

## From Mourning Rituals to Social Activism: The Multifaceted Functions of Women's Religious Associations (Hey'ats) in Yazd

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### Abstract

In recent years, women's religious associations (hey'ats) have evolved beyond their traditional ritual and religious functions to become institutions performing diverse cultural, social, supportive, and political roles. Employing a qualitative approach and grounded theory methodology, the present study examines the social functions of women's religious associations in the city of Yazd. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 women active in these associations, selected via purposive sampling with maximum variation until theoretical saturation was reached. The data were analyzed through coding processes and category extraction. The findings revealed five primary functions: cultural-educational (Qur'an classes, sewing, and religious rulings); charitable-supportive (assistance to the needy, provision of bridal trousseaus, and securing the release of prisoners); counseling and empowerment (resolution of family problems and entrepreneurship); socio-service and recreational (pilgrimage trips and interest-free loan funds); and political (participation in demonstrations, elections, support for the resistance front, and involvement in urban activities). These findings were interpreted within the frameworks of functionalism, social capital theory, and religious civil society. The results demonstrate that women's religious associations in Yazd have transformed into multifunctional social institutions that, in addition to fulfilling religious roles, effectively address women's cultural, economic, psychological, social, and political needs.

**Keywords:** women's religious associations (hey'ats), social functions, Yazd, functionalism, social capital, religious civil society.

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**Introduction**

Religious associations (*hey'ats*) in Iran have long functioned as significant social and cultural hubs beyond their purely religious roles (Fayyaz et al., 2010). These organizations, which have deep roots in the history of Shiism, are formed around devotion to the Infallible Imams (peace be upon them) and are administered by the people themselves. A distinctive feature of these associations is their popular funding and independence from state institutions. This grassroots and self-governing character grants them a high degree of autonomy and direct connection to the needs of the local community. Such self-governance strengthens a sense of belonging and responsibility among members—particularly women—and fosters initiative as well as the development of diverse social projects.

In this context, the role of women in religious associations has gained increasing importance (Kahirdeh & Damavandi, 2023; Karami Ghahi et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that women's participation in these associations yields considerable cultural and social benefits and that these organizations possess substantial transformative potential within society. Women's presence in *hey'ats* transforms existing social networks into powerful levers for disseminating information, mobilizing resources, and coordinating activities. The emotional and relational dimensions that are often more pronounced in women's gatherings further contribute to the formation of stronger bonds and higher levels of commitment, thereby amplifying their collective impact.

Yazd Province, with its long-standing religious and cultural heritage, is known as the "Husseiniyeh of Iran" and possesses a rich infrastructure of *hey'ats* and *husseiniyehs* (Morshedi et al., 2021). This profound religious and social identity provides a fertile ground for the flourishing and expansion of the social functions of women's associations. In such an environment, social activities initiated by *hey'ats*—especially women's associations, which tend to be more localized and community-oriented—receive greater public acceptance and support.

**Statement of the Problem**

Previous research has demonstrated that the functions, practices, and rituals of women's and men's *hey'ats* differ from one another (Mohseni, 2003). Moreover, the Islamic Revolution should be regarded as the beginning of a transformation in attitudes and lifestyles among the general public—a transformation that altered people's understanding of the core elements of religious rituals and mourning ceremonies and subjected these rituals themselves to extensive formal and substantive changes. Consequently, from the late 1990s onward, new forms of religious associations and eulogies emerged whose structures and

identity elements differed significantly from traditional types (Fayyaz et al., 2010; Dastouri, 2010).

Participation in ritual spaces constitutes an important factor in women's socialization, and *hey'ats* are among the most enduring venues that create such spaces (Kahirdeh & Damavandi, 2023). An examination of the transformations in women's agency within religious associations from the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution to the present reveals that during those years, mosques, *husseiniyehs*, and *hey'ats*—which had become centers for the intellectual nourishment and guidance of revolutionaries—did not provide suitable conditions for women's direct activity; women learned of revolutionary activities indirectly through male family members. However, as the revolutionary movement intensified, women entered the arena of struggle as influential agents, and revolutionary-political *hey'ats* became one of the most important centers for attracting women. The imposed war also constituted a significant period for the emergence of women's powerful agency in *hey'ats*; alongside collecting popular donations, they reinforced revolutionary ideology and the motivation for resistance on the home front. In the 1990s, a spectrum of religious modernists played a key role in transforming the ritual space, leading to the formation of new, non-traditional women's *hey'ats* in major cities (Kahirdeh & Damavandi, 2023).

Although studies such as Morshedi et al. (2021) have addressed the typology of *hey'ats* in Yazd, and Mashalchi and Morshedi (2021) have examined their role in strengthening civil society, the concrete and operational functions of women's religious associations in the local context of Yazd have received comparatively little attention. Yazd Province, with its distinctive cultural-religious characteristics, may differ from metropolises such as Tehran or Mashhad, where most previous research has been conducted (Soleimani & Amirpour, 2018; Karami Ghahi et al., 2021).

