HANDICRAFT WORKSHOPS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN IRAN: THE INTERNET, THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP IN HOUSEHOLDS

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INTRODUCTION

The domain of Iranian traditional craftsmanship encompasses a wide range of elements, each of which has its own unique traditional knowledge and artistic methods. Throughout the history of generations of bearers and practitioners, such arts originated in households and were transmitted non-formally or informally to the following generations. Changes in living conditions and an increase in market demand are two factors that encouraged the transfer of these traditions from the home into workshops where specialized crafts people, who were mainly men, were engaged in producing handicraft items in larger quantities for sale on the market. Women were gradually removed from the practice, as the activities of most of them were traditionally confined to the home. Younger generations became less aware of their values and functions of handicrafts that used to be transmitted in homes and through mother-child relations. More recently, the advent of modern industrial products to rival them has had a negative effect on the popularity of these now mainly masculine handicraft industries, resulting in the loss of part of their market. As a consequence, more and more workshops gradually closed down and the practitioners became involved in other occupations (Vizārat-i Ṣanāyi and Malayeri, 1992; Hosseinian and Bazeghi, 2010).

One negative effect of such developments had been lack of awareness about the origins of such arts, their potential to support the family livelihoods, the hidden capacities of women and younger adults effectively to safeguard these elements and, overall, the power of Iranian households to promote diversity, inclusion, and sustainable development through the practice of their traditional arts. Iranian bearers of these handicraft traditions needed a catalyst to remind them of all these factors and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was such a trigger. In spite of all of the difficult outcomes that this disastrous period has had on all countries, economic hardships, the pandemic also encouraged families to consider the potentials of their homes and the people who lived together to help them live through these difficult conditions. One strategy available to them was

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to transfer many handicrafts and traditional arts back from workshops to their homes and adjust their practice and modes of transmission to the new COVID-19 conditions.

This paper presents the findings of field research conducted on handicraft workshops related to three Iranian handicraft elements (introduced in the following section). The focus of this fieldwork was on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the practice of these handicrafts and, in particular, on the role of women in bringing some traditional crafts back into households.

The ICH Elements Studied

Three handicraft elements were chosen for this field research, namely *soozandoozi* and *patehdouzi* (traditional needlework and embroidery), *givehdoozi* (traditional espadrille production) and *sofalgari* (traditional pottery). It should be noted that Iran is a country of diverse ethno-linguistic and socio-cultural conditions and each of the selected elements manifest as local varieties with their formal features, cultural meanings, and accompanied by a set of cultural norms defining them with their social functions. For each of these three elements, workshops in different regions of Iran were studied and some notable regional variations were revealed. Altogether, 15 workshops practising one of the aforementioned handicrafts were studied, distributed between rural and urban areas and covering diverse regions of the country (Figure 1).[3] Although it had initially been planned to include handicraft workshops in the cities of Qom and Hamedan, they were not included in the final survey due to the fact that the practices observed did not meet the criteria of a field research on traditional craftsmanship viewed as ICH. This was because the workshops in those two cities were either highly commercialized and large industries (in Hamedan), there had been an almost complete transformation of traditional methods and techniques (in both Hamedan and Qom) or there were special norms that limited access to many aspects of the element (in Qom).[4] The practitioners interviewed were all work-

[3] The locations of the interviews for *Soozandoozi* and *Patehdouzi* were: Zahedan in Sistan and Baluchestan Province (South-east Iran); Kerman in Kerman Province (South-east Iran); and the city of Tehran (capital city) in Tehran Province (North-central Iran). The locations of the interviews for *Givehdoozi* were: Miwan village, a Kurdish community in Kermanshah Province (Western Iran); Nashlaj village in Esfahan Province (Central Iran); Senejan township in Markazi Province (North-central Iran); Abarkooh/Abarghoo in Yazd Province (Central Iran); and Qazvin in Qazvin Province (North-central Iran). The locations of the interviews for *Sofalgari* were: Garmsar in Semnan Province (North-central Iran); Kashan in Esfahan Province (Central Iran); Nazarabad in Alborz Province (North-central Iran); Rasht in Gilan Province (Northern Iran); Qazvin in Qazvin Province (North-central Iran); and Kermanin Kerman Province (South-east Iran).

[4] In place of these locations, the team decided to study Garmsar, Kashan, Nazarabad, and Qazvin which represented the state of the arts in a better way.

Figure 1. Map of Iran (Source: Nations Online Project)

shop owners and comprised nine women and six men.[5]

The specific characteristics of each handicraft element studied are as follows. Soozandoozi and patehdouzi (traditional needlework and embroidery) is one of the most diversified Iranian traditional arts that is practiced solely by women. Dating back to around 8,000 years ago, they comprise 115 different disciplines with 120 different types of sewing techniques and each locality uses colours, motifs and norms in its products in such a way that the regional and cultural features are clearly discernible. This art is widespread throughout the country, including among the ethnic arts of Balouch peoples in South-east Iran, Bakhtiyaris in West and South-west Iran and Turkmen in North-east Iran (Vogelsang-Eastwood and Vogelsang, 2021).

Giveh is a traditional espadrille that is a lasting, light traditional shoe of Iran suitable for walking long-distances, working on farms, taking cattle to the desert for grazing, and many other outdoor activities especially in rural areas. Farmers and cattle breeders need light, comfortable, strong, and inexpensive footwear to walk through highlands and rocky passages and giveh are usually the option they select. Givehdoozi is the art of producing giveh and, dating back more than

[5] Data-gathering was accomplished through interviews, and taking photos and videos in each location. In total, the survey covered 15 interviews, accompanied by photography and video filming. The mentioned photography and filming were conducted with regard to the resources of the field workers and wouldn't require involvement of professional photographers or film makers.

1,000 years, it is a handicraft found in almost all provinces of Iran (Nikoueia, Payvandyb and Davodi Roknabadic, 2017). *Givehdoozi* is a shared enterprise between men and women, with women usually producing the top part working with big needles, while men make the sole. The raw materials are available in the surrounding environment, the upper being made from strong threads of sheep wool and goat wool thread is used for sewing; rolled pieces of worn cloth are gathered together and connected with strong threads to make the sole; then natural gum, cow leather and sheep fat, which are abundant in the village context, are used to strengthen the whole structure and make it water proof (Anonymous, 2021).

Sofalgari (traditional pottery) is the art of making vessels, containers, and objects using clay. In ancient Iran, pottery has been made at home by family members for millenia. Until recently, it was thought that pottery was produced by farmers and ranchers in 8000 BC, but discoveries made in Moravia (Czechoslovakia) have changed this theory and the date of discovery of pottery is estimated to be much older than the Neolithic period (Sajjadi and Mansour, 2017, pp. 327-328; Kambakhsh Fard, 2013).

During the course of the long history of settlement in Iran, clay vessels, containers, and objects were used in households and numerous workshops were involved in the mass production of such products. A number of traditional workshops are still involved in making such containers and objects. In recent years, an emerging branch of *sofalgari* has involved talented artists, especially younger sculptors, practitioners of the fine arts and talented self-trained individuals in creating artistic or decorative clay objects (Towhidi, 2013; Rafii, 2008).[6] The main reasons why these three elements were selected include the following:

- They are now being practised by a considerable number of women, although *givehdoozi* and *sofalgari* are generally regarded as mainly masculine handicrafts.
- They have recently been accompanied by the emergence of good practices which satisfy the definition of ICH safeguarding in various aspects.
- They exhibit the potential to support family livelihoods in the face of the COVID-19 challenges.
- They exemplify effective employment of online platforms, appropriate involvement of women and younger adults, acceptable utilization of family resources, and solid involvement of the family to sustain the economic and psychological challenges of the difficult COVID-19 period.
- They exemplify a correct understanding of market needs by choosing industries that are less demanding with their raw materials and workshop equip-

[6] Such objects include tiles, sculptures, motifs borrowed from different cultures or discovered among the details of historical buildings, historical paintings, and decorative arts on historical objects, and even motifs from Persian calligraphy, among numerous other pieces of art.

ment, on the one hand, and products that are cheaper for sale in the local, national and international markets.

