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Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī and the Children’s Book Council of Iran: Cultural Institution-Building, Organized Voluntarism, and the Logic of Sustainability

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional role of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī in the formation, consolidation, and long-term sustainability of the Children’s Book Council of Iran (CBC) as one of the most enduring civil-society cultural institutions in contemporary Iran. Drawing on an analytical reading of Anṣārī’s biography, the works of Parīchehr Nasrīn-Pāy, and materials from the Oral History Project of the Children’s Book Council, the article argues that the CBC’s success resulted from the convergence of three key factors: multicultural formative experiences, professional librarianship, and an ethical approach to cultural management. Rather than offering a linear biographical narrative or an event-based institutional history, this study focuses on institutional mechanisms, the model of organized volunteerism, and the logic of “quiet power” in leadership.

The article also addresses the limitations and costs of this model, demonstrating that volunteer-based structures grounded in ethical commitment and human capital, while sustainable, are labor-intensive and difficult to replicate. Ultimately, it argues that the experience of the CBC should be understood less as a transferable operational model and more as an analytical framework for examining cultural institution-building under conditions of limited resources, political instability, and lack of formal support in Iran. This experience has endured not only in the organizational structure of the CBC but also in the collective memory of the pioneering women whose sustained participation shaped its institutional identity.

Keywords: Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī; Children’s Book Council of Iran; cultural institution-building; volunteer work; institutional sustainability

Introduction

Civil-society cultural institutions in Iran, unlike the short lifespan of many administrative and state structures, have at times demonstrated a remarkable resilience through quiet perseverance and sustained individual commitment. The Children's Book Council of Iran (CBC) is among the most enduring examples of such institutions: an organization that emerged neither through state funding nor formal bureaucratic hierarchy, but rather through volunteer labor, professional standards, and ethical commitment. At the center of this durability and coherence stands a figure whose imprint on more than half a century of Iran's cultural life is unmistakable: Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī. Yet this exceptional longevity itself calls for critical inquiry. What mechanisms made such endurance possible, and what kinds of complexities and costs did these mechanisms generate within the institution?

This article is based on a body of key sources addressing the institutional history of the CBC and the role of its pioneering figures. Among the most significant are four reflective works by Parīchehr Nasrīn-Pāy, each illuminating a different dimension of the CBC's evolution: *The Children's Book Council: From Cooperation to Participation* (2015),¹ which documents the transformation of volunteer work and the emergence of professional structures through interviews with Council and encyclopedia contributors; *Peace Must Be Learned from Childhood* (2015),² which explores the ethical and educational foundations of the institution through conversations with Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī and other cultural actors; and *A Conversation with Tūrān Mīrbādī* (2018),³ which reveals the intellectual horizons of the founding generation. In addition, the volume *The Life and Times of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī* (2024)⁴ offers a comprehensive account of her professional trajectory and decisive role in institutional formation. The article also draws on Peymāneh Ṣālehī's

¹ Parīchehr Nasrīn-Pāy, *The Children's Book Council: From Cooperation to Participation* (Tehran: Ketābdār Publications, 2015). [In Persian].

² Parīchehr Nasrīn-Pāy, *Peace Must Be Learned from Childhood*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Child Workshop Publications, 2015). [In Persian].

³ Parīchehr Nasrīn-Pāy, *A Conversation with Tūrān Mīrbādī: Peace Must Be Learned from Childhood* (Tehran: Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults Publications, 2018). [In Persian].

⁴ Parīchehr Nasrīn-Pāy, *The Life and Times of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī*, ed. Fāṭimeh Manjazī (Tehran: Kargadān Publications, 2024). [In Persian].

study, “The Voices of Pioneer Women: An Analysis of the CBC Oral History Project” (2024),⁵ which employs oral narratives to deepen our understanding of lived experience, internal dynamics, and the CBC’s inner history. Another important source is encyclopedia entry “Shūrā-ye Ketāb-e Kudak” [Children’s Book Council], which provides a concise institutional account of the Council’s history, objectives, and activities from the perspective of one of its most influential members.⁶

These sources—produced largely from within the CBC and through the direct participation of its actors—not only provide valuable data but also constitute part of the process through which the CBC’s institutional memory has been constructed. As such, they require a reading attentive both to what is articulated and to what remains unsaid.