The present study draws on three theoretical frameworks to analyze the functions of women's religious associations in Yazd: functionalism, to identify the manifest and latent functions of the associations (drawing on Durkheim and Merton); social capital theory, to analyze networks of trust and cooperation and their conversion into material and non-material resources (drawing on Putnam and Bourdieu); and religious civil society, to examine the position of *hey'ats* as intermediary institutions independent of the state that nonetheless operate within the framework of religious values (Pirouzmand & Sadeghi). Accordingly, the central research problem is: What concrete social functions do women experience in the religious associations of Yazd? How can these functions be interpreted through the lenses of functionalism, social capital, and religious civil so-

ciety? And to what extent do they converge with or diverge from the findings of previous studies?

### **Significance and Necessity of the Research**

The necessity of this research can be justified on several grounds. First, previous studies on women's religious associations have primarily focused on identity and motivational dimensions (Karami Ghahi et al., 2021; Sabourian & Vatan-doust Valeh, 2024), while the concrete and operational functions of these associations in the domains of service provision, charity, counseling, and empowerment have been less systematically examined. The present study therefore seeks to fill this theoretical gap. Second, whereas the study by Karami Ghahi et al. (2021) was conducted in Tehran, Yazd Province—with its long-standing religious-cultural heritage and its reputation as the "Husseinیه of Iran"—constitutes a distinct setting from the metropolis of Tehran. Examining this phenomenon in a more traditional-religious context such as Yazd can yield a deeper understanding of regional and cultural differences. Third, given recent developments concerning women's agency in religious associations and what Kahirdeh and Damavandi (2023) have reported regarding the intensification of women's agency in response to recent movements, documenting the current state of women's *hey'ats* in cities such as Yazd—which receive less attention from national media—assumes added urgency. Fourth, Sabourian and Vatan-doust Valeh (2024) have shown that motivations for participation in *hey'ats* differ significantly across generations of women, and Yazd Province, with associations that date back several decades, provides a suitable setting for examining these generational differences within a traditional-religious context. Fifth, the findings of this study can inform cultural and social policymaking in Yazd Province and similar regions, thereby possessing practical significance as well. In this way, the present research is necessary and significant from theoretical (filling the gap in studies of concrete functions and introducing a combined framework of functionalism, social capital, and religious civil society), methodological (examining the distinct local context of Yazd), temporal (documenting contemporary transformations in women's agency), and applied (offering policy recommendations) perspectives.

The primary aim of this article is to identify and classify the concrete functions of women's religious associations in Yazd across five domains: cultural-educational, charitable-supportive, counseling and empowerment, socio-service and recreational, and political. The secondary aims are: to identify the principal motivations of women for participating in the religious associations of Yazd; to examine transformations in women's agency within Yazd's *hey'ats* in compari-

son with national developments; and to offer practical recommendations for strengthening the social functions of women's associations.

### Literature Review

A systematic review of previous research on women's religious associations (*hey'ats*) appears necessary in order to identify the achievements and theoretical gaps in this field.

Sabourian and Vatandoust Valeh (2024), in a study titled "Comparative Analysis of the Perceptions and Motivations of Women from Different Generations Regarding Participation in *Hey'ats*," demonstrated that individual motivations—such as love for the Ahl al-Bayt, the pursuit of knowledge and awareness, a sense of well-being, and child-rearing—constitute the most frequently cited reasons for women's participation in these associations. Each generation exhibits distinct motivations: the generation of the 1950s emphasizes awareness-raising; the generation of the 1960s prioritizes psychological calm; the generation of the 1970s adopts an individualistic approach focused on child-rearing; the generation of the 1990s concentrates on social relations and collective enthusiasm; and the generation of the 2000s displays a critical and enthusiasm-oriented perspective.

Kahirdeh and Damavandi (2023), in a study titled "A Sociological Perspective on Transformations Surrounding Women's Agency in Religious Associations from the Threshold of the Islamic Revolution to the Present," showed that participation in ritual spaces constitutes an important factor in women's socialization. Their findings indicate that in the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, mosques and *hey'ats* did not provide suitable conditions for women's direct activity; however, with the intensification of the revolutionary movement and especially during the imposed war, women's powerful agency within these associations emerged.

Morshedi et al. (2021), in a study titled "Typology of Contemporary Religious Associations in the City of Yazd," concluded that Yazd's *hey'ats* can be classified into three types: "reflexive," "identity-oriented," and "school-oriented." In a related study, Mashalchi and Morshedi (2021), examining "The Role of Religious Associations in Strengthening Civil Society," demonstrated that religious associations function as "intermediary institutions" and that each of the three types maintains a distinct relationship with civil society.

Karami Ghahi et al. (2021), in a phenomenological study titled "Conflicts and Alignments in the Construction of Women's Religious Gatherings in Tehran," identified two principal categories—"gender identity formation" and "social status attainment"—within women's religious gatherings. