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The Impact of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī on Librarian Women's Cultural Participation in Iran¹

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Abstract

This commemorative analytical study examines the institutional and professional legacy of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, a pioneering figure in Iranian social librarianship, with particular attention to her role in fostering women's cultural participation. Over more than six decades of professional activity, Anṣārī has influenced reading promotion, library services, and cultural institutions in Iran, most notably through her long-standing involvement with the Children's Book Council of Iran (CBC). The study aims to identify the mechanisms through which her leadership and professional practices facilitated women's engagement in cultural and educational activities.

The research is based on a qualitative approach and draws upon the lived experiences of Anṣārī's colleagues, students, and collaborators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. The findings indicate that Anṣārī supported women's participation primarily through participatory leadership, mentorship, and institutional capacity-building. By creating collaborative environments and encouraging active involvement in professional and voluntary organizations, she enabled women to develop self-confidence, acquire practical skills, expand professional networks, and assume influential roles within cultural institutions.

¹ This article is based on the first author's M.A. thesis in Knowledge and Information Science (Information Management), Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran. The second author supervised the thesis, and the third author served as its advisor.

The study further demonstrates that organizations associated with Anṣārī, particularly the CBC, functioned as important platforms for women's cultural participation and professional development. Rather than focusing on broad social transformations, the article highlights the significance of localized institutional experiences and professional networks in expanding opportunities for women. It argues that Anṣārī's enduring legacy lies in her ability to create supportive structures through which women could participate more actively in the cultural and intellectual life of contemporary Iran.

Keywords: Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī; Women's Cultural Participation; Iranian Librarianship; Social Librarianship; Children's Book Council of Iran (CBC)

Introduction

Women have played a significant role in the development of cultural, educational, and intellectual life in contemporary Iran. Despite various social and institutional constraints, many women have contributed to the growth of cultural organizations, educational initiatives, and professional communities. Their participation has often depended not only on individual effort but also on the existence of supportive institutions and professional networks that provide opportunities for learning, collaboration, and leadership.

Within the field of Iranian librarianship, Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī occupies a distinctive position. For more than six decades, she has been actively involved in librarianship, reading promotion, children's literature, and cultural activities. Through her work in organizations such as the Children's Book Council of Iran (CBC), the Encyclopedia for Children and Young Adults, the House of Librarians, and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), she has contributed to the development of socially engaged librarianship and the promotion of reading in Iran.² Her professional activities have consistently emphasized the relationship between libraries, culture, and society, as well as the importance of creating opportunities for participation and learning.

² Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, *Sitārāb-i furūḡān: Muṣaḥḥabah-i tārikh-i shafāhi ba Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī*, interviewed and edited by Paymānah Ṣāliḥī (Tīhrān: Sāzmān-i Asnād va Kitābkhānah-i Millī-yi Īrān, 1396 [2017]), 173–228. [In Persian.]

Anṣārī's understanding of librarianship extends beyond technical and administrative functions. She has repeatedly emphasized the social role of libraries and their potential to serve as spaces for communication, education, and cultural exchange. In her view, libraries are not merely repositories of information but institutions that can facilitate access to knowledge, encourage dialogue, and strengthen social participation.³ Through this perspective, she helped promote an understanding of librarianship that places people and communities at its center.

In addition to her contributions to librarianship, many of Anṣārī's colleagues and students have emphasized her role as a mentor, educator, and facilitator of cultural participation.⁴ Through her long-standing involvement in cultural institutions, she encouraged women to participate more actively in professional and cultural activities and helped create environments in which they could develop skills, gain confidence, and assume greater responsibilities. As a result, her influence extends beyond librarianship itself and can also be examined within the broader context of women's cultural participation in Iran.

Although a number of studies have examined Anṣārī's contributions to librarianship, reading promotion, and children's literature, little attention has been paid to her role in facilitating women's cultural participation. Likewise, few studies have explored how an individual librarian and cultural leader can influence women's professional development through mentorship, institution-building, and participatory leadership.⁵

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the impact of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī on women's cultural participation in Iran. Drawing on qualitative interviews with her colleagues and students, the study investigates the mechanisms through which her professional practices, leadership style, and institutional activities contributed to women's engagement in cultural and educational initiatives. In doing so, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of Anṣārī's legacy and her place in the cultural and librarianship history of contemporary Iran.

³ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, *Kitāb va kitābdārī* (Tīhrān: Tūs, 1354 [1975]), 21–22. [In Persian.]

⁴ Parīčīhr Nasrīnpay, ed., *Zīndagī va ṣamānah-i Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī* (Tīhrān: Nashr-i Kargadan, 1403 [2024]), 88–90. [In Persian.]

⁵ Maḥbūbah Khazāyī, "Ta'thīr-i Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī bar bāft-i kitābdārī-yi ijtimā'ī-yi Īrān" (Master's thesis, 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī University, 1404 [2025]), 102–115. [In Persian.]

Previous Studies

Previous studies have examined different aspects of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī's professional activities and contributions to Iranian librarianship, reading promotion, children's literature, and cultural institutions. These studies have highlighted her role in the development of social librarianship, public library services, reading promotion, and the activities of the CBC.⁶ Other works have emphasized her commitment to public services and the social role of libraries within Iranian society.⁷ While these studies provide valuable insights into her professional achievements, they have generally focused on librarianship and institutional development rather than on her role in facilitating women's cultural participation.

At a broader level, scholars have emphasized the importance of professional networks, institutional support, and mentorship in expanding women's participation in cultural and educational activities.⁸ However, little attention has been paid to the role of cultural leaders in creating opportunities for women's engagement through institution-building and participatory leadership. The present study addresses this gap by examining how Anṣārī's professional activities and leadership contributed to women's cultural participation in Iran.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling and included individuals with professional backgrounds in Information Science and Knowledge Studies who had direct experience working with Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī or within institutions closely associated with her, particularly the CBC. Seven participants met these criteria. The sample included librarians, educators, and cultural activists who had worked closely with Anṣārī over extended periods.

Data were collected through documentary sources and semi-structured interviews. Documentary materials included Anṣārī's

⁶ Parīčīhr Nasrīnpay, ed., *Zīndagī va z̄amānah-ī Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī*, 88–90 and Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, *Sitārah-ī furūzān*, 173–228.

⁷ Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, *Kitāb va kitābdārī*, 21–22.

⁸ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992).

publications, interviews, and institutional records. In addition, online interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes were conducted with participants to explore their experiences of mentorship, professional development, and cultural participation within organizations associated with Anṣārī.

The data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding. This process resulted in three principal themes: institution-building as a foundation for cultural participation, participatory leadership, and the expansion of women's professional and cultural roles through institutional engagement.

Findings

The findings of the present study are based on a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, complemented by a review of documents related to the institutional environments in which Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī carried out her professional and cultural activities. The interviews indicate that Anṣārī's influence on women's cultural participation extended beyond personal mentorship and was closely connected to the institutions in which she worked, particularly the CBC. Participants repeatedly emphasized that these institutions provided opportunities for women to develop professional skills, gain experience, build networks, and gradually assume greater responsibilities. The findings suggest that Anṣārī's contribution lay not only in encouraging individual women but also in creating supportive environments that enabled their long-term participation in cultural and educational activities.

A. Institutional Capacity-Building and Enhancing Women's Professional Roles

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the interviews was Anṣārī's role in strengthening women's professional capacities through a combination of personal encouragement and institutional engagement. Participants consistently noted that she sought to create opportunities through which women could gradually become more involved in cultural and educational activities and assume more active roles within professional organizations. Rather than viewing women's professional aspirations as being in conflict with their family responsibilities, she encouraged approaches that allowed both dimensions of their lives to coexist.

Interviewees noted that organizations associated with Anṣārī, particularly the CBC of Iran, often provided flexible and collaborative environments that accommodated women's family responsibilities while enabling them to remain active in cultural and professional work. Through participatory forms of management and gradual delegation of responsibility, women were encouraged to gain confidence in their abilities and expand their involvement in institutional activities. Several participants considered this approach an important factor in retaining women within cultural organizations and helping them develop long-term professional commitments.

A recurring theme in the interviews was Anṣārī's ability to strengthen women's self-confidence and encourage them to develop broader social and cultural identities. As one participant explained: She never denied the traditional role of women. On the contrary, she helped women find a multi-layered identity; to be both housewives and social and cultural women.

Participants frequently emphasized that this perspective enabled many women to engage in cultural and educational activities without perceiving them as incompatible with other aspects of their lives. Rather than encouraging a rejection of traditional roles, Anṣārī helped women reinterpret and expand those roles within broader social and cultural contexts.

The interviews also highlighted Anṣārī's commitment to inclusiveness and support for individuals facing various forms of disadvantage. Participants referred to numerous examples of her willingness to provide guidance and assistance to those who required additional support. One frequently mentioned example concerned her sustained support for a visually impaired girl. Such experiences illustrate that her understanding of participation extended beyond professional advancement and included creating opportunities for individuals who might otherwise remain excluded from cultural and educational activities.

Another important finding concerns Anṣārī's role as a professional model for younger generations of women. Participants repeatedly referred to her long-standing presence in academic, cultural, and librarianship institutions as a source of inspiration. Her sustained engagement in these fields demonstrated that women could successfully participate in cultural life, assume leadership positions, and contribute to institutional development. As one interviewee observed, "Participatory

management, encouraging women to be self-reliant, and introducing them to women's organizations were all part of her practical approach."

