of equal value,” first formulated in Convention No. 100, into their constitutions, labour legislation, and anti-discrimination regulations. European Union law, from the Treaty of Rome to directives on equal remuneration, expressly refers to this principle, and analytical reports indicate that Conventions Nos. 100 and 111 played an important reference role in the development of this framework ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)). More recent initiatives, such as the European Union Pay Transparency Directive, build on this legacy by introducing mechanisms including gender pay-gap reporting, regular pay audits, and workers’ rights of access to pay information, all of which are specifically designed to reduce structural discrimination against women ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

With regard to maternity protection and family responsibilities, studies of the potential effects of applying Conventions Nos. 183 and 156 in Eastern European countries demonstrate that aligning national legislation with these standards, particularly by extending maternity leave, guaranteeing cash benefits, and prohibiting dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity leave, has significant positive effects on women’s employment security and return to the labour market ([International Labour Organization, 2020](#)). International monitoring of maternity-protection legislation has also employed Convention No. 183 and Recommendation No. 191 as reference standards and has indicated that countries applying these principles tend to perform more effectively in protecting maternal and infant well-being ([International Labour Organization, 2020](#)).

In the field of domestic work and the informal economy, Convention No. 189 has played a prominent role in recognizing domestic work as “work,” rather than merely as a “family service.” The experience of countries such as Uruguay and the Philippines indicates that, following the adoption of standards associated with Convention No. 189, specific legislation has been enacted to establish minimum wages for domestic workers, require written contracts, limit working hours, and extend insurance coverage. In some cases, domestic workers’ unions have also been established ([Human Rights, 2017b](#); [International Labour Organization, 2020](#)). At the European level, the recognition of these standards has similarly been associated with initiatives aimed at improving conditions in domestic and care work ([International Labour Organization, 2014](#)).

In relation to gender-based violence and harassment at work, Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206 have become reference instruments for the development of comprehensive legislation against sexual harassment and gender-based violence in a number of countries. Reviews of parliamentary instruments and legal reports indicate that the implementation of

Convention No. 190 has contributed to broader definitions of sexual harassment, the extension of protection to supply chains, contract workers, informal employment, and digital spaces, and the strengthening of inspection and complaint mechanisms ([International Labour Organization, 2019, 2023](#)).

At the transnational level, quantitative research indicates that ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and ILO conventions concerning gender equality is generally associated with improvements in legal and institutional indicators relating to women's labour rights, including prohibitions on discrimination, maternity leave, protection for working mothers, and women's participation in formal employment. Nevertheless, translating legal reform into genuine improvements in women's labour-market position requires deeper transformations in economic and cultural structures ([Englehart & Miller, 2014; World Bank, 2014](#)).

Overall, empirical evidence indicates that international labour standards have their greatest impact on women workers' rights where, first, they are expressly incorporated into national labour legislation, anti-discrimination law, and labour-market policy; second, they are supported by effective enforcement mechanisms, including labour inspection, labour courts, equality institutions, and sex-disaggregated statistical data; and third, women's movements, trade unions, and civil-society organizations are able to use them as "legal and discursive instruments" for advocacy and supervision.

9. The Iranian Legal System in the Field of Non-Discrimination and the Protection of Women's Labour Rights

At the normative level, the Iranian legal system provides considerable capacity for protecting women's labour rights. Article 19 of the Constitution recognizes the equal rights of all members of the nation without discrimination based on ethnicity, race, or similar characteristics. Article 20 provides that all citizens, both women and men, are equally protected by law and enjoy human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights ([Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021](#)). Article 21 requires the government to secure women's rights in all respects in accordance with Islamic principles and to protect working mothers, while Article 28 recognizes freedom of occupational choice and requires the government to create equal employment opportunities ([Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021](#)).

This general orientation was translated into more specific rules in the Labour Law of 1990. Article 38 establishes the principle of "equal remuneration for equal work under equal conditions" and prohibits discrimination in wages on the basis of sex or other unjustified factors ([Islamic Republic of, 1990](#)). The chapter on "women's work" also includes provisions prohibiting women's employment in arduous and hazardous work, restricting night work, providing maternity leave, and protecting breastfeeding mothers ([Islamic Republic of, 1990](#)). Conceptually, these provisions are consistent with international standards such as Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration and Convention No. 111 on non-discrimination ([International Labour Organization, 1951, 1958](#)).

In addition to the Labour Law, the Social Security Law of 1975 provides protections such as maternity benefits, survivors' pensions, and retirement benefits for employed women. Nevertheless, certain rules, including the prioritization of the "male breadwinner," indirectly restrict women's equal access to benefits ([Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021](#)). Analyses of the relationship among the Constitution, labour legislation, and international instruments indicate that principles such as equality between women and men, non-discrimination, and human dignity have a clear textual position within the Iranian legal system.

However, empirical and political-economy research demonstrates that women's economic participation rate in Iran remains significantly low and that a large proportion of women are concentrated in informal, low-paid employment lacking legal protection ([Karshenas & Moghadam, 2024; Moghadam, 1995](#)). International reports have also highlighted this gap between "legal text" and "labour-market reality," emphasizing the effects of cultural restrictions, family structures, and conservative interpretations of gender roles on women's actual enjoyment of labour rights ([Human Rights, 2017b; World Bank, 2014](#)).

From jurisprudential and legal perspectives, some studies indicate that Shi'i jurisprudence recognizes the general "permissibility of women's employment" and the possibility of reconciling the right to work with family obligations and Islamic dress requirements. This may provide a basis for a more progressive reinterpretation of labour legislation ([Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021](#)). At the same time, provisions such as Article 1117 of the Civil Code, which permits a husband to prevent his wife from working where her occupation is considered inconsistent with family interests or the dignity of the spouses, are

regarded by many scholars as insufficiently compatible with constitutional equality and international standards prohibiting discrimination (Human Rights, 2017a; Moghadam, 1995). This internal tension between the equality-oriented capacities of the Constitution and restrictive rules in other legislation constitutes one of the principal subjects of scholarly criticism of Iran's legal framework governing women's employment.

10. Iran's Ratification of ILO Conventions and the Scope of Its Obligations

Iran is a longstanding member of the International Labour Organization and has ratified several fundamental conventions in the field of labour rights. In relation to women's labour rights, two principal instruments have particular importance: Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration and Convention No. 111 on discrimination in employment and occupation. Available ILO-related country information indicates that Iran ratified Convention No. 100 in 1972 and Convention No. 111 in 1964 (International Labour Organization, 2023).

Convention No. 100 requires member states to implement the principle of "equal remuneration for work of equal value" in legislation, job-evaluation systems, and wage structures and to prevent wage discrimination based on sex (International Labour Organization, 1951). The concept of "work of equal value" extends beyond the simpler formula of "equal work" and requires the objective evaluation of skills, responsibilities, effort, and working conditions so that occupations traditionally regarded as "women's work" are not systematically undervalued (International Labour Organization, 2019). Convention No. 111 defines discrimination as any distinction, exclusion, or preference based on race, sex, religion, political opinion, or similar grounds that adversely affects equality of opportunity or treatment in employment and occupation (International Labour Organization, 1958).

At the same time, Iran has not ratified several important supplementary conventions, including Convention No. 156 on workers with family responsibilities, Convention No. 183 on maternity protection, Convention No. 189 on decent work for domestic workers, and Convention No. 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work (International Labour Organization, 2023). This absence of ratification limits the scope of Iran's international obligations in areas such as the reconciliation of occupational and family responsibilities, paid domestic work, and the prevention of violence and sexual harassment at work. ILO supervisory assessments concerning Iran's implementation of Conventions Nos. 100 and 111, while recognizing the existence of legal foundations for equality in the Constitution and Labour Law, have drawn attention to the continuing gender pay gap, occupational segregation, the absence of clear mechanisms for evaluating "work of equal value," and the effects of family legislation on women's employment opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2019, 2023). These assessments demonstrate that ratification alone is insufficient and that effective implementation requires domestic legislative reform, stronger supervisory institutions, and the promotion of legal awareness among employers and workers.

Academic studies of Iran reinforce this assessment. Valentine Moghadam's classical research on women's employment in Iran during the 1990s identified continuing institutional and cultural obstacles despite the existence of certain legal capacities (Moghadam, 1995). More recent research by Karshenas and Moghadam demonstrates that, even in recent decades, the expansion of women's higher education and Iran's ratification of equality and non-discrimination conventions have not overcome the combined effects of structural factors, including sanctions, macroeconomic instability, and restrictions in public-sector recruitment, and institutional factors, including discriminatory family laws, wage disparities, and gender norms. These factors continue to sustain women's low rate of economic participation (Karshenas & Moghadam, 2024).

Iranian jurisprudential and legal studies, including the research of Bakhsh Zadeh and colleagues, also suggest that the internal capacities of Iranian jurisprudence and law may be aligned with international labour standards, provided that justice-oriented and gender-sensitive interpretations of religious texts and constitutional principles are given greater prominence in legislation and policymaking (Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021). In other words, Iran's ratification of Conventions Nos. 100 and 111 has established a legal basis for reconsidering existing legislation. However, until such reconsideration is institutionalized in legislation, adjudication, and public policy, international obligations will not be fully translated into tangible rights for women workers.

11. A Brief Comparison of International Standards and Domestic Regulations Relating to Women Workers' Rights

A comparison of international labour standards with Iran's legal framework reveals a dual and complex relationship between "normative convergence" and "practical divergence." From the perspective of international labour law, Conventions Nos. 100 and 111 and the interpretations of treaty-monitoring bodies, including the ILO Committee of Experts and the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its general interpretation of Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, emphasize several central principles: first, equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation; second, equal remuneration for work of equal value; third, the elimination of direct and indirect discrimination; and fourth, the acceptance of "positive-action measures" as instruments for reducing structural inequality, rather than as restrictions on women's employment.

In Iran, Articles 19, 20, and 21 of the Constitution and Article 38 of the Labour Law are textually aligned with many of these standards. The Constitution emphasizes the equal protection of women and men and their enjoyment of economic and social rights, while the Labour Law prohibits discrimination in remuneration. Nevertheless, several important differences exist at the levels of "content and implementation."

First, the international principle of "work of equal value" under Convention No. 100 has a broader meaning than the principle of "equal work" contained in Article 38 of the Labour Law. Under the ILO standard, the "value" of work must be assessed through objective and gender-neutral job-evaluation systems based on factors such as skills, responsibilities, effort, and working conditions. This is intended to prevent occupations traditionally regarded as feminine, including care work, education, and services, from being systematically undervalued. In Iran, such systems have not been institutionalized at either the legislative or implementation level. According to international supervisory assessments, this deficiency contributes to the continuing gender pay gap and occupational segregation disadvantaging women.

Second, a significant portion of domestic legislation relating to women's employment adopts a protective–paternalistic approach. Prohibitions on women's employment in arduous and hazardous occupations, night work, or the carrying of heavy loads are formally intended to protect their health, but may in practice restrict women's occupational choices and reinforce gender stereotypes in the labour market. Critical analyses of Iranian labour law indicate that such "difference-based protections" may conflict with the spirit of Convention No. 111, which emphasizes the elimination of sex-based discrimination, unless they are justified as temporary, necessary, and proportionate measures.

Third, certain regulations outside the direct field of labour law, particularly those concerning family law, social security, and population policy, affect women's ability to enjoy labour rights. Requirements relating to a husband's permission for employment or travel under Article 1117 of the Civil Code and passport regulations, preferences for married men in recruitment and family benefits, and policies encouraging traditional motherhood have all been identified by human rights institutions and researchers as factors reproducing structural discrimination against employed women in Iran.

By contrast, comparative data and feminist political-economy research indicate that countries that have implemented a balanced combination of international standards, domestic legal guarantees, and welfare policies supportive of women's employment, including high-quality maternity leave, childcare services, and prohibitions on discrimination, have been more successful in increasing women's economic participation and reducing gender disparities. In Iran, despite certain legal developments, research concerning women's labour rights, international development frameworks, and women's economic participation demonstrates that the gap between the legal framework and institutional and cultural realities remains the principal obstacle to gender equality in the labour market.

In summary, first, at the normative level, Iran has accepted a significant portion of global principles of equality and non-discrimination through the Constitution, the Labour Law, and its ratification of Conventions Nos. 100 and 111. Second, at the implementation and structural levels, the continuation of direct and indirect discrimination, restrictions arising from family law and population policies, the absence of ratification of supplementary ILO conventions, and the weakness of supervisory and workers' institutions have prevented these obligations from being fully realized in women workers' everyday lives.

This gap underscores the need for a coherent reconsideration of legislation, policymaking, and administrative practice. Such reform should simultaneously draw on the internal capacities of Iran's legal and jurisprudential system, including constitutional principles and justice-oriented interpretations of Shi'i jurisprudence, and on international labour standards, in order to achieve genuine progress in women workers' rights.

12. Evaluation of the Role of International Organizations in Promoting Women Workers' Rights in Iran

12.1. *Instances of the Influence of ILO Standards on Iranian Legislation and Policymaking*

Iran is a longstanding member of the International Labour Organization and, since the 1950s, has accepted certain ILO standards through the ratification of conventions and the reform of national legislation. The most important point of intersection between ILO standards and domestic law is the Labour Law of 1990, which was drafted within the context of this interaction and is particularly aligned with Conventions Nos. 100 and 111 in the areas of equal remuneration and non-discrimination. Available ILO-related information indicates that Iran ratified Convention No. 100 concerning equal remuneration for work of equal value in 1972 and Convention No. 111 concerning discrimination in employment and occupation in 1964 ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

The explicit domestic translation of these obligations may be observed in Article 38 of the Labour Law, which provides that women and men performing equal work under equal conditions in the same workplace must receive equal wages and that discrimination in determining remuneration on the basis of age, sex, race, ethnicity, belief, or other similar factors is prohibited ([Islamic Republic of, 1990](#)). This formulation substantially overlaps with the language of Convention No. 100 concerning equal remuneration for work of equal value. Comparative labour-law assessments have accordingly identified Iran as a country that formally recognizes equal remuneration in its labour legislation, although implementation remains problematic ([WageIndicator & Centre for Labour, 2024](#)).

In the field of maternity protection and the health of women workers, Iran has not ratified Convention No. 183 on maternity protection, but the Labour Law and Social Security Law provide certain protections relating to maternity leave, protection from arduous and hazardous work, and insurance benefits. Articles 75–78 of the Labour Law impose restrictions on pregnant women's employment in harmful environments and on night work, while social-security legislation recognizes maternity benefits as an insured entitlement. From an ILO perspective, these provisions may be regarded as an example of the “partial incorporation” of protective standards without formal ratification of the more recent conventions ([Islamic Republic of, 1990](#); [Mehdizadeh, 2015](#)).

At the discursive level, recent research indicates that women's labour rights in Iran have been influenced not only by ILO standards, but also by their intersection with broader international instruments such as the UNESCO 2030 framework and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goals 5 and 8. Bakhsh Zadeh and colleagues, for example, demonstrate how the concepts of “women's economic empowerment” and “gender equality at work” have entered domestic policy discourse through such instruments and have influenced the interpretation of constitutional and labour-law principles ([Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021](#)).

At the level of executive policymaking, technical cooperation between Iran and the ILO in areas such as employment-strategy development and consultation on labour-law reform has facilitated the introduction of concepts including “decent work,” “the reduction of in-work poverty,” and “gender equality in the labour market.” Although these concepts have not been fully institutionalized in development programmes and employment policies, the language of official documents has gradually moved toward convergence with ILO discourse and global indicators, including human-development and gender-gap indicators ([International Labour Organization, 2009](#); [World Bank, 2014](#)).

It may therefore be concluded that some of the central elements of ILO standards, particularly those concerning equal remuneration and non-discrimination, have been reflected in the text and terminology of Iranian labour law. Nevertheless, such normative convergence has not by itself been sufficient to guarantee actual equality in the labour market.

12.2. *Identification of Gaps: The Distance between Legal Texts, International Obligations, and Practical Implementation*

Despite relative convergence at the textual level, virtually all empirical studies emphasize a significant gap between legal provisions, international obligations, and the lived realities of women workers in Iran. ILO data and supervisory observations indicate that, although Iran has ratified Conventions Nos. 100 and 111, it has not yet fully aligned itself with those instruments

in relation to a comprehensive definition of discrimination, the evaluation of “work of equal value,” and coverage of all stages of the employment cycle, from recruitment to promotion and dismissal ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

In terms of the substance of domestic law, Article 38 of the Labour Law prohibits discrimination in “wage payment,” but contains no clear and comprehensive provisions concerning discrimination in recruitment, promotion, vocational training, or dismissal. Nor is there specific legislation comprehensively addressing sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. The *Labour Rights Index 2024* states that, although Iran receives positive recognition for formally establishing equal remuneration, it lacks explicit rules prohibiting workplace sexual harassment and effective complaint mechanisms ([WageIndicator & Centre for Labour, 2024](#)). In practice, this gap means that many forms of indirect discrimination and gender-based violence in workplaces cannot be effectively pursued or remedied through labour-law mechanisms.

The gap between official obligations and reality becomes still more evident when objective labour-market indicators are considered. Human Rights Watch’s report *It’s a Men’s Club* indicates that women’s labour-force participation in Iran was approximately 14.9% in 2016–2017, a figure lower than the average for the Middle East and North Africa and inconsistent with women’s high level of educational attainment, given that women constituted more than half of university graduates ([Human Rights, 2017a](#)). The report identifies obstacles including occupational restrictions in certain sectors, requirements relating to spousal permission for certain forms of employment or travel, and the absence of effective protection against workplace discrimination, all of which substantially restrict women’s right to work.

Historical analysis of women’s employment in Iran similarly demonstrates that legal changes alone have been insufficient to reform the structure of the labour market. Valentine Moghadam’s influential study of women’s employment in contemporary Iran shows that post-revolutionary policies, despite their discursive emphasis on social justice, resulted in a decline in women’s share of the formal labour force during the 1980s. Women’s share fell from 20.2% in 1976 to below 9% in 1986 ([Moghadam, 1995](#)). Although that share increased somewhat in subsequent decades, more recent research by Karshenas and Moghadam demonstrates that the combined effects of labour-market institutions, wage levels, the oil-based economic structure, and sanctions continue to constitute major obstacles to women’s economic participation ([Karshenas & Moghadam, 2024](#)).

A further gap and tension may be observed within domestic legal discourse. Bakhsh Zadeh and colleagues demonstrate that, although constitutional principles and certain jurisprudential interpretations accept women’s economic participation, family legislation, including Article 1117 of the Civil Code, which permits a husband to prevent his wife from working, and more recent population policies restrict women’s ability to enjoy labour rights to a greater extent than either international obligations or the text of the Labour Law would permit ([Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021](#)).

The existing gaps may therefore be summarized at three levels: first, a gap in “legal coverage,” reflected in the absence of comprehensive legislation against employment discrimination and sexual harassment and the limitation of equality primarily to remuneration; second, a gap in “enforcement and supervisory mechanisms,” including weak labour inspection, the absence of specialized equality institutions, and unreliable complaint procedures; and third, a gap in “economic and cultural structures,” including the preference for a male breadwinner, population policies, and dysfunctions within the labour market.

12.3. Legal, Institutional, Cultural, and Economic Obstacles to the Full Use of the Capacities of International Organizations

To explain why Iran, despite its membership in the International Labour Organization and its ratification of certain key conventions, has not fully utilized the Organization’s capacities for promoting women workers’ rights, it is necessary to consider legal, institutional, cultural, and economic obstacles together.

From a legal perspective, the first obstacle lies in the “fragmentation of the normative system.” On the one hand, the Constitution and Labour Law emphasize the equal legal protection of women and men and prohibit wage discrimination. On the other hand, certain provisions of family law, including a husband’s authority to restrict his wife’s employment, and rules based on gender segregation in certain sectors effectively limit the application of those principles ([Bakhsh Zadeh et al., 2021](#); [Human Rights, 2017a](#)). In addition, Iran’s non-ratification of specialized conventions concerning maternity protection, domestic workers, and violence and harassment in the world of work means that international legal obligations, and consequently international supervisory pressure, remain weaker in areas where women face some of the greatest risks ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

Several major limitations are also apparent at the institutional level. First, Iran's system of workers' organization, centred on Islamic labour councils and the Workers' House, possesses less independence and bargaining power than the model of independent trade unions presupposed by ILO tripartism. ILO assessments concerning freedom of association have long emphasized restrictions on workers' organization and the difficulties involved in reforming labour legislation in this area ([International Labour Organization, 2009](#)). Where independent and powerful organizations of women workers are weak, the use of international standards as instruments for advocacy and "bottom-up" pressure becomes more difficult. Second, the labour-inspection system and labour-dispute bodies face shortages of human resources, inadequate specialized training in gender equality, and, at times, political constraints. Consequently, many women's complaints concerning discrimination or harassment are halted at the administrative stage and do not generate influential judicial precedents ([Human Rights, 2017b](#); [WageIndicator & Centre for Labour, 2024](#)).

The cultural and ideological dimension is equally important. Research such as Bahrami Tash's study of Islamic fundamentalism and women's economic roles, together with Moghadam's work on conflicting discourses concerning women in Iran, demonstrates that segments of the legal and policy system continue to regard the "male breadwinner and female homemaker" as the preferred family model ([Bahrami Tash, 2003](#); [Moghadam, 1995](#)). Although this model conflicts with the lived realities of millions of employed women and female heads of household, it influences administrative judgments, recruitment practices, and managers' perceptions of women's employment. Measures such as the 2016 law reducing working hours for women in "special circumstances" may consequently be treated by employers as a reason to exclude women from recruitment rather than as an instrument of empowerment.

Finally, economic and structural obstacles are highly consequential. An oil-dependent economy, persistent recession, international sanctions, and high unemployment have rendered the general labour market highly competitive and constrained. Under such conditions, research by Karshenas and Moghadam indicates that employers and policymakers tend to allocate scarce employment opportunities to "male breadwinners," thereby reproducing structural discrimination against women in recruitment and promotion ([Karshenas & Moghadam, 2024](#)). At the individual level, the absence of public childcare infrastructure, safe transportation, and effective work–family reconciliation policies disproportionately increases the cost of women's participation in formal employment ([Mehdizadeh, 2015](#)).

The overall conclusion is that the full use of international organizations' capacities in Iran is not merely an issue of international law, but a multidimensional challenge. First, until new international obligations, including Conventions Nos. 183, 189, and 190, are accepted and conflicting domestic legislation concerning family law, employment discrimination, and sexual harassment is reformed, the legal dimension will remain incomplete. Second, without stronger independent workers' organizations, supervisory institutions, and transparent complaint mechanisms, ILO standards will continue to remain "texts on paper." Third, as long as dominant cultural discourse assigns women a secondary position in breadwinning and economic participation, and the economic structure fails to generate sufficient high-quality employment, international standards will not be meaningfully connected with the everyday lives of women workers.

13. Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that the architecture of international labour law and human rights law, particularly through the International Labour Organization, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, has created a relatively coherent global framework for protecting women workers' rights. The fundamental conventions concerning equal remuneration and non-discrimination, conventions and recommendations relating to maternity protection, family responsibilities, domestic work, and violence and harassment in the workplace, and multilayered supervisory mechanisms, including reporting, the Committee of Experts, the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards, and complaint procedures, have transformed gender discrimination at work from a purely national matter into an issue of global normative and political significance. The experience of numerous countries also demonstrates that, where these standards are expressly incorporated into domestic legislation and labour-market policy and supported by inspection systems, labour courts, equality institutions, and independent workers' organizations, they can produce tangible improvements in women's labour-market position.

With regard to Iran, the examination of the legal foundations demonstrates that the legal system contains substantial textual capacities for protecting women's labour rights. Articles 19, 20, 21, and 28 of the Constitution emphasize the equal protection of women and men, the rejection of discrimination, and the right to employment. The Labour Law has also taken an important step toward convergence with international standards by recognizing the principle of "equal remuneration for equal work under equal conditions" and establishing certain protections for women workers. Iran's ratification of the conventions concerning equal remuneration and non-discrimination further obliges the state, under international law, to observe minimum standards in the field of women workers' rights and provides a basis for more progressive interpretations of domestic legislation.

Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that this normative convergence has not yet been transformed into "substantive equality" in the labour market. The gap between legal texts and social reality is evident at several levels. At the legal level, the absence of comprehensive legislation prohibiting employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence in the workplace, the limitation of equality primarily to remuneration, and the continued existence of family-law provisions permitting a husband to prevent his wife from working restrict the application of the equality-oriented principles of the Constitution and Iran's international obligations. At the institutional level, the weakness of independent workers' and women's organizations, restrictions on freedom of association, shortages of resources and specialized training within labour inspection and dispute-resolution systems, and the absence of effective mechanisms for addressing complaints of discrimination and harassment mean that many rights recognized by law cannot be effectively enforced.

At the cultural and structural levels, the persistence of the "male breadwinner/dependent woman" model, population policies, and dominant gender norms, combined with an oil-dependent economy, labour-market recession, and the effects of sanctions, has subjected women to multiple barriers, particularly in access to formal and high-quality employment, and has concentrated them in informal and low-paid sectors. This situation demonstrates that the mere ratification of conventions and inclusion of general principles in the Constitution and Labour Law are insufficient to promote women workers' rights. Without simultaneous reform of legal, institutional, cultural, and economic structures, international standards risk being reduced to "texts on paper."

Accordingly, the article emphasizes several areas of reform. First, the legal dimension should be strengthened through the gradual ratification of supplementary ILO conventions concerning maternity protection, domestic work, and violence and harassment in the world of work, together with the revision of domestic legislation, particularly provisions relating to employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and family law that restrict women's access to employment. Second, the institutional dimension should be consolidated by enhancing the independence and effectiveness of women's workers' and professional organizations, strengthening labour inspection, creating specialized gender-equality units within the Ministry of Labour and labour-dispute bodies, and developing sex-disaggregated statistical data. Third, the capacities of Islamic jurisprudence and constitutional values should be used creatively to develop justice-oriented and dignity-based interpretations of women's economic roles, thereby strengthening the connection between international labour standards and the endogenous foundations of the Iranian legal system and reducing cultural and political resistance.

Ultimately, the principal conclusion of the study is that international organizations, particularly the International Labour Organization, can play an effective and sustainable role in promoting women workers' rights in Iran only where their standards are applied not merely as treaty obligations, but as part of a multidimensional reform project encompassing legislation, policymaking, institution-building, and discursive transformation. Only under such conditions can a transition be made from "equality in the text of the law" to "equality in the lived experience of women workers."

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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