

## Women Who Play the World: Gender and Transmission in Iranian Folk Music

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folclórica iraní

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## Women Who Play the World: Gender and Transmission in Iranian Folk Music

### Mujeres que tocan el mundo: género y transmisión de la música folclórica iraní

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#### *Abstract*

This study examined the role of Iranian women in the preservation and revitalization of folk music within a context shaped by sociopolitical restrictions and processes of digital transformation. Drawing on a qualitative research design based on methodological triangulation, the study combined semi-structured questionnaires (n=8), three in-depth interviews, and digital content analysis to explore how women sustain musical traditions across private, community, and increasingly transnational spaces. The findings indicated that women play a central role in the oral transmission of folk repertoires, particularly through domestic and community-based practices, while simultaneously facing social, economic, and institutional barriers. The thematic analysis further revealed that participation in folk music functions as a form of artistic expression, cultural resilience, and identity affirmation. In addition, digital platforms emerged as ambivalent yet significant mediating structures, expanding the visibility and circulation of these musical practices while also reshaping traditional modes of transmission. By situating women's musical participation at the intersection of gender, cultural sustainability, and digital mediation, this study contributed a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive perspective to ethnomusicology and gender studies, highlighting both structural limitations and creative strategies of continuity and adaptation in contemporary Iranian folk music.

**Keywords:** Iranian women; folk music; cultural transmission; digital mediation; ethnomusicology

#### **Resumen**

Este estudio examinó el papel de las mujeres iraníes en la preservación y revitalización de la música folclórica en un contexto marcado por restricciones sociopolíticas y procesos de transformación digital. A partir de un diseño de investigación cualitativo basado en la triangulación metodológica, se combinaron cuestionarios semiestructurados (n=8), tres entrevistas en profundidad y análisis de contenido digital con el objetivo de analizar cómo las mujeres sostienen las tradiciones musicales en espacios privados, comunitarios y, cada vez más, transnacionales. Los resultados indicaron que las mujeres desempeñan un papel central en la transmisión oral de los repertorios folclóricos, particularmente a través de prácticas domésticas y comunitarias, al tiempo que enfrentan barreras sociales, económicas e institucionales. El análisis temático reveló además que la participación en la música folclórica funciona tanto como expresión artística como forma de resiliencia cultural y afirmación identitaria. Asimismo, las plataformas digitales emergieron como estructuras mediadoras ambivalentes pero significativas, ampliando la visibilidad y la circulación de estas prácticas musicales, a la vez que reconfiguran los modos tradicionales de transmisión. Al situar la participación musical

de las mujeres en la intersección entre género, sostenibilidad cultural y mediación digital, este estudio aportó una perspectiva teóricamente fundamentada y contextualizada a la etnomusicología y a los estudios de género, destacando tanto las limitaciones estructurales como las estrategias creativas de continuidad y adaptación en la música folclórica iraní contemporánea.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres iraníes; música folclórica; transmisión cultural; mediación digital; etnomusicología

## 1.- Introduction

Discussions of Iran in Western academic and journalistic discourse frequently rely on reductive binaries that obscure the complexities of Iranian society. This tendency toward simplification also affects how Iranian cultural production, particularly folk music and women's participation within it, is represented and studied. As Semati (2017) notes, these narratives are framed through simplified oppositions such as reformist versus hardliner, modern versus conservative, and urban versus rural, which flatten lived social realities. Such reductive logics extend to the realm of cultural production, including music. Within this domain, the richness of Iranian folk traditions and the central role of women in sustaining them remain comparatively underexplored in academic scholarship.

Rooted in diverse regional traditions and historically transmitted through oral practices, Iranian folk music constitutes a dynamic cultural practice through which artistic expression, collective memory, and identity are continuously negotiated. Women have traditionally played a central role in this process as performers, educators, and custodians of local repertoires. However, sociopolitical constraints, including restrictions on public performance, limited institutional support, and persistent gender biases, have significantly curtailed their visibility and professional development. Recent research further highlights these constraints. Rahimi and Khaksar (2024) argue that female musicians in Iran encounter multiple structural and market-related barriers that restrict their professional entry and limit their opportunities for advancement, despite their artistic potential.

Despite these structural limitations, women continue to sustain and transform folk traditions through everyday cultural practices, community-based transmission, and increasingly through digital media platforms that enable transnational circulation beyond geographic and political borders. Yet their contributions remain insufficiently theorized within existing scholarship, particularly regarding the intersection of gender, cultural sustainability, and digital mediation in contemporary contexts. Conceptually, examining

women's participation in folk music requires moving beyond binary narratives of oppression and empowerment toward a more relational understanding of cultural agency. In many contexts where public performance is socially regulated, artistic practice unfolds within negotiated spaces shaped by tradition, community norms, and evolving technological infrastructures. Cultural sustainability, therefore, cannot be reduced to the preservation of repertoire alone; it involves the ongoing reproduction of meaning, memory, and social belonging through everyday practices. In this study, women's musical engagement is approached as both an individual artistic practice and a collective cultural process. While musical expression often occurs within personal and domestic contexts, these practices contribute to the broader transmission of shared cultural knowledge and communal memory. Women's participation in folk music therefore reflects both individual experience and a wider cultural phenomenon through which traditions are preserved, transformed, and communicated across generations.

Women's roles in these processes are often embedded in informal, domestic, and intergenerational settings that remain underrepresented in formal institutional accounts. At the same time, digital mediation introduces new configurations of visibility and circulation that reshape how heritage is experienced, shared, and validated. Situating Iranian women's folk engagement within this broader conceptual terrain allows for a more nuanced analysis of how continuity and transformation coexist in culturally constrained yet creatively adaptive environments.

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of women in preserving and revitalizing folk music within the Iranian context. It investigates how female musicians sustain cultural traditions, navigate social constraints, and utilize digital platforms to amplify their artistic and cultural contributions. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do women in Iran sustain and transmit folk music despite cultural and social constraints? (2) In what ways does women's engagement in folk music function both as an artistic endeavor and as a form of cultural resistance and identity reinforcement? (3) What roles do technology and social media play in enhancing women's contributions to the preservation of folk music? Situated at the intersection of ethnomusicology, gender studies, and cultural sustainability, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's agency in contemporary folk music preservation, foregrounding both structural limitations and creative strategies of continuity and transformation. The objective of this

study was to examine the role of Iranian women in the preservation and revitalization of folk music within contemporary sociocultural and digital contexts, with particular attention to cultural transmission, gender-related barriers, and processes of digital mediation.

### 1.1 Theoretical and Historical Context

To situate women's musical participation within its broader socio-political context, it is necessary to consider the historical and ideological frameworks shaping cultural production in Iran. Secularism functions as a regulatory form of power that structures public, private, religious, and political life, often intersecting with gender norms that constrain women's agency in musical spaces (Mahmood, 2005; Casanova, 2006). Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, state policies limited women's public performances, and regional music was marginalized, reducing women's visibility as artists (Youssefzadeh, 2000). Even within these constraints, ethnographic evidence shows that folk music continues to play a vital role in daily life.

Private and domestic spaces have historically become important sites of musical creativity. Hanif (2024) notes that Iranian women often express emotions through singing during domestic work. Similarly, Shadi Fathi emphasizes that "folk music is a form of non-academic music passed down through generations, often sung in intimate settings, such as lullabies sung by mothers to their children" (personal communication, March 12, 2025). Practices such as lullabies, agricultural songs, and ta'zieh have historically lacked state support, reflecting official neglect, yet they remain central to everyday life and ecological labor settings.

Women have traditionally played a key role in preserving folk songs, often under conditions of cultural resistance. Research documents their informal transmission through lullabies, family gatherings, and ceremonies (Nettl, 2005; Nooshin, 2011; Spiri, 2020). Insights from the Harandi sisters (personal communication, March 2025) highlight the growing role of digital platforms and educational institutions in safeguarding folk music. Interviews indicate that women's engagement in private and community settings reinforces collective identity and sustains intangible heritage, despite social, economic, and state-imposed restrictions (Rahimi & Khaksar, 2024). Taken together, these studies suggest that women's participation in Iranian folk music operates simultaneously at intimate, communal, and increasingly transnational levels.

Women's contributions extend beyond folk music into classical traditions. As one musician notes, "In folk music, which is closely tied into daily life, women have an undeniable, very prominent role... It is impossible to imagine this type of music being formed or continued without the involvement of women" (personal communication, March 2025). Ahmadian (2023) observes that women in Iranian classical music act as agents of resistance, reclaiming historically marginalized spaces. Aslanova (2024) emphasizes that women actively create and transmit oral traditions, preserving collective experiences across generations.

Early education is crucial for continuing folk traditions. Exposure to local stories, lullabies, and musical narratives in preschool strengthens cultural identity and motivation to engage with local music (Development of Musical Culture of Preschool Children Based on Folk Traditions, 2023). Women's domestic and informal practices constitute acts of intangible resistance, transmitting heritage and identity across generations, while the increasing visibility of women in classical music represents a transformative moment where artistic expression and social resistance intersect (Hanif, 2024; personal communications, March 2025).

Finally, global circulation of music is influenced by language and geographic proximity. Countries with shared languages tend to exchange more music, while physical distance has become less significant due to digital platforms (Ferreira & Waldfogel, 2013; El País, 2024). In the Iranian case, these dynamics intersect with gendered constraints, rendering digital platforms particularly significant for women musicians. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and digital archives complement traditional preservation methods, allowing Iranian women to share performances and educational resources, thus extending the reach of folk traditions to local and global audiences while adapting to technological change (Harkins, 2019).

Taken together, these historical and theoretical perspectives suggest that women's participation in Iranian folk music cannot be understood solely through institutional visibility or formal performance structures. Instead, it must be situated within layered social spaces where regulation, tradition, and everyday practice intersect. Gendered cultural agency in this context emerges through relational networks, intergenerational transmission, and adaptive strategies that respond to shifting political, social, and technological conditions. Folk music

therefore functions as both an artistic genre and a social practice embedded in domestic, communal, and increasingly digital environments.

This framing invites a reconceptualization of cultural sustainability beyond preservationist discourse. Rather than viewing sustainability as the static safeguarding of repertoire, it can be approached as a dynamic process shaped by embodied practice, negotiated legitimacy, and evolving modes of circulation. In contexts where public performance opportunities may be limited, informal and digitally mediated practices become critical sites of continuity. Women's roles in these spaces illuminate how heritage persists through lived experience, affective labor, and context-sensitive adaptation. Such a perspective foregrounds the interaction between structure and agency, revealing how cultural transmission unfolds within constraints while remaining responsive to change.

## 2.- Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design supported by methodological triangulation. Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire, three in-depth interviews, and the analysis of digital materials produced by participants, allowing the comparison of multiple sources of evidence. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size, numerical indications are used only descriptively to support the qualitative interpretation.

### 2.1 Participants

The core sample consisted of eight women (n=8) who completed the questionnaire, including five folk musicians and three classical musicians. In addition to the questionnaire participants, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals selected for their expertise in Iranian music. Two of the interviewees are ethnomusicology researchers based in Iran with expertise in Iranian classical and folk traditions. Their perspectives were included in order to provide contextual and analytical insights into the cultural, historical, and social dimensions of women's participation in Iranian music. The third interviewee is a setar teacher currently living in France who has been actively performing Iranian classical music in concerts across Europe for more than twenty years. Her participation offered a diasporic perspective on the transmission, performance, and representation of Iranian musical traditions outside Iran.

Their perspectives were considered particularly valuable for the study because they provided expert insight into the cultural context of Iranian music, the historical dynamics of women's participation, and the ways in which Iranian musical traditions are interpreted both within Iran and in diasporic contexts.

The study employed purposive sampling in order to engage participants with direct experience in folk and classical music performance, teaching, and research. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the sensitivity of the socio-cultural context, emphasis was placed on depth of insight rather than numerical representativeness. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in musical practice and their capacity to reflect critically on issues of transmission, gender, and cultural preservation. While the sample size is limited, this approach is consistent with qualitative research traditions that prioritize contextual richness and interpretive depth over statistical generalization.

## 2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected between April 2025 and June 2025 through a semi-structured questionnaire that included open-ended questions and closed-ended items using Likert-scale responses. The study focused on Iranian women involved in folk and classical music practices in Iran and within transnational digital contexts, including one participant residing in France. Open-ended responses were submitted as written textual entries of varying length. Three interviews were conducted (two lasting approximately 30 minutes and one lasting 20 minutes), all of which were audio-recorded with participants' consent and fully transcribed. Additionally, digital content produced by the study participants on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and streaming services was examined. Between 10 and 15 recent posts per participant from the previous year were selected for analysis, and the digital analysis was limited to the official public accounts of the study participants.

The selection of digital materials followed specific inclusion criteria. Posts were selected only from the official public accounts of the participants and had to be directly related to musical performance, teaching activities, or the presentation of folk repertoire. Only posts published within the previous twelve months were considered in order to capture recent practices and current forms of digital engagement. Content unrelated to musical activities, such as personal or non-artistic posts, was excluded from the analysis.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Qualitative data from questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were analyzed using iterative thematic content analysis. Initial open coding identified recurring concepts such as cultural identity, intergenerational transmission, musical resistance, digital engagement, and structural constraints. Codes were progressively grouped into broader thematic categories through successive rounds of refinement, allowing patterns to emerge inductively from the data rather than from predetermined analytical templates. Coding was conducted manually in iterative phases to ensure internal consistency, thematic coherence, and analytical rigor.

Throughout the analytical process, attention was given to both convergence and divergence across data sources. Codes were systematically compared across questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, and digital materials in order to identify shared patterns as well as contextual variation. This cross-source comparison enhanced interpretive depth and supported the development of themes that reflected complexity rather than uniformity. Analytical depth was further strengthened by examining how themes shifted across different narrative contexts, allowing attention to nuance, contradiction, and situated meaning within participants' accounts.

Although the analytical orientation remained inductive, interpretation was informed by relevant theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review. Reflexive awareness of the researcher's interpretive position was maintained throughout the process, particularly in relation to issues of gendered experience, cultural regulation, and digital visibility. Systematic memo writing accompanied each stage of coding in order to document emerging interpretations, track analytical decisions, and enhance transparency in the development of themes. The integration of questionnaire data, interview material, and digital content enabled methodological triangulation, strengthening the internal coherence and credibility of the findings.

Closed-ended questionnaire items were summarized descriptively using SPSS (Version 27) to report demographic characteristics and response distributions. Given the small sample size, quantitative results are interpreted cautiously and are not treated as statistically generalizable evidence.

Digital content analysis combined basic engagement indicators such as views, likes, comments, and shares with qualitative examination of captions, performance context, and audience interaction. Posts were selected based on recency and relevance to musical performance and were analyzed through focused qualitative coding to identify recurring thematic patterns. Engagement indicators were interpreted descriptively as markers of digital visibility rather than as measures of causal influence or popularity.

## 2.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. Data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes. Given the socio-political sensitivities surrounding women's public musical participation in Iran, particular attention was paid to participants' anonymity in both textual analysis and digital content examination. Publicly accessible materials were analyzed with caution to avoid exposing identifiable information beyond what participants had intentionally made visible.

## 3.- Results

The findings presented in this section are based on data collected from eight participants (n=8). The participants represented different age groups, including younger and more experienced musicians. Five of the eight participants were between 30 and 50 years old, two participants were between 18 and 29, and one participant was over 50 years old. All participants provided informed consent, and most were actively engaged in folk music activities at the time of the study.

Participants identified several challenges affecting women's engagement in Iranian folk music. Four participants referred primarily to social barriers as the most significant difficulty, while three participants highlighted economic constraints. One participant emphasized cultural barriers as the main challenge. Several participants also referred to the need for greater financial and institutional support, emphasizing the interconnected nature of social, economic, and cultural limitations. These responses suggest that social restrictions remain the most frequently mentioned difficulty, although economic and cultural factors also shape women's musical participation.

A closer examination of participants' responses revealed that these challenges often overlap rather than functioning as isolated categories. Social restrictions frequently intersected with economic constraints, particularly when limitations on public performance reduced income opportunities and professional visibility. Similarly, cultural barriers were often embedded within broader normative expectations regarding gender roles and appropriate spaces of artistic expression. The thematic categories presented below were derived from recurring patterns identified across questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, and digital content analysis.

The thematic analysis further revealed that women play a significant role in the transmission of folk traditions through oral practices such as lullabies, domestic singing, and family-based teaching. One participant explained that "many traditional songs are still transmitted informally within families, especially through mothers and grandmothers." Participants emphasized that these practices contribute to preserving collective cultural memory across generations.

Several responses also framed women's engagement in folk music as a form of cultural resistance and identity expression. Participants described musical participation as a means of maintaining cultural continuity within everyday social life. Social and cultural barriers were frequently mentioned, particularly restrictions related to religious norms and limitations on women's public performances. One participant noted that "social expectations and restrictions often limit women's opportunities to perform publicly." Participants also highlighted the lack of institutional and financial support as a significant obstacle affecting women musicians.

Participants emphasized the growing role of digital media and social networks in increasing visibility and facilitating new forms of participation. Digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube were described as alternative spaces that allow women to present their musical work and connect with broader audiences beyond local contexts. One participant stated that "social media has made it easier to share music beyond local limitations."

Some participants also expressed concern that the reduced participation or invisibility of women could weaken the richness and authenticity of folk traditions. Overall, the findings highlight a complex interplay between preservation, resistance, and adaptation within the

contemporary landscape of Iranian folk music, particularly in relation to new forms of digitally mediated visibility.

#### 4.- Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the central yet contextually constrained role of women in the preservation and transmission of Iranian folk music. Within this exploratory sample, participants identified social restrictions as the most significant challenge, followed by economic and cultural barriers. These findings suggest that women's musical engagement develops within broader processes of negotiation, adaptation, and cultural continuity shaped by social and institutional conditions.

The thematic analysis emphasizes women's role in sustaining oral traditions and maintaining cultural memory through practices such as lullabies, domestic singing, and the transmission of regional repertoires. Similar patterns have been documented in studies from Central Asia, Turkey, Korea, and Morocco, where women musicians navigate marginalization while preserving local musical traditions. Although these contexts differ historically and culturally, the Iranian case reflects broader dynamics in which women's participation in folk music is closely connected to questions of identity, heritage, and cultural continuity.

The findings may also be interpreted through discussions of gendered agency within constrained socio-cultural environments. Rather than presenting women's participation as either resistance or compliance, participants' experiences point toward negotiated forms of agency shaped by structural limitations. Women's engagement in folk music unfolds within existing restrictions while simultaneously contributing to forms of visibility, continuity, and cultural reinterpretation. In this context, folk performance may function as a space where tradition is preserved and adapted through embodied musical practice. This interpretation aligns with gender studies perspectives that emphasize situated agency within regulatory frameworks.

Digital mediation emerged as another important dimension of participants' experiences. Social media platforms were described as spaces that increase visibility, facilitate networking, and support new forms of participation and community building. At the same time, participants' reflections revealed tensions between cultural preservation and digital adaptation. Digital technologies appear to reshape contemporary folk practices by

influencing how authenticity, visibility, and audience engagement are negotiated. Online participation may create opportunities for broader circulation and professional connection while also generating forms of exposure and vulnerability. For some participants, digital spaces functioned as alternative environments for musical expression that partially bypass physical and institutional limitations. These developments suggest changing conditions in the ways structural inequalities are experienced and negotiated within contemporary musical contexts.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited sample size, the findings should be interpreted as contextually grounded rather than statistically generalizable. The purposive and non-probabilistic sample limits broader transferability, and the perspectives presented reflect specific musical and socio-cultural experiences. In addition, written questionnaire responses varied in depth, and the digital materials analyzed represent curated forms of self-presentation rather than unmediated everyday practices. Reliance on publicly accessible digital content also restricts the analysis to materials participants intentionally chose to share online. As a result, private performances, informal gatherings, and offline pedagogical interactions remain outside the scope of observation. While confidentiality and reflexive analysis were prioritized throughout the research process, the findings remain situated within a specific temporal and contextual framework.

The study also points toward several broader implications. Participants' experiences suggest the importance of structural support mechanisms, including inclusive cultural policies, financial support, and institutional recognition, in sustaining women's contributions to intangible cultural heritage. Women's participation in folk music appears closely connected to artistic expression, cultural continuity, community relationships, and intergenerational transmission. These findings invite further reflection on how gendered participation shapes the sustainability of musical traditions across different cultural contexts. In addition, discussions surrounding intangible heritage may benefit from greater attention to informal transmission networks and domestic musical practices, which participants frequently identified as central to the continuity of folk traditions.

The findings further suggest practical implications for cultural and educational initiatives. Institutional frameworks that actively support women's participation in folk music may contribute to cultural sustainability by expanding access to performance opportunities, pedagogical spaces, and funding resources. Educational and community-based initiatives may

also benefit from recognizing informal and domestic musical practices as significant forms of cultural transmission. Documentation and archiving projects focused on women's repertoires, including lullabies and regional vocal traditions, may further support intergenerational continuity and cultural preservation.

The digital dimension additionally highlights the importance of developing nuanced approaches to online cultural preservation. While digital platforms expand visibility and transnational circulation, they also operate within algorithmic systems that influence exposure and audience engagement. Future initiatives related to digital archiving, ethical visibility, and sustainable dissemination may therefore play an important role in supporting women musicians' participation in digital environments.

Conceptually, this study contributes to discussions of cultural sustainability by framing women's participation in folk music as a form of embodied continuity shaped through everyday practices, informal transmission, and engagement with digital infrastructures. Within the Iranian context, these processes are closely connected to gendered experiences unfolding across domestic, relational, and increasingly digital spaces. This perspective contributes to broader understandings of intangible heritage by emphasizing the relationship between cultural continuity, mediation, and adaptation.

Future research may benefit from larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal approaches, and comparative perspectives examining women's participation across different socio-cultural and technological environments. Additional attention to audience reception, both online and offline, may also deepen understanding of how women's musical practices are interpreted, validated, and circulated. Interdisciplinary approaches combining ethnomusicology, gender studies, and digital media research may further strengthen the analysis of gendered cultural sustainability in contemporary folk music settings.

Overall, this study offers an exploratory and theoretically informed perspective on Iranian women's participation in folk music and the structural conditions shaping their experiences. The findings suggest that folk music functions as a dynamic cultural field shaped by negotiations among gender norms, communal expectations, and evolving technological contexts. Women's participation reflects ongoing interactions between constraint, adaptation, and creativity, highlighting how intangible cultural heritage continues through embodied and situated musical practices.

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