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Libraries of Care: Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī and Feminist Democracy in Iranian Librarianship

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Abstract

Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī (b. 1939), the Iranian librarian and educator, is a central yet largely unexamined figure in the feminist history of librarianship outside Western contexts. This article draws on Joan Tronto's framework of "democratic care" to argue that her career constitutes a feminist practice of institutional reorientation marked by a decades-long refusal to accept the library's imagined public as given and a sustained effort to move librarianship in Iran toward accountability for the full range of lives it is meant to serve. This reorientation unfolds across three dimensions: outreach as a form of structural critique that translates individual exclusion into institutional accountability; the redesign of the library's spatial and social threshold so that belonging becomes a task the institution must actively construct rather than assume; and the cultivation of a collective professional culture in which care is lived inward before it can be practiced outward. Considering the distinction between the feminized presence and the feminist practice of equity in public libraries, the article argues that feminist commitments in librarianship, including advocacy for the underrepresented and equitable access for nonconventional readers, are present in Anṣārī's approach. Her work extends the geography of feminist librarianship and demonstrates that democratic care as an institutional practice has its non-Western precedents that need to be acknowledged. Attending to these precedents unsettles the assumption that feminist institutional transformation travels from theory to practice, from West to elsewhere, and asks what it would mean for public libraries to diversify their commitments as well as the communities they aim to serve.

Keywords: feminist librarianship; democratic care; public libraries; Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī; librarianship – Iran; librarianship – Middle East

Introduction

Feminist scholarship on librarianship has grown considerably over the past few decades, producing rich accounts of how gender has shaped the profession's history, its institutional structures, and its epistemological commitments. This body of work has developed largely within North American and Western European contexts. Yet the gendered dimensions of librarianship beyond North American and Western European contexts, and the question of how feminist values have been deployed and institutionalized within libraries in the Middle East in particular, remain significantly underexplored in international scholarship. This geographical gap in scholarship carries a conceptual consequence as well: the traditions of democratic care and commitment to the underserved that have animated librarianship in the region have rarely been examined through feminist frameworks, in part because feminism itself has been largely defined in ways that do not always map outside Western scholarly categories.¹

This paper addresses this gap by turning to Iran and to a feminist practice of librarianship organized around the concept of *care*, not as a private accommodating effort or a natural human disposition, but as a civic and political commitment assumed and practiced publicly. This brief description, however, still requires further elaboration, as care has been a contested concept within feminist thought. In its broadest definition, care encompasses everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible.² Earlier scholarship focusing on care has mostly discussed it as a domestic ethic confined to the home, associated with the private sphere and with the historically feminized labour of tending to others.³ More recent feminist scholarship, however, has extended this definition further, arguing that care is the inescapable force that holds together the "life-sustaining web" of any community, and that social and institutional life, at its most fundamental, is sustained by relations of care that must be

¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3.

² Berenice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care*, ed. E. K. Abel and M. Nelson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

³ Tamara Metz, "Demands of Care and Dilemmas of Freedom: What We Really Ought to Be Worried About," *Politics and Gender* 6, no. 1 (2010): 120–28.

actively organized and distributed.⁴ The emerging body of feminist political theory has insisted that the privatized understanding of care is insufficient and has historically kept it an invisible and unaccountable concept within public institutions. Care, on this account, is a civic and democratic responsibility that public institutions are obligated to practice in ways that are attentive to the full range of lives they are meant to serve.

Considering such understanding of care, I bring light to the works of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī (b. 1939), librarian, educator, and long-standing secretary and board member of the Children's Book Council of Iran (CBC), whose approach to librarianship as "books for all"⁵ has consistently worked against the exclusions built into the bureaucratic conventions of public library culture. To foreground the theoretical significance of Anṣārī's work in a feminist capacity, I draw on Joan Tronto's framework of "democratic care" as a model for social connection and repair. For Tronto, the democratic ethic of care is not organized around individual acts of compassionate sympathy or institutional charity. Instead, care is envisioned as a rule of living in which the purpose of economic and political life is to support the means for people to live care-filled lives, "a life in which one is well cared for by others when one needs it, cares well for oneself, and has room to provide for the caring — for other people, animals, institutions, and ideals — that gives one's life its particular meaning."⁶ Tronto delineates four primary phases of care: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving, to which she adds a fifth and most demanding phase: *caring with*.⁷ This final phase requires that both the needs being met and how they are met remain consistent with democratic commitments to justice and equality for all. Democratic politics, on this account, cannot be indifferent to care; it must take seriously the responsibility of assigning care and ensuring that all citizens are capable of participating in that assignment, as care-givers or care-receivers.

⁴ María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 5.

⁵ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, "Kitābdārān dar Īrān" [Librarians in Iran], interview by Bihruz Fathi and Mīhrnāz Rasānchī, *Kitāb-i Māh: Kulīyat* (Book of the Month: Generalities), (Farvardīn 1384 [2005]): 7. [In Persian.]

⁶ Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 170.

⁷ Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 23.

Anṣārī's work can offer an institutionally specific case for thinking through how democratic care has been put into practice in a non-Western context. Through introducing non-conventional approaches that prioritize care over other outcomes, her career, which spans from the early 1960s to the present, has been shaped by a consistent refusal to accept the library's imagined public as it has been given. Where the institution has assumed a literate, mobile, and abled user, Anṣārī has asked who had been organized out of that assumption and what it would take to bring them in, not as exceptions requiring charity, but as readers whose presence is necessary for the institution to fulfill its own democratic promise. What is striking is that this refusal was not simply a programmatic or policy orientation. It was grounded in a deeply held understanding of what libraries are for. In one of her earliest works on establishing libraries in villages, she wrote: "A good librarian turns the library into a community of affection where the poor and the wealthy alike may benefit."⁸ This vision became, over decades, the foundation of a practice that worked to deinstitutionalize librarianship in Iran and redefine it as a socially embedded commitment or what she herself called "true service" (*khidmat*), as distinct from what she rejected as "administrative display" (*zāhirsāzī-yi idārī*).⁹ The paper traces this practice across three dimensions: her outreach work as a form of structural critique that translates individual exclusion into institutional accountability; her investment in participatory reading cultures; and her model of collective professional culture as an enactment of caring from within the institution. These dimensions illuminate what a feminist democratic ethics of care looks like when it is practiced institutionally beyond abstract theorization.

Serving the Unserved

Despite being a well-known figure in Iran, relatively little is known about Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī beyond the context of Iranian scholarship, and the

⁸ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, *Tashkīl-i Kitābkānah dar Rustā; Dawrah-yi Chahār Māhah-yi Takmilī-yi Sipāh-i Danish, Yek Salab-yi Tarbiyat-i Mu'allim, va Dawrah'ha-yi Karāmūz-yi Amūzgāran* [Establishing Libraries in Villages; the Four-Month Supplementary Literacy Course, the One-Year Teacher Training, and Teacher Internship Programs] (Tehran: McGraw-Hill, 1343 [1964]), 52. [In Persian.]

⁹ Anṣārī, *Kitāb va kitābdārī: majmū'ah-'i maqālāt* [Book and Librarianship, Collection of Essays] (Tehran: Tūs, 1975). [In Persian.]

majority of the literature documenting her accomplishments and contributions remains confined to Persian-language sources. Born in 1939 to a diplomatic family, Anṣārī spent her childhood and youth moving across multiple countries and cities, an upbringing that shaped her adaptability and sustained attentiveness to cultural differences. These qualities would later define her approach to librarianship as a practice of reaching across social and institutional boundaries.¹⁰

Anṣārī undertook formal training in librarianship in Switzerland in 1958. While completing her degree, she gained her first professional experience through internships, fieldwork, and voluntary positions in public and specialized libraries. One of the encounters she identifies as most formative during this period was her work as an outreach librarian organized around a “door-to-door” model, in which students were responsible for visiting people, mostly the elderly and the disabled, in their homes, reading to them and bringing the books they had requested.¹¹ What this model made visible, in ways that conventional library service did not, was the degree to which access had been structured around assumptions of mobility and physical presence. More importantly, it reframed the homebound reader beyond an exceptional case, and as evidence of how the institution of the library had been built around a norm that quietly excluded them.

This insistence on identifying individual need as a structural and institutional problem stayed with Anṣārī and later shaped the direction of her professional commitments in Iran. Central among these was her long-standing advocacy for blind and visually impaired readers. In one of her most quietly radical teaching practices, while leading a course on librarianship at the University of Tehran, Anṣārī required each student to bring one visually impaired student into the classroom with them.¹² While this lesson for Anṣārī’s students led to the production and distribution of dozens of audiobooks at the University of Tehran and

¹⁰ “Shab-i Duktūr Nūsh-Āfarīn Anṣārī Barguzār Shud” [A Commemorative Evening for Dr. Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī Was Held], *Dā’irat al-Ma’arif-i Buzurg-i Islāmī* (Encyclopaedia Islamica Foundation), 16 Khurdād 1396 [6 June 2017]. [In Persian.]

¹¹ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, “Kitābdārān dar Irān,” 5–15.

¹² Surayā Qizil Ayāgh (Bihruzī), “Kitābdārī-yi Ijtimā’ī: Rāh-i Taḥqīq-i Ārmān-i Kitāb barā-yi Hamah — Niḡāhī bih Tajribah’hā-yi Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī” [Social Librarianship: The Path to Realizing the Ideal of Books for All — A Look at the Experiences of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī], *Kitāb-i Māh: Kulliyāt*, no. 88 (Farvardīn 1384 [2005]), 2. [In Persian.]

later national-level projects producing Braille, tactile, and sensory books, the presence of these disabled learners transformed librarianship in a more profound way. The barriers that disabled learners faced in using libraries became concrete and discussable, and sensitized future librarians to the ways disabled readers are structurally excluded from standard library practice.

These practices can be interpreted within a feminist social justice framework that understands institutional reform as emerging from the translation of personal troubles into structural critique. As more recent feminist perspectives suggest, personal troubles become politically meaningful when understood not as individual failures or circumstances but as symptoms of larger structural inadequacies that require collective and political response.¹³ The elderly reader who cannot leave their home, or the visually impaired student who barely finds a place within the university's knowledge infrastructure, does not represent an exceptional case requiring benevolence or sympathy. Their situation exposes the limits of an institution built around an imagined normative public, with quietly encoded assumptions about who a reader is and what a reader needs. When such a personal account is made to speak to institutional design, it generates the groundwork for "political connections based in combined perspectives and needs."¹⁴ What is significant here is the way Anṣārī's practice reframes care from a private sentiment dispensed by the benevolent toward the vulnerable to a shared civic responsibility that democratic institutions are obligated to organize and distribute. This shows the recognition that all members of society are, at different moments and in different ways, care receivers and are entitled to have their needs met through accountable structures. These interventions collectively produce a reorientation of the library's public structure into an accountable institution that identifies and responds to those it has historically excluded.

Such policies initiated by Anṣārī have set a model of professionalism that is described by one of her trainees, Surayā Qizil Ayāgh, as "social librarianship." In this model, the public needs and service policies are

¹³ Robin Truth Goodman, "Feminism and Social Justice: Translating Private Problems into Public Problems," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Social Justice*, ed. Ashraf Raja Masood and Nick T. C. Lu (New York: Routledge, 2024), 61–72.

¹⁴ Goodman, "Feminism and Social Justice: Translating Private Problems into Public Problems," 61.

understood as inseparable from social responsibility and the ethical imperative to confront structural exclusion.¹⁵ At the heart of this model is a particular understanding of collective engagement in which service is not provided by an institution for users, but as a practice through which people are empowered to articulate their specific needs and participate meaningfully in shaping how those needs are addressed.

This model finds expression in Anṣārī's work with communities excluded not only from library infrastructure but from civic recognition itself; populations for whom the absence of library service was symptomatic of a far broader political and social exclusion. Qizil Ayāgh refers to Anṣārī's sustained commitment to readers who are positioned at the furthest margins of public cultural life. Among these were Afghan and Iraqi children living in refugee settlements, officially designated as "guest towns," in some parts of Iran, such as Bushehr or Semnan. Upon finding out that refugee children have not received any services in terms of book distribution, she launched a collaborative initiative with UNICEF to support the establishment of fifteen libraries in their communities. These libraries functioned as cultural infrastructures of recognition where displaced children encountered books specifically created for them and were invited into storytelling practices that affirmed their presence in a new land. Likewise, a related but distinct challenge shaped her work when she turned to rehabilitation centers for children with juvenile criminal records in the south of Tehran, where the established rules of communicating with the children were considerably more difficult, and the distance from conventional readership was substantially greater. For this objective, libraries were established through volunteer networks and participatory forms of management of the workers already stationed in the rehabilitation centers to create environments in which incarcerated youth could re-enter circuits of reading and cultural participation. In both contexts, the library has been understood as a space through which the cultural boundaries of who counts as a reader and who belongs within the imagined public could be actively and deliberately redrawn.

Anṣārī's commitment to reaching non-conventional readers was not only a matter of practice but also of historical consciousness. In one of

¹⁵ Qizil Ayāgh (Bihruzī), "Kitābdārī-yi Ijtimā'i: Rāh-i Taḥqīq-i Ārmān-i Kitāb barā-yi Hamah — Niḡāhī bih Tajribah'hā-yi Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī", 3.

her earlier research articles, she undertakes a close examination of reading houses, known as *Qirā'at Khānah*, that operated in Tehran and other Iranian cities between 1909 and 1926, recovering them as precedents for the very model of participatory, community-driven librarianship she had been building throughout her career. These spaces were early forms of public knowledge infrastructure built with no state sponsorship to respond to the mass illiteracy of the population of the time in Iran.¹⁶ Often assembled through local initiative and using minimal resources, these places created access to newspapers and periodicals through the collective practice of reading aloud in order to make knowledge available to those who could not read. What interests Anṣārī in these spaces is the logic they embodied, which relied on knowledge circulation as a communal practice, sustained through participation and attentiveness to local needs. Depending on the community these places were established for, the reading materials and the time of day when the reading and recitations took place varied. Particularly significant in her account are the reading houses organized by and for women, and the sites established for labourers to inform them of the latest political changes in the country. It is precisely due to the significance of these unacknowledged readers that today's librarianship places a great emphasis on participatory design and equity-centred approaches, in order for libraries to create spaces where the needs of users are assessed and accounted for while examining whose presence has been excluded.¹⁷ In recovering these spaces, Anṣārī establishes a precedent for understanding participatory, community-driven knowledge circulation as an indigenous tradition of democratic care that exceeds the formalized library institution. While this first dimension of democratic care concerns the library's relationship to those it has excluded, the following section turns to a second and equally pressing

¹⁶ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, "Qirā'at Khānah'hā va Kitābkhānah'hā-yi Tih-rān" [Reading Houses and Libraries of Tehran] in *Nāmvārah-yi Duktūr Maḥmūd Afshār* (Festschrift for Dr. Mahmoud Afshar), vol. 3, ed. Īraj Afshār and Karīm Iṣfahānīyān (Tehran: Maḥmūd Afshār Foundation, 1987). [In Persian.]

¹⁷ Cinthya Ippoliti, "Building a Library Outreach Program through Community Engagement," in *Building Community Engagement and Outreach in Libraries*, ed. Kathryn Moore Crowe and Joanne Hérouvry, 1st ed., vol. 43 (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022), 35–37.

question of how the library's internal spatial and social design must itself be transformed in order to make inclusion genuinely possible.

Disordering the Library

Libraries are often understood as repositories of knowledge governed by a clear set of rules and principles, built around the assumption of a specific imagined reader.¹⁸ They house books and materialize an epistemological order, maintained through classification systems and professional practices that enable knowledge to be systematized and safeguarded against disorder. This very commitment to order depends upon distinguishing what belongs within the system of legible knowledge from what must remain outside it.¹⁹ While books and information stay inside, anything that might seem like a distraction from this order is left at the door. In Iran, this model of the library as an orderly knowledge repository took institutional shape in the early twentieth century, gradually expanding into a formalized national network which also left little room for creative or social practices outside the ordered norm. Libraries functioned as classic institutions where people could visit to find their reading materials and little else.²⁰

By the time Anṣārī began her career in Iran in 1963, librarianship was not yet recognized as a discipline. Working from within this institutional vacuum, she simultaneously built the profession's infrastructural foundations by training future librarians and directing the University of Tehran Library while questioning the boundaries those structures had drawn around the library's imagined public. This is vividly shown in an episode she recounts in one of her articles. Reflecting on the operation of a small community library, she notes that while the space attracted regular visitors who borrowed books, the overwhelming majority of

¹⁸ Harris, Michael. "The Purpose of the American Public Library." *Library Journal* 98 (September 1973): 2509.

¹⁹ Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford, "Power, Knowledge, and Fear: Feminism, Foucault, and the Stereotype of the Female Librarian," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 67, no. 3 (July 1997): 250–266.

²⁰ For the development of public libraries as a formalized institutional network in Iran, see K.S. Umapathy, "Libraries and Librarianship in Iran," *International Library Review* 10, no. 2 (1978): 119–35. On the limitations of this model, see also the discussion in Zouhayr Hayati and Rahmatollah Fattahi, "Education for Librarianship in Iran before the 1979 Islamic Revolution: A Historical Review of American Roles and Influences," *Library Review* 54, no. 5 (2005): 316–27.

users were men and younger students. Women, particularly mothers and housewives, were almost absent. For Anṣārī, this absence signalled a structural mismatch between the library's design and the social realities of women's daily lives. In response, the library introduced sewing machines into the space, a seemingly modest intervention that came with significant effects. The presence of these machines drew women in, not necessarily as readers at first, but as participants in a shared social environment where they could learn how to work with sewing machines or tailor clothes that they needed.²¹ Over time, their physical presence transformed the library into a more inclusive communal space where women became visible members of the local knowledge community regardless of their immediate engagement with books.

This episode complicates conventional understandings of the library's role, which have often emphasized neutrality and access to information as their primary social justice function. Recent scholarship suggests that traditional ways libraries use to support social justice can encompass collecting and providing access to materials that address contested social issues, as this allows users to encounter multiple viewpoints within a space of professional impartiality.²² Anṣārī's intervention extends this model by highlighting access to space and participation as prerequisites for knowledge exchange. Before a woman can borrow a book, she has to walk through the door, and for this to happen, the library needs to welcome her first. By introducing sewing machines or any materials other than books, libraries can create the conditions under which the mission of inclusion reaches the people it claims to serve. In Tronto's terms, including the sewing machine moves through the first phase of care, which is attentiveness, or "caring about," wherein the structural absence of women is recognized as an unmet need that the institution is obligated to respond to. More significantly, however, this intervention highlights the fifth and most demanding phase, "caring with," in which the ways needs are met must remain answerable to democratic commitments to justice and equality: women are not accommodated as passive recipients of an institutional gesture but invited into a shared social environment

²¹ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, "Kitāb va Ijtimā'" [Book and Society], *Majallah-yi Dānishkadab-yi Adabīyāt va 'Ulūm-i Insānī* [Journal of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities] 18, no. 1: 256. [In Persian.]

²² R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2011), 383.

where their presence gradually but actively reshapes the library's public. By recognizing that meaningful inclusion may precede literacy or reading itself, Anṣārī reframes librarianship as a relational and infrastructural practice that actively reshapes conditions of belonging so that underrepresented groups can enter, remain, and eventually contribute to the life of the library on their own terms.

This reconceptualization of the library's threshold finds an important theoretical grounding in an encounter Anṣārī has repeatedly cited as formative. While this might be regarded as one of her personal memories, the incident opens the argument about what libraries fundamentally are. During a voluntary internship in Delhi in 1961, she attended a public talk held in one of the city's prominent library buildings, where the room was filled with a dense mix of people across social and class lines. She asked the library manager a question that, in hindsight, seems to expose her own assumptions: "Are all these people gathering in the library actually literate?" The answer, she says, changed the way she thought. She was told the library was not only for literate people.²³ It was for everyone, and it should welcome those who carried knowledge in any possible way. Many of the people in the audience, she was told, lacked the material means of writing, yet they held rich indigenous and experiential knowledge not found in books or archives. In this sense, the library is less of a guarded repository and more of a social space where knowledge circulates through the gathering and presence of all and any members of a community. The library could therefore function, as Elaine Harger puts it, "as a site of beginnings and transitions, both a guide and a companion to all who pass through its portal."²⁴

The understanding that the library belongs to everyone, regardless of how they participate in its knowledge production, was carried into overlooked spaces in Iranian public life in Anṣārī's work. Among the earliest and most striking of these was her collaboration with her

²³ Parīṣā Aḥādīyān, "Shab-i Duktūr Nūsh-Āfarīn Anṣārī Barguzār Shud" [A Commemorative Evening for Dr. Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī Was Held], *Bukhārā* (cultural magazine website), 10 Khurdād 1396 [31 May 2017] [In Persian.], <https://bukharamag.com/1396.03.18079.html>.

²⁴ Elaine Harger. 2025. "Social Class, Solidarity & Librarianship: Reckoning with Our Own Culpability in Reproducing Systems of Injustice." *Public Library Quarterly* 44 (4): 465–94. doi:10.1080/01616846.2025.2464520.

colleague Abbas Bani-Adam to bring a mobile library into a psychiatric hospital in the suburbs of Tehran, an institution whose residents were widely regarded as beyond the reach of civic and cultural participation.²⁵ These institutions, known colloquially as *Divanah kbanah*, or “house for the crazy,” were among the most stigmatized sites in Iranian public life, and their residents were widely regarded as beyond the boundaries of civic participation and cultural life. Anṣārī refused this logic. She arranged to bring books into these spaces and volunteered to read aloud to patients herself; she insisted on recognizing psychiatric patients as legitimate recipients of care and as readers whose inner lives merited the same attention and resources afforded to any other member of the public. The regularity of these visits was itself significant: the mobile library did not arrive as a one-time gesture of help but happened steadily over a decade in the 1970s. This resulted in embedding outreach programs within the institutional life of many libraries in Tehran and the suburbs, aimed at providing service to readers who might need exceptional care but are not treated as temporary care recipients in civic contexts.

A parallel commitment shaped her approach to rural communities. By the time Anṣārī started her professional career in the 1970s, the majority of villagers surrounding Tehran were illiterate or had little formal education and, therefore, were not considered conventional readers. Following visits to these rural communities to gain first-hand knowledge of conditions on the ground, Anṣārī authored a set of guidelines for establishing libraries in villages, among the earliest librarianship texts written in Persian.²⁶ This set of guidelines, emerging directly from observation and encounter, reflects the same methodological principle that animated Anṣārī’s outreach program at the psychiatric hospital work: that meaningful service must be grounded in the specific realities of the communities it seeks to reach, rather than imposed through universal models designed for an imagined standard user.

²⁵ Manṣūrah Shujā’ī, “Hashtād Sālah-yi Insān: dar Nikūdāsht-i Nūsh-Āfarīn Anṣārī” [A Human Being at Eighty: In Commemoration of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī], *Āsū* (cultural website), 3 Dīsāmr 1398 [3 December 2019] [In Persian.], <https://www.aasoo.org/fa/articles/2487>.

²⁶ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, *Tashkīl-i Kitābkhanah dar Rustā*, 42.

By extending the library's reach to those whom literacy norms had excluded from readership, Anṣārī disrupted the boundary between the literate and the illiterate as a limit on who deserved access to knowledge and cultural participation. This understanding finds articulation in the needs-based theories of librarianship, which argue that public libraries must move toward a targeted redistribution of resources in favor of those “who need libraries the most but use them the least.”²⁷ While such initiatives require more creative efforts on a policy-making level, improving relevance for lapsed users does not detract from existing services. On the contrary, it deepens the library's democratic mission by grounding access in the reality of differential need rather than the fiction of a universal user. The following section looks at how these outward commitments can be translated inward into the professional culture of librarianship itself and into the collective structures through which democratic care becomes institutionally sustainable as a policy.

Collectivity: Thinking as Us

Anṣārī has consistently described her approach to institutional leadership in terms that resist individual authorship. In interviews, she speaks of her commitment to collective management in unambiguous terms: “All my activities have been done collectively; it's good that I have never been left alone in my work.”²⁸ Quoting this statement, Qizil Ayāgh adds that she has not been left alone because she herself did not leave others alone.²⁹ This reflects a feminist understanding which requires that the values of care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility govern how an institution organizes itself from within. Donna Haraway's notion of thinking-with offers a useful theoretical lens for understanding what this looks like in practice. For Haraway, knowledge is not the product of an isolated mind or a single organization working alone; it emerges through

²⁷ John Pateman and John Vincent, *Public Libraries and Social Justice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 115–116.

²⁸ *Zindigīnāmah va Khidmāt-i 'Ilmī va Farhangī-yi Ustād-i Farīkhtah va Kitābdār-i Barjastah Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī* [Biography and Scholarly and Cultural Services of the Distinguished Scholar and Eminent Librarian Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī], *Anjuman-i Āsār va Mafākhīr-i Farhangī* [Association for the Commemoration of Cultural Works and Dignitaries], 1383, 107. [In Persian.]

²⁹ Qizil Ayāgh (Bīhrūzī), “*Kitābdārī-yi Ijtimā'i: Rāh-i Taḥqīq-i Ārmān-i Kitāb barā-yi Hamāh — Nigāhī bih Tajribah'hā-yi Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī*”, 39.

relations, through the ongoing and often unpredictable encounter between people, ideas, and the worlds they inhabit together. Entities, on this account, do not pre-exist their relations but are shaped by them. This carries a profound implication for how institutions are designed.³⁰ If knowledge is fundamentally relational, then the structures built to house and transmit it cannot remain hierarchical without distorting the very thing they claim to serve. Meanings, practices, and responsibilities are generated through situated collaboration and mutual adjustment that accumulate between people working toward shared ends over time. While this effacement of individual authorship might be read as professional modesty, it reflects a deeper conviction that the collective is the proper site of meaning-making and that an institution's outward democratic commitments cannot be sustained without first being lived inward.

This relational understanding of knowledge finds its concrete institutional expression in Anṣārī's approach to pedagogy and professional formation, particularly evident in her sustained commitment to collective knowledge-making and the intergenerational transmission of professional values. Anṣārī managed to introduce librarianship as a discipline to university students and taught early career librarians who were interested in the field but did not find a reliable source of knowledge for that. Her pedagogical efforts were focused on creating spaces of exchange, where the inexperienced librarians could share their perspectives and the challenges they face in their jobs. Anṣārī acknowledged that she often found herself learning from her students' views and experiences to the point of "losing herself" within the group she was training.³¹ This is what bell hooks calls "engaged pedagogy," a model in which the teacher's growth is inseparable from the student's, and where learning is collective effort and mutual vulnerability.³² Hooks explains that teaching in the classroom becomes meaningful only when everyone's presence is genuinely valued and recognized as a resource. Anṣārī's emphasis on 'collective thinking' also confirms that knowledge merges between people who are willing to learn from one another,

³⁰ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

³¹ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, "Kitābdārān dar Īrān," 11.

³² Bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8, 21–22.

regardless of their given roles in a classroom. In her understanding, professional knowledge is not concentrated at the top of a hierarchy but exchanged by any and every team member. In this view, librarianship is a relational practice sustained through mentorship and shared responsibility, where authority is earned through care, as both demonstrated for others and participated in as a member.

In one of her commentaries on the future of universities in Iran, Anṣārī argues that academic institutions should become embedded in civil discourse and draws on the conception of experience that is explicitly collective rather than individual.³³ Knowledge, in this capacity, is not privately held but always already in the making between and by people. Read alongside Haraway's relational epistemology, this orientation reflects a deeper conviction that knowledge produced in isolation from the people it is meant to serve will always fall short of what librarianship requires. This is why Anṣārī has never stopped teaching, not only students formally enrolled in library science programs but colleagues, volunteers, and newcomers to the profession who arrived without technical training. The group of trainees in her courses were gradually drawn into a broader ethical understanding of librarianship as a form of public service: an apprenticeship not into a set of skills but into a way of being in the profession, grounded in care for their colleagues and a sense of obligation to the communities they serve. The profession's internal culture, on this account, cannot be separated from its public mission: the relational and ethical capacities that librarians seek to cultivate in their communities must first be cultivated among librarians themselves, through the same practices of dialogue, inclusion, and mutual accountability they model outward.³⁴ By prioritizing cooperation over command and learning over bureaucratic control, Anṣārī has cultivated a professional culture in which the boundaries between teacher and student or leader and colleague remain deliberately porous. In Tronto's terms, this internal culture of collective management and mutual accountability enacts the fifth and most demanding phase of democratic care, "caring with" as the organizing principle of the

³³ Omid Ghanbari, ed., *Zindigī-nāmah va Khidmāt-i 'Ilmi va Farhangī-yi Ustād Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī* [Biography and Scientific and Cultural Contributions of Professor Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī] (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āsār va Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 1385 [2006]), 104. [In Persian.]

³⁴ R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 386.

institution itself. This dimension reveals that democratic care must also be lived inward so that the institution itself becomes a site of plurality and shared responsibility among those who inhabit it. Knowledge, in this culture, acquired value only when it was entrusted to others and carried forward. Such sustained investment in mentoring and working alongside younger librarians can thus be read as an effort to populate the profession with shared responsibility, to ensure its collective practice.

The CBC founded in 1962 by Tūrān Mīrhādī and Leili Emini as an independent, non-profit civil organization funded entirely through membership fees and voluntary contributions, stands as an institutional manifestation of the collective and care-based principles Anṣārī had practiced throughout her career. Under her secretaryship since 1978, the Council has operated on the very principles of voluntary participation, collective governance, and commitment to the marginalized, which remained in place even across the political rupture of the Islamic Revolution. *Farhangnāmih-yi Kudakān va Nūjavānān* [*The Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults*], an encyclopedic reference work created through the collaboration of more than 300 scholars, embodies the collaborative approach to librarianship and knowledge production that has characterized Anṣārī's career. The Council's dedicated committee for library services for children with special needs institutionalizes the outreach commitments she had practiced individually decades earlier.

Anṣārī joined the CBC in 1963, when the Council was only one year old and had been established through the efforts of two other women, Tūrān Mīrhādī and Laylī Aymanī. Notably, the leadership of the Council has, until today, been entrusted to women. This gendered continuity situates the Council within a broader historical pattern shared with the profession of librarianship itself, which has long been a feminized space, or in other words, shaped, staffed, and sustained by women's labour. While feminization denotes women's numerical presence, feminism requires a structural and ethical reorientation of policies to bring in inclusive values responding to the needs of the underrepresented groups. Anṣārī's significance lies in her ability to move the CBC beyond feminization toward a feminist institutional practice. Under her leadership, while women continue to play a crucial role in sustaining the Council, their participation is no longer exclusive along gendered lines, and the Council operates today as a recognized member of the International Board on Books for Young People. The Council is the

center where policies and initiatives are directed towards reaching children in remote areas, those with physical disabilities or refugee children. The Council's trajectory illustrates how women-led institutions can evolve from feminized spaces into feminist spaces where care and equity can be initiated by women, while simultaneously expanding the scope and social responsibility of librarianship itself. The objectives pursued by librarians are reframed as a civic project of caring with anyone involved in the profession.

Conclusion

What this article has traced, across three dimensions of Anṣārī's practice, is a sustained and quietly radical argument about what public libraries are for. Focusing on reaching excluded communities, redesigning the conditions of belonging, and cultivating a professional culture of shared responsibility, studying Anṣārī's approach reveals that the library's democratic mission is not fulfilled at the moment a book is borrowed by a user. It begins, rather, with the harder question of who never walked through the door, and why. Anṣārī's career demonstrates that the commitments at the heart of feminist librarianship are not confined to extensively theorized settings. Her work extends the geography of feminist librarianship scholarship and invites the field to recognize that these values have been practiced and institutionalized in contexts that existing scholarship has yet to fully account for.

Part of what has kept these contexts unaccounted for is the very structure of the profession itself. Librarianship has long been understood as a feminized profession, numerically dominated by women yet structured in ways that have historically kept genuine feminist transformation at bay. As Dee Garrison cautions, any discussion of librarianship as a feminist profession remains largely theoretical, given the field's history of being regarded as peripheral and secondary to other disciplines.³⁵ The distinction between feminization and feminist practice is a concept that scholars of the profession have insisted upon precisely because the presence of women within an institution does not automatically produce a reorientation of its values or its relationship to

³⁵ Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 241.

the communities it serves.³⁶ Anṣārī's significance lies in having moved across this distinction by reorienting its structures, steadily and over decades, around the commitments of democratic care. What began as a feminized institution shaped by the historically feminized labour of tending to others became, with her efforts, a feminist space where care is given by anyone regardless of their hierarchical position and provided for everyone irrespective of whether they are legible users of libraries.

What Anṣārī's career makes visible goes beyond what the feminized/feminist distinction alone can capture. Puig de la Bellacasa argues that care is not a bilateral exchange between giver and receiver but a collectively disseminated force, "a thick mesh of relational obligation" that sustains the worlds we inhabit together.³⁷ Making care invisible within an institution does not make it disappear; it shifts who bears its weight, and that weight falls, as it always has, on those already at the margins. The library's failure to institutionalize care is a structural condition that reproduces the very exclusions the library claims to address. What Anṣārī practiced across decades was what Puig de la Bellacasa calls reclaiming care from within existing conditions without accepting them as given, not building a new institution but reorienting it, so that care moves from its margins to its center.³⁸

Recent scholarship on social justice in Iranian libraries still finds compliance with equity frameworks low across the elderly, the disabled, women, and ethnic minorities. More than being a measure of institutional lag, this suggests that the work Anṣārī spent decades doing remains as pressing as it was when she began. Her reciprocal policies of professional learning and sharing and unconventional ways of making libraries more socially inclusive open a question that librarianship, wherever it is practiced, has yet to fully answer. Her career asks what librarianship still owes the communities it claims to serve and whether the library can ever fulfill its democratic promise without first asking who it has never welcomed in the first place.

³⁶ Shana Higgins, "Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship," in *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, ed. Shirley Lew and Baharak Yousefi (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017).

³⁷ María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 20.

³⁸ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 11.



Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī with Qashqā'ī children. Firūzābād, Fars, 1991.



From right to left: Ṭahūrā Vahdatī, Parvīz Kalāntarī, Tūrān Ishtiyāqī, Tūrān Mīrhādī, Nūr al-Dīn Zarīn-Kalk, Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, and Yahyā Māfī. Fiftieth anniversary of the Children's Book Council of Iran, Research Library of the Children's Book Council of Iran, Tehran, 2012.



Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī and Mahdī Muḥaqqiq. Private residence, Yūsufābād, Tehran, 2023. Photo credit: Majīd Ghulāmī jalīlah.