Taken together, these findings suggest that Anṣārī's contribution to women's cultural participation was rooted not only in personal mentorship but also in her ability to create institutional environments that encouraged learning, collaboration, and professional growth. Through participatory leadership, supportive networks, and sustained institutional engagement, she enabled many women to move beyond passive participation and assume active roles within Iran's cultural and librarianship communities.

B. Mechanisms for Increasing Women's Cultural Participation and Networking

The interviews indicate that one of the most important ways in which Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī encouraged women's cultural participation was through creating opportunities for collaboration, networking, and active involvement in cultural institutions. Participants repeatedly emphasized that her influence extended beyond personal mentorship and was closely connected to the environments she helped create within organizations such as the CBC. These institutions provided spaces in which women could develop professional relationships, exchange experiences, and participate in collective cultural activities.

Several interviewees referred to Anṣārī's long-standing presence in cultural and educational institutions as a source of inspiration. Her more than six decades of continuous professional activity demonstrated that women could maintain active and influential roles within cultural life despite various social and institutional constraints. Participants frequently described her as an example of an effective cultural figure whose sustained engagement encouraged others to pursue similar paths.

The interviews also highlight the importance of cultural events and collective activities in expanding women's participation. One of the most frequently cited examples was the Mothers' Exhibition, which participants described as a space that brought together women from different social and cultural backgrounds. Beyond presenting creative work, the exhibition provided opportunities for communication, collaboration, and the formation of professional networks. As one participant explained:

“In addition to showcasing the works of women, the exhibition was a space for cultural and social networking. It even introduced immigrant women to other artists. By symbolically purchasing from all the stalls, she showed that women's activities were valuable.”

Participants viewed such initiatives as practical mechanisms for encouraging women's participation in cultural life and increasing their visibility within broader social networks. Several interviewees also noted that these activities helped strengthen women's confidence in their own abilities and created opportunities for future collaboration.

Another recurring theme concerned Anṣārī's ability to establish relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Participants frequently described her as a reliable source of guidance and support and emphasized the importance of her humane and approachable manner. Many referred to her as a person to whom they could turn for advice, encouragement, and professional assistance. These qualities contributed to the creation of environments in which women felt comfortable participating, expressing their views, and assuming greater responsibilities.

The interviews further suggest that institutions associated with Anṣārī, including CBC and the House of Librarians, functioned not only as cultural organizations but also as spaces for learning, cooperation, and community-building. Through these networks, women were able to establish professional connections, gain practical experience, and participate more actively in cultural initiatives.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Anṣārī promoted women's cultural participation through a combination of networking, mentorship, trust-building, and institutional engagement. By creating opportunities for collaboration and encouraging women's active involvement in cultural organizations, she helped transform participation from an abstract ideal into a lived experience for many of her colleagues, students, and collaborators.

Conclusion

This commemorative analytical study examined the role of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī in fostering women's cultural participation within Iranian librarianship and related cultural institutions. Drawing on the experiences of her colleagues, students, and collaborators, the findings demonstrate that Anṣārī's influence extended beyond her professional

achievements as a librarian and educator. Her most enduring contribution lay in her ability to create and sustain institutional environments in which women could participate actively in cultural and educational activities.

The study indicates that women's participation within organizations associated with Anṣārī was supported through a combination of mentorship, participatory leadership, and institutional engagement. Rather than relying solely on encouragement, she created opportunities through which women could acquire practical experience, develop professional confidence, expand their networks, and gradually assume greater responsibilities. Organizations such as the CBC provided important spaces in which these processes could take place.

The findings further suggest that Anṣārī encouraged women to engage in cultural life without viewing professional participation and family responsibilities as mutually exclusive. Through collaborative and flexible organizational practices, she helped many women remain active in cultural and educational initiatives while developing broader professional and social roles. Interviewees also emphasized the importance of her commitment to inclusiveness, trust-building, and support for individuals facing various forms of disadvantage.

From the perspective of Iranian librarianship, Anṣārī's legacy is closely connected to her understanding of librarianship as a socially engaged profession. Through her teaching, institutional activities, and long-standing involvement with the CBC, she consistently emphasized participation, access, and community engagement. More importantly, she transformed these principles into practice by creating opportunities through which women could become active contributors to cultural life.

Ultimately, the significance of Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī's work lies not simply in her individual achievements, but in her ability to transform cultural institutions into spaces through which women could gradually move from participation to responsibility and from responsibility to leadership. Her contribution therefore represents an important chapter in the history of Iranian librarianship and women's cultural participation in contemporary Iran.



From right to left: seated: Tūrān Mīrhādī, Zahrā Farmānī, and Maryam Aḥmadi Shirāzī; standing: Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī. Annual meeting of the review groups of the Children's Book Council of Iran, Research Library of the Children's Book Council of Iran, Tehran, 1980s.



From right to left: Nūshāfarīn Anṣārī, Manṣūrah Rā'ī, Andreas Bode, Hūshang Murādī Kirmānī. International Youth Library, Munich (IYL), 1992.