In addition, the survey of *givehdoozi* has also introduced at least one good practice, with even positive impacts in the Kurdish communities of Iran, among the country's less well-represented cultures, from international contacts. The survey of *soozandouzi* has also provided evidence of widespread involvement of vast networks of women, with a focal point located in Iran and the cooperation of the market. The survey of *sofalgari* demonstrated at least one successful creative revitalization practice accompanied by promotion and engagement.

SEVERITY AND MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19 IN IRAN

The first cases of the COVID-19 virus in Iran were identified in February 2020, and the following graphs (Figure 2) show the fluctuations in COVID-19 rates of infection and related deaths in the country between 15 February 2020 and January 2023.

The first social distancing and lockdown measures were introduced in early April 2020, following the end of the Persian New Year holiday. On 11 April many government offices re-opened, operating at a two-thirds capacity though high-risk spaces (such as cinemas, theatres and restaurants) remained closed and cultural and religious gatherings were prohibited. Schools and universities were closed from April 2020 to April 2022 and all teaching and other activities were held online.

The crafts persons and other handicraft workshop staff interviewed for this survey in Iran did not specify the periods in which they were most affected by COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, but their responses related particularly to

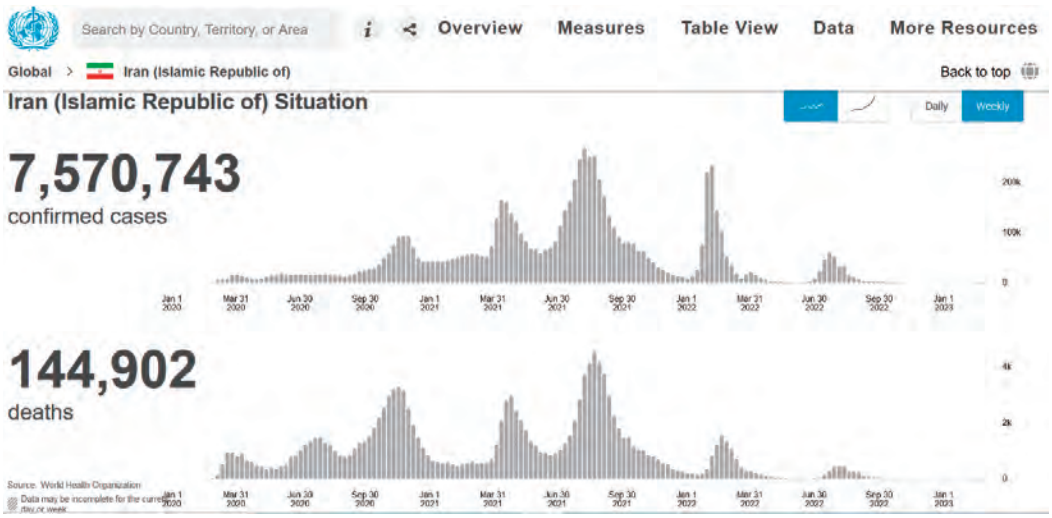

Figure 2. Number of cases and deaths in Iran from 31 March 2020 to 30 September 2022 (Source: World Health Organization)

periods in which their cities and provinces were under lockdown restrictions. The lockdown measures imposed generally involved closing governmental offices, and other offices and workplaces during more severe lockdowns, and applying a 'work-from-home' directive. In addition, cinemas, theatres, swimming pools, saunas, beauty salons, shopping centres and restaurants were also closed and even cultural and religious gatherings were prohibited. More serious lockdowns were also accompanied by a ban on movement between cities. Clearly, such restrictions had an important impact on the ability of handicraft workers to exhibit and sell their products since such spaces were closed and both domestic and international tourism[7] were severely restricted or prevented. The closure of schools also affected their ability to teach in-person classes in their workshops. Most handicraft workshops could continue to operate and were not affected by the 'work-from-home' directives.

In addition to all schools and universities teaching online from April 2020 to April 2022, countrywide lockdowns were imposed in April and November 2020 and April 2021; in the November 2020 lockdown, only banks, bakeries, hospitals, and grocery stores were allowed to open and travel restrictions between cities were imposed. Some areas of the country experienced additional lockdowns, such as the re-imposition of restrictions in Sistan and Baluchestan Province in May 2020, the announcement of a code 'red' with a very strict lockdown regime and travel into and out of cities in Kurdistan and Kermanshah Provinces in May-June 202 and lockdown restrictions re-imposed in Tehran, with travel restrictions into and out of the city, in July 2020.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON IRANIAN HANDICRAFT WORKSHOPS

In this section of the paper, we will present the main findings related to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns and other social control measures on handicraft workshops in Iran, according to the three handicraft elements studied.

Three examples of the totally female practice[8] of *soozandouzi* and *patehdouzi* were studied in Sistan and Baluchestan, Kerman, and Tehran (Figure 3). The workshop/institute in Sistan and Bluchestan practices traditional Baluchi needlework from Southern Iran, while the Kerman and Tehran workshops both practise *patehdoozi*, a handicraft from Kerman Province. The following findings attracted the attention of the project team as being of particular interest. The owner of the Tehran *patehdoozi* workshop has been successful in training, transmission and promotion of the element and found that the COVID-19 Pandemic presented an opportunity to explore new designs and techniques and invest more on

7 For the same period as the school and university closures, there were periods when movement between cities and internationally was heavily restricted or prohibited.

8 The actual embroidery work is a practice for women. Tasks like raw material production and distribution and marketing and sales also involve men.

networking and training. As a consequence, online platforms have been extremely useful for this workshop and the pandemic period offered room for reflection and innovation both in the craft itself as well as in marketing and transmitting it. All of the workshop owners recognized that the fact that younger trainees are more comfortable working (and training) online work can be positive. However, they also noted that, ultimately, it is older women who continue practising the art since younger practitioners are too impatient to dedicate their time and effort to learning and practising the craft and their time and energy is taken up with many other preoccupations. It is interesting to note that the Sistan and Baluchistan institute[9] had more success in working with young people and this may be due to the fact that the younger rural women living in that area have more limited lives and opportunities. Sistan and Baluchestan is one of the most financially deprived and marginalized provinces of Iran and its female inhabitants are occupied with household tasks or helping with agricultural activities or making tools. The institute has provided them with a vital additional income source which they can pursue from their homes.

Figure 3. *Soozandouzi* in Tehran Province and (below) a pattern for *patehdoozi* from Tehran. (Photo: PGILH)

9 The institute that works with these women has 15 female employees and outsources to 700, mostly rural, women.

Another view of the online as opposed to the 'off-line' environment was presented by the Kerman *patehdoozi* workshop. It is more inclined towards direct, 'face-to-face' marketing and the owner regards online platforms as lacking any direct quality control or understanding on the part of the buyer as to the nature of the traditional craft that goes into making the products. She saw this as potentially, leading over time to lower quality products and a loss of market opportunities and she stated a preference for the pre-COVID conditions. The differing experiences of these *soozandouzi* and *patehdouzi* workshops during COVID-19 and varied reactions of the owners illustrates well that there is some diversity in how the pandemic impacted on this handicraft.

The ways in which these women-run workshops have responded specifically to women's needs are also of interest, and there are two main messages to take away from the interviews conducted with them. Woman handicraft practitioners tend to adopt a more comprehensive outlook towards their craft and take account of aspects that are generally neglected by men. These include and investment in training and inter-generational transmission, introducing new designs and techniques and expanding their network by inviting interested older or younger women. Generally, also, they are less conservative and readier to innovate and to support transmission while male practitioners/owners were more inclined towards realizing short-term profits. Rural workshop owners are more inclined towards continuing with their traditional methods of production, partly due to less reliance on (and access to) the Internet.

Givehdoozi (Figure 4) and its related arts and skills requires a network of people who are involved in sourcing and preparing the raw materials, design and production and selling the *giveh* produced. As a consequence, workshops that were related to larger networks were more successful in surviving the stresses of the COVID-19 period. One of the workshops studied was in danger of disappearing, the owner being a sole practitioner who is not hopeful about the survival of the art because of the impatience and lack of interest of the younger generation.

Figure 4. A traditional *givehdoozi* workshop. (Photo: PGILH)

Figure 5. A female-owned *givehdouzi* workshop. (Photo: PGILH)

In addition, as with other handicrafts studied, the Iranian Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism and the related governmental organizations provided no financial and promotional support to deal with COVID-19 and only gave some minor help in listing the workshops.

Two female-owned *givehdoozi* workshops (Figure 5) demonstrated a notable case in their response to COVID-19 whereby they used the additional time available to update their knowledge of the artistic and technical aspects of their work, managed to increase their networks, gave value to training women and transmission to younger people and successfully supported rural households' financial needs. These two workshops leveraged the experience of lockdown to be creative and also to build up extensive networks of practitioners, trainees and customers within Iran and overseas.

The six *Sofalgari* workshops constitute a relatively homogeneous group due to the nature of the work, their geographical locations and the equal distribution of the practice among women and men (Figures 6 and 7). The pottery items they produced were of an 'artistic' or 'decorative' nature, all of the workshops were located in larger urban areas[10] and three women and three men were interviewed. The *sofalgari* practitioners should be regarded as creative artists involved in re-creating pottery as an ICH element, according to contemporary demands, and see this as a form of safeguarding. Most of the general findings mentioned above also apply to *sofalgari,* but what we have learned specifically in relation to *sofalgari* include the following. First, as art works their products have a limited and specialised customer base and they needed governmental support during the pandemic to cover the costs related to shipping their (heavy) products and of potential damage during transportation. Again, they did not receive any COVID-related support.

[10] They are located in the cities of Garmsar, Kashan, Nazarabad, Rasht, Qazvin, and Kerman.

Figure 6. Some typical products of *sofalgari*. (Photo: PGILH)

Figure 7. A traditional *sofalgari* workshop. (Photo: PGILH)

Although the workshop owners welcomed online platforms as an effective tool for training, marketing, and online sales they generally believe that these have the negative impact since actual physical examination of the products is not possible and this had reduced their sales. They almost unanimously preferred a hybrid method of both online and in-person contact, especially as regards promotion and marketing. A further point, which exacerbated the impacts of the pandemic, was that this handicraft has a major overseas market among cultural organizations, and galleries and museums but the domestic market is not well developed; more support is required for effective awareness-raising and promotion within Iran.

The project team was especially impressed by successful practices undertaken by creative women in all three handicraft elements, who discovered opportunities under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions to continue, and even expand their practice. They successfully brought their crafts into households, utilized the capabilities provided by online platforms, engaged women and younger people in their handicraft, promoted the mental and physical health of family members through it and contributed to the financial sustainability of their families. In addition, they expanded the geographical scope of their activities to other locations within Iran and even overseas. Two of these practices, namely *givehdoozi* and *sofalgari* are traditionally regarded as masculine practices carried out in workshops located within the market place, not within houses. *Soozandoozi* was also gradually losing its household base, due to the occupation of women and younger adults with other in-home activities and amusements. Finally, all of three elements were struggling against a strong pressure from imported products of modern industrial processes, namely shoes, fabrics, and vessels made by powerful brands.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the survey conducted on *soozandoozi*, *givehdoozi*, and *sofalgari* workshops in Iran has demonstrated a some limited engagement by younger generations, the outstanding presence of large networks of women in the competitive market, the comprehensive and innovative approach of women practitioners to all aspects of safeguarding ICH, the emergence of good safeguarding practices, the potential of the handicrafts to successfully support family livelihoods and health during the pandemic, the employment of online platforms as a multidimensional tool and networking over vast geographical distances.

The above findings emphasize the need for taking more vigorous steps in Iran towards adopting and implementing a fully inclusive and respectful approach towards ICH safeguarding that includes sustainable development within its perspective. One main observation was that almost none of the surveyed workshops had received any financial support from the government during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were left on their own to find strategies for survival. Although several workshop owners responded creatively to the pandemic stresses, it is important to adopt effective policies and allocate adequate governmental support for handicraft elements in order to support them in crises. The challenging economic conditions resulting from the pandemic, and other economic pressures from the sanctions regime on Iran, have forced some exponents of these ICH elements to turn to the luxury market. This has had the intriguing impact that some ordinary people who can no longer afford to buy these products have resorted to learning the skill in order to make these items for themselves, thus resulting in an unusual form of transmission. Although these findings presented here relate specifically to the three elements of *soozandoozi*,

givehdoozi, and *sofalgari*, it is more than likely that similar results would be gathered from interviewing proponents of many other ICH elements.

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