These sources—produced largely from within the CBC and through the direct participation of its actors—not only provide valuable data but also constitute part of the process through which the CBC’s institutional memory has been constructed. As such, they require a reading attentive both to what is articulated and to what remains unsaid. The present study draws upon these works collectively as its principal evidentiary base, using them to reconstruct the historical development, institutional culture, volunteer structure, and mechanisms of sustainability that have shaped the CBC across successive generations.

Through an analytical juxtaposition of these materials, the present article revisits the history of the CBC not as a mere chronicle of events, but as an institutional and intergenerational study. Its central question is: how did Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī succeed in transforming a small council into a leading reference institution for children’s literature in Iran amid a turbulent social and political context? And what consequences did this process of institution-building entail at the level of internal relations—from generational differences and definitions of professional competence to the retention and sustainability of volunteer participation?

⁵ Peymāneh Šālehī, “The Voices of Pioneer Women: An Analysis of the Oral History Project of the Children’s Book Council,” *Pažhvāk-e Zanān dar Tārikh* 4, no. 12 (2024). [In Persian].

⁶ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, “Shūrā-ye Ketāb-e Kudak,” in *Farhangnāmeḥ-ye Kudak va Nūjavān* (Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults), vol. 17 (Tehran: Farhangnāmeḥ-ye Kudak va Nūjavān Foundation, 2017), 205–208. [In Persian].

Rather than presenting a linear biographical narrative, the article addresses this question through an analysis of three key axes:

1. The formation of Anṣārī's "professional individuality" through encounters with diverse cultural contexts;
2. The transformation of librarianship into an instrument of cultural justice;
3. Institution-building grounded in organized volunteerism and professional standards.

In this sense, Anṣārī was not merely the director of a council, but a cultural architect of a generation of institution-builders—one that elevated children's books from the realm of entertainment to that of a cultural, educational, and social concern. The CBC Oral History Project reveals how this process of institution-building was lived and internalized in practice by members and volunteers: from narratives of early workshops to the creation of networks with libraries and families, and the production of the *Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults*. This internalization of experience, alongside its constructive effects, also contributed to the consolidation of a specific institutional culture—one that enabled continuity while simultaneously producing unwritten frameworks for participation and decision-making.

Drawing on biographical narrative, institutional analysis, and a critical reading of oral history, this article demonstrates why the CBC, unlike many comparable institutions, not only survived but maintained its credibility through the most difficult political periods.

1. The Institutional and Historical Context of the Children's Book Council of Iran

The CBC was founded in January 1963 at a time when children's literature in Iran remained fragmented, non-standardized, and largely dependent on the individual efforts of writers and translators. During the 1950s and 1960s, despite rapid urbanization and the growing number of school-aged children, the cultural infrastructure necessary to support literacy development was largely absent. Public libraries for children were virtually nonexistent, and the production of children's books—ranging from textual and illustrative quality to translation practices and educational content—lacked coherence and reliable evaluative standards. Under these conditions, the need for an independent institution capable

of ensuring quality, selection, and professional criteria in children's literature became increasingly evident.

In response to this vacuum, a group of thirty-seven cultural actors—writers, translators, illustrators, educators, and librarians—came together to establish an independent institution that would not only organize book production but also assume responsibility for evaluation systems, the introduction of selected works, public education, and the establishment of standards. From its inception, the CBC was grounded in three core principles: financial and administrative independence, organized volunteer work, and cultural responsibility. These principles, initially shaped by the lived experiences of pioneering women in education, librarianship, and children's literature, gradually crystallized into the CBC's enduring institutional identity. The diversity of the founders' professional backgrounds rendered the CBC a multi-voiced space from the outset—one whose sustainability required ongoing negotiation among differing professional and pedagogical logics.

The Oral History Project of the CBC clearly demonstrates that the institution emerged from the individual and collective concerns of active women who lacked formal backing or state funding but relied instead on cooperation and pedagogical insight to build a network of collaboration. Rather than awaiting governmental support, they acted independently. In the accounts of interviewees, the CBC is described as the product of “necessary cultural work,” not as an administrative or state-driven project. While this framing of cultural necessity served a strong motivational function, it also had the potential, over time, to normalize the pressures of volunteer labor and the unequal distribution of responsibilities, rendering them implicit and largely unspoken.

In 1964, Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī—then only twenty-four years old—joined the CBC, marking a turning point in its institutional trajectory. Her biography reveals that this was not a peripheral choice but a logical continuation of her professional path in librarianship. Anṣārī had received formal academic training in librarianship in Switzerland and had previously gained volunteer experience at the Delhi Public Library, where libraries functioned not merely as lending spaces but as social, educational, and cultural institutions. These experiences later formed the foundation of her professional approach to the CBC. The introduction of an academic, library-based professional perspective—despite its clear advantages—gradually shifted the balance of decision-making within the

CBC toward the language of order, documentation, and specialized criteria.

Participants in the oral history interviews repeatedly emphasize that Anṣārī introduced “professional librarianship” into the CBC: she brought with her the principles of organization, documentation, informed book selection, and planning, thereby transforming the CBC from an informal volunteer circle into a semi-professional institution. During the 1960s, the CBC remained small and vulnerable, entirely dependent on the personal commitment of its members; yet through her systematic approach, Anṣārī moved it beyond its initial fragility and laid the groundwork for sustained institution-building. This transition toward semi-professionalization, while stabilizing the structure, also established new thresholds for participation and long-term volunteer retention.

Another significant transformation occurred in 1964 with the CBC’s official membership in the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY). This affiliation shifted the CBC’s trajectory from that of a small local institution to an international cultural actor. Entry into the global IBBY network introduced a set of new standards into Iran’s cultural sphere, including systems for book evaluation, criteria for selecting outstanding works, a non-ideological approach to children’s literature, and attention to children’s rights. Oral history interviews frequently refer to IBBY membership and participation in international events as moments that solidified the CBC’s professional identity, with many members describing this period as the CBC’s “moment of globalization.” At the same time, this global orientation confronted the CBC with the challenge of reconciling international standards with the local constraints of publishing and education in Iran.

This period also marked the point at which the CBC required formalization, documentation, division of labor, and the creation of an institutional memory—needs to which Anṣārī responded decisively. Many members later reflected that she “moved the CBC from a space of individual enthusiasm to a professional and sustainable structure.” It is at this juncture that the CBC’s history is commonly divided into two distinct phases:

1. The Lālī Ayman (Āhī) period (1962-1980): a phase of foundation, initial identity formation, global connections, and governance driven primarily by cultural enthusiasm.

2. The Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī period (1980–present): a phase of substantive institution-building, professionalization, documentation, and the establishment of organizational memory.

Analyses of the Oral History Project reveal broad consensus—even among those with differing perspectives—on this distinction between “foundation” and “institutionalization,” identifying Anṣārī as the central figure of the latter phase: the individual who stabilized the CBC’s internal structure, professional standards, and conception of volunteer work.

Following the 1979 Revolution, many civil institutions in Iran were dissolved, marginalized, or fundamentally transformed. The CBC, however, persisted despite political pressures, financial constraints, and significant generational turnover among its members. The expansion of the CBC’s research library, the publication of annual lists of selected books, the organization of specialized scholarly meetings, sustained participation in international awards, and the advancement of the major Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults project positioned the CBC uniquely: neither a state institution nor a purely volunteer initiative, but a specialized social organization. This continuity, while indicative of institutional success, required difficult choices and prioritizations, some of which remain underrepresented in official narratives.

The CBC’s endurance during this period demonstrates that the professional structure, institutional memory, and cultural ethics formed in earlier decades—particularly during Anṣārī’s tenure—functioned as the engine of its survival. While many cultural institutions of the same era were dismantled or lost their identity, the CBC endured because it was built upon a foundation combining independence, organized volunteerism, professional standards, and institutional ethics. A significant portion of this resilience can be attributed to Anṣārī’s long-term, gradual approach to institution-building, through which she adapted the CBC’s foundational principles to the needs of successive generations and guided it through political and administrative turbulence. At the same time, this person-centered mode of institution-building raises critical questions regarding the transmission of experience and succession within the CBC’s structure.

In sum, the emergence and persistence of the CBC cannot be understood without attention to the historical and social context of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the decisive role played by Anṣārī. Her entry into the CBC was not merely an individual event but the convergence of

a distinctive professional life with a historical necessity—a necessity that, without such a figure, might never have produced an institution of comparable durability and credibility. This assumption of decisive influence is examined in subsequent sections of the article not in order to negate it, but to reflect on the complexities and institutional costs embedded in this model.

2. An Analytical Biography of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī

An examination of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī's role in shaping and consolidating the CBC becomes meaningful only when her life is read not as a linear sequence of events, but through the intellectual and experiential axes that formed the foundation of her professional identity. The Life and Times of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī clearly demonstrates that her life constituted a form of “institution-building education”: a constellation of intercultural, professional, and ethical experiences that later sedimented into the institutional identity of the CBC. For this reason, an analysis of her life must begin with an understanding of these formative contexts rather than a mere enumeration of biographical milestones. This mode of reading, while avoiding descriptive biography, allows for the relationship between individual experience and the emergence of the CBC's institutional logic to be traced—without reducing the individual's role to a heroic narrative.

The first defining element in Anṣārī's life was her extensive multicultural upbringing. From an early age, she lived in countries including India, Sweden, Afghanistan, the Netherlands, Belgium, and England, encountering distinct cultural and educational systems in each context. This direct exposure to diverse social environments expanded her perspective beyond the limited cultural frameworks of mid-twentieth-century Iran. Her experiences of caste-based discrimination in India, the order and cultural equity of European public libraries, and differing pedagogical approaches fostered a form of social and ethical sensitivity that later shaped her views on childhood, education, and equitable access to books. This sensitivity is also corroborated in oral history interviews, where many participants emphasize Anṣārī's sustained attention to marginalized children, underserved regions, and the necessity of providing appropriate books to those communities. At the same time, this multicultural background—while opening new horizons—also produced a degree of experiential distance between

Anṣārī and some of her colleagues, a distance that at critical moments of professional decision-making could manifest as differences in priorities and expectations.

Alongside this multicultural formation, Anṣārī's professional path in librarianship constituted the second pillar of her institutional persona. Unlike many of her contemporaries in the cultural sphere, she pursued librarianship not through personal inclination alone but through formal academic and research-based training. Her studies in Switzerland and her volunteer work at the Delhi Public Library familiarized her with the practical functioning of public libraries—spaces in which librarianship is exercised in its full sense rather than as a merely administrative or symbolic role. These experiences were later complemented by her work at the Central Library of the University of Tehran, together forming a set of professional competencies that would serve as the foundations for standardization within the CBC. Her approach to book selection, organizational order, collection management, and the training of volunteers derived directly from this professional trajectory. Oral history accounts repeatedly reference her precision, commitment to quality, and rigor in book selection, cataloguing, and evaluation processes. This emphasis on professional standards, while enhancing institutional quality, gradually established new boundaries for participation and produced a distinction between “specialized volunteer work” and other forms of cultural involvement.

Beyond these two axes, the most significant element shaping Anṣārī's institutional character was her ethical disposition and what may be described as her “quiet power.” She came from a family in which reading, order, responsibility, and attention to education were foundational values. This disposition persisted throughout all phases of her life, from volunteer initiatives to her leadership of the CBC. Within the organization, Anṣārī exercised influence not through formal authority, but through ethical trust, diligence, precision, and humility. Her power was not performative or controlling; it resided in sustained commitment, personal coherence, and fidelity to quality. It was precisely this approach that enabled the CBC to endure successive periods of political, financial, and cultural instability and encouraged volunteers of diverse orientations to remain engaged over many years. Oral history interviewees describe this disposition using terms such as “participatory management,” “listening to everyone,” and “distributing responsibility.”

This ethical disposition proved more influential than any formal position. Through her capacity to foster empathy, forge connections among members, and maintain a human-centered approach to cultural work, Anṣārī built a durable network of volunteers and specialists—one that would later become the engine of the CBC's resilience. At the same time, institutional reliance on such a network raises important questions regarding the transmission of experience and the sustainability of this managerial logic in Anṣārī's absence.

Ultimately, what rendered Anṣārī singular within the CBC was the convergence of three mutually reinforcing forces: the global scope of her experience, the professional rigor of her skills, and the ethical grounding of her leadership. It was through the interplay of these forces that she transformed an informal organization into a reference institution—one that continues to derive much of its credibility from her methods and character. This singularity, rather than lending itself to myth-making, underscores the complexity of a model of institution-building that was both successful and deeply contingent upon specific conditions and a particular human configuration.

3. Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī at the Children's Book Council: Rebuilding an Institution from Within

Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī's entry into the CBC in 1964 marked the point of convergence between her professional experience and a pressing cultural need. At the time, the CBC was a small, dispersed body reliant on a limited circle of enthusiasts devoted to children's literature and remained far from functioning as a stable institution. Anṣārī joined at precisely the moment when this small collective required someone capable of bridging volunteer enthusiasm with professional order. *The Life and Times of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī* demonstrates that from her earliest years at the CBC she acted not as an auxiliary figure, but as an individual with a systematic approach and a long-term vision, effectively redefining the CBC's initial structures. Her arrival thus inaugurated a process through which volunteer passion was gradually rearticulated within institutional and professional frameworks—a process that, alongside generating cohesion, demanded collective adaptation and learning.

One of Anṣārī's most significant contributions was the transformation of members' fragmented activities into structured processes. Prior to her involvement, the CBC operated largely on the

basis of cultural enthusiasm, personal relationships, and individual efforts. By introducing principles of librarianship—such as evaluation systems, documentation, task categorization, and division of labor—Anṣārī provided direction to these activities. She shifted the CBC from a “circle of enthusiastic volunteers” to a “professional volunteer institution.” The distinction is crucial: in a volunteer circle, activities revolve around individuals; in a volunteer institution, they are organized around structure and standards. Interviews from the Oral History Project confirm this transformation, with many participants recalling the emergence of “order,” “planning,” and “accountability” as Anṣārī’s role became more prominent. This institutional transition, while enhancing quality and sustainability, also produced new definitions of commitment, competence, and durability, thereby delineating more precise boundaries for volunteer participation.

Equally consequential was Anṣārī’s role in forging the CBC’s international connections, which fundamentally reshaped its institutional identity. Membership in the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) and participation in international events—documented in Nasrīn-Pāy’s work—not only consolidated the CBC’s global standing but also introduced international standards into its internal environment. Drawing on her broad cultural experience and familiarity with international structures, Anṣārī functioned as a cultural mediator, enabling the CBC not merely to learn from global currents but to join them. Oral history narratives likewise identify IBBY membership and participation in international conferences and awards as pivotal moments in the CBC’s being “taken seriously,” both domestically and abroad. At the same time, these global connections confronted the CBC with the challenge of translating and adapting international criteria to Iran’s local publishing and educational conditions.

Perhaps Anṣārī’s most distinctive feature within the CBC was her mode of leadership—one that may be described as “quiet power.” Unlike many cultural managers who rely on formal authority and administrative hierarchy, Anṣārī derived her influence from trust, consistency, and a strong work ethic. Accounts in Nasrīn-Pāy’s book indicate that she understood management not as control, but as responsibility toward quality and continuity. Oral history interviews similarly describe her as someone who “listened to everyone,” “distributed work rather than monopolizing it,” and “maintained calm even at moments of intense

disagreement." This approach enabled the CBC to preserve its cohesion through successive periods of crisis—from the Revolution to financial scarcity and generational turnover among volunteers. Members remained engaged not out of administrative obligation, but out of trust in her leadership. This form of informal management, while fostering cohesion, also tied decision-making less to explicit mechanisms than to personal trust and an ethical memory, rendering critique and renewal gradual and largely internal processes.

Another crucial aspect of Anṣārī's role was her ability to transform volunteers into effective agents. In Iran, volunteer work is often associated with fragmentation, instability, and a lack of accountability; Anṣārī, however, created an environment through a combination of order, mutual respect, and transparency in which volunteers developed a sense of ownership and belonging. Through the organization of working groups, regular book-review sessions, thematic committees, and educational programs, she elevated volunteers from "auxiliary helpers" to "professional cultural actors." Participants in the Oral History Project repeatedly describe the CBC as their "school" and "laboratory"—a place where they gained their first experiences in writing criticism, collaborative work, and professional engagement with children's literature.

Anṣārī's influence was not limited to executive management; she also shaped the CBC's conceptual understanding of "children's books" and "children's libraries." For her, children's books were neither mere cultural commodities nor solely educational tools, but integral to children's identity and rights. Rooted in her intercultural experiences and professional training in librarianship, this perspective became an element of the CBC's institutional identity—transforming it from a recommending body into an institution with a distinct cultural worldview. Both Nasrīn-Pāy's writings and oral testimonies reflect this worldview through concepts such as "the child's right to access quality books," "children's literature as cultural capital," and "the necessity of independence in evaluation." While this shared worldview strengthened cohesion, it also contributed to the formation of clear institutional boundaries that distinguished the CBC from other currents within children's literature.

In sum, Anṣārī was neither merely a member nor simply a manager, but the architect of the CBC's institutional identity. Her presence

demonstrated that a sustainable cultural institution can emerge only when leadership is grounded not in power, but in ethics, experience, and a broad cultural vision. The CBC stands as her legacy: an institution initiated by a group of eminent figures, yet one whose cohesion, continuity, and credibility today are the result of decades of her calm, precise, and persistent leadership—a form of management clearly traceable both in her biography and in the collective memory of the women and men whose voices are preserved in the Oral History Project. This legacy, rather than offering a simple model for replication, represents a complex experience of cultural institution-building—one that can only be understood through simultaneous attention to its successes and its institutional subtleties.

4. The Children's Book Council of Iran as a Civil Institution: Durability, Crises, and Mechanisms of Survival

The multi-decade endurance of the CBC—within a context in which many cultural institutions have experienced decline, dissolution, or profound identity shifts—demonstrates that the CBC was sustained not merely by cultural enthusiasm or administrative support. Rather, over time it developed a set of internal institutional mechanisms that rendered it resilient in the face of political, economic, and generational crises. Any examination of these mechanisms would be incomplete without attention to the role of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, who not only shaped the CBC's internal management but also articulated its logic of survival. This articulation transformed the CBC from a body reacting episodically to circumstances into an institution capable of sustained agency, even though this transition required decisions that were not without cost.

One of the earliest factors contributing to the CBC's durability was its independence from state structures. The CBC possessed neither a fixed budget nor formal affiliation with official cultural policies, nor was it defined within an administrative bureaucracy. While this independence often imposed significant constraints, it simultaneously shielded the CBC from crises that undermined many dependent institutions. Anṣārī regarded this independence not as a "limitation" but as a form of "capital"—one that allowed the CBC to define its own criteria and remain flexible in the face of external pressures. During the years of her active involvement, decisions regarding book selection, evaluation, and judging practices were never subordinated to political or administrative

expediciencies. In the Oral History Project, this independence repeatedly emerges as a core element of the CBC's identity: interviewees describe it as an institution committed to preserving its standards even when doing so intensified financial hardship. At the same time, this independence compelled the CBC to rely on limited human resources and the sustained self-sacrifice of its volunteers.

A second factor in the CBC's survival was a distinctive form of "institutional memory" shaped through the continued presence of Anṣārī and a small number of other key figures. The CBC did not fracture with each generational shift because it was built from the outset upon documentation, the recording of experience, and its transmission over time. Anṣārī played a central role in this process. Through her professional discipline and librarianship-based precision, she strengthened the CBC's written memory and prevented the loss of valuable experiential knowledge as individuals came and went. In this sense, the CBC gradually evolved from "a collection of individuals" into "a structure possessing an autonomous memory." The Oral History Project itself constitutes one manifestation of this logic: by recording members' narratives, the CBC seeks to elevate institutional memory from the level of individual recollection to that of collective documentation. At the same time, the concentration of institutional memory around a limited number of key figures raises internal questions regarding the full transmission of experience and the possibility of its critical reassessment.

Alongside institutional memory, the CBC possessed another crucial mechanism of survival: its capacity to regenerate and attract new members. Unlike many civil institutions that gradually become closed circles, the CBC remained an open environment during Anṣārī's tenure—one in which individuals with diverse backgrounds and motivations could enter, receive training, and gradually assume responsibility. This openness, facilitated by the CBC's volunteer-based structure and Anṣārī's non-hierarchical approach, ensured that the organization never confronted a "lost generation" crisis. Oral history interviewees frequently recall their initial encounters with the CBC through children's literature workshops, book-review groups, and projects such as the Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults—spaces where education, collective work, and responsibility were interwoven. Sustaining this cycle, however, required a high degree of

temporal and emotional investment, which also entailed the risk of gradual burnout among active members.

Another dimension essential to the CBC's resilience was its ability to preserve a coherent "cultural identity." Over the decades, the CBC neither succumbed to structural rigidity nor lost its sense of purpose, nor did it become an instrument of individual preferences. A significant component of this identity stability derived from Anṣārī's conception of cultural work. For her, children's books were neither merely tools for reader formation nor simply cultural commodities, but elements of children's cultural rights and integral components of their lived world. Rooted in her experiences in Europe and in public libraries in India, this perspective became a lasting value within the CBC. Oral history accounts indicate that many members understood the CBC not only as a "professional institution" but as an advocate for children's right to access high-quality literature—a conviction that explains the CBC's insistence on independent evaluation and rigorous standards. This stability of identity simultaneously protected the CBC from fluctuations in taste and delineated clear boundaries between it and other currents within children's literature.

Finally, the ethical structure of the CBC—shaped decisively by Anṣārī—emerged as one of the most significant factors in its endurance. The CBC functioned as an environment in which respect, empathy, and responsibility were lived values rather than rhetorical slogans. This form of institutional ethics encouraged members to view themselves as part of a broader cultural network and to regard the CBC's continuity as a personal responsibility. Such collective commitment constitutes one of the rare elements capable of sustaining a civil institution for decades without financial resources, governmental backing, or formal organizational structures. Oral history narratives, particularly those related to workshops and the encyclopedia project, demonstrate how this ethic of collective work kept individuals engaged in the CBC over many years.

It can therefore be argued that the survival of the CBC resulted from a constellation of institutional mechanisms—some structural, others cultural. Among these, however, the role of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī as the figure who articulated and stabilized these mechanisms remains paramount. Put plainly, the CBC endured not because of favorable circumstances, but because of her managerial model, professional ethics,

and cultural worldview. If the CBC today stands as a credible, stable, and trusted institution, this status is due above all to half a century of Anṣārī's calm, coherent, and sustained institution-building. And if this experience can now be revisited and analyzed, it is in part because of the systematic recording of memories and narratives by pioneering women through the Oral History Project.

5. Volunteer Work at the Children's Book Council of Iran

Volunteer work at the CBC—particularly during the period of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī's leadership—was not conceived as a strategy for financial economy, but as a foundation for building a participatory culture and fostering civic education. In her interview in *The Life and Times of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī*, she clearly explains why volunteer work in Iran is often misunderstood and how the CBC sought to cultivate a different understanding of it. She states: "When economic pressures increase, volunteer work begins to seem strange or even ridiculous to people. If we show how much satisfaction, pleasure, and learning volunteer work can offer... the individual becomes constructive and effective... through volunteer work, a person arrives at peace." Anṣārī thus frames volunteerism not merely as social participation, but as part of a broader process of healing relationships within families and society; in her view, one form of violence lies in the "suppression of speech," and volunteer work creates opportunities for expression and individual growth.

Elsewhere, she emphasizes the heavy responsibility borne by those who guide volunteer work: "Those who lead volunteer work carry a heavy burden and must pay close attention to the emotional needs of individuals." She goes on to describe the CBC's structure as "council-based" and without a single "head," explaining that the review groups and committees—nineteen in total—are entirely administered through consultation, opinion-sharing, and equal participation: "Collective consultation is invisible... expressing opinions leads to thinking and to a sense of responsibility... encouraging, involving—these are all forms of therapy."

From Anṣārī's perspective, volunteer work must always be accompanied by institutional rationality. In a discussion of the CBC's workshops, she explains that young people may initially be drawn to activities such as assisting working children or engaging in charitable initiatives, but that the central issue is "staying" in volunteer work—and

demonstrating that the CBC's own management is also voluntary, so that it may function as a model. This emphasis on "staying," while aligned with the necessity of institutional continuity, implicitly reveals issues of burnout, the gradual withdrawal of some participants, and the inherent instability of volunteer engagement.

Peymāneh Šāleḥī's (2024) analysis of the CBC's Oral History Project—although it does not extract direct quotations through search tools—generally demonstrates that the women active within the CBC regarded volunteer work as the "core of institutional identity" and as the foundation of collective education. In this analysis, volunteerism is presented as a means of transmitting collaborative skills, cultivating cultural sensitivity, and shaping a civil institution across multiple generations—an interpretation fully consistent with Anṣārī's own accounts.

Taken together, these observations indicate that volunteer work at the CBC, at least during Anṣārī's tenure, was not simply a form of practical participation. Rather, it functioned as a form of "institutional ethics" that enabled the CBC to remain resilient during periods of cultural and political transformation and to serve as the foundation for major projects such as the book review groups and the *Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults*. At the same time, this institutional ethic transformed the CBC into a model of durability that was costly to sustain—one whose continuity depended on specific forms of human capital and on commitments extending well beyond formal or contractual obligations.

Conclusion

An examination of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī's life, professional experience, and institutional role demonstrates that the CBC should be understood not as a small cultural organization, but as one of the most enduring civil institutions in the history of modern Iranian culture. The CBC's continuity—despite political upheavals, generational change, financial constraints, and the absence of legal or structural support—can only be fully understood through an analysis of Anṣārī's approach to institution-building. By combining three foundational elements—multicultural formation, professional librarianship, and ethical disposition—she articulated a model of cultural management that operated beyond the dominant and often ineffective frameworks of formal institutions. While

historically effective, this model functioned less as a generalizable blueprint than as a precise response to the CBC's specific cultural, human, and temporal conditions.

A fuller reading of this experience emerges when individual biography is placed alongside the collective narrative preserved in the Oral History Project. The article "Voices of Pioneer Women" illustrates how the CBC is remembered by its women members as a space defined by commitment to children's literature, participatory management, national and international advocacy, the elevation of literary quality, educational workshops, and the production of the *Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults*. In this way, what appears in Anṣārī's life as an instance of "institution-building individuality" is sustained at the collective level as a network of pioneering women and a distinctive institutional culture. This transition from individual leadership to collective memory underscores that successful institution-building depends on the interaction between personal leadership and shared historical consciousness.

Anṣārī's role within the CBC cannot be reduced to executive management or long-term presence. She was, in effect, the architect of the CBC's institutional culture—a culture grounded in respect, independence, quality, and responsibility. She demonstrated that volunteer work, when structured through order, education, and professional standards, can become a force more durable than financial resources. In a context where cultural institutions are typically defined by budgets and administrative support, Anṣārī advanced an alternative model: an institution built on "human capital," whose sustainability was generated from within rather than imposed from outside. At the same time, this model relied on an ethical commitment and a form of human investment that cannot be easily reproduced without the same social and cultural fabric.

The case-based analysis of projects, together with the parallel reading of biography and oral history, further reveals the tangible and measurable effects of Anṣārī's presence within the CBC. The standardization of book evaluation, the stabilization of the CBC's international standing, the training of new generations of children's literature professionals, the creation of a reliable archive for the history of children's literature, and the formation of an oral memory of women's pioneering experiences are among the achievements that would have taken a fundamentally different shape—if they had emerged at all—without her and her network of

collaborators. These projects function not merely as operational outcomes, but as embodiments of her understanding of books, childhood, and cultural institutions. It is precisely this alignment between ideas, structure, and practice that distinguishes the CBC from many short-lived cultural initiatives.

In sum, Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī represents a rare example of cultural institution-building in contemporary Iran. She demonstrated that an individual, even in the absence of supportive structures, can establish an institution grounded in professional ethics and a coherent cultural worldview, and sustain it as one of the most credible centers of children's literature in the country. The CBC today remains, in many respects, her intellectual and practical legacy—not in the sense that the institution could not have existed without her, but in the sense that its current durability, quality, and identity are largely the result of her sustained presence and managerial approach. The integration of biographical evidence with oral history data shows that this legacy endures not only in the CBC's structures, but also in the collective memory of successive generations of women and men shaped within it. Understanding this experience is therefore fundamental not only for the history of children's literature, but also for the study of civil institutions and the mechanisms of institutional survival in Iran. In this sense, the significance of the CBC's experience lies not in the possibility of its direct replication, but in the analytical framework it provides for understanding cultural institution-building under constrained, costly, and unstable conditions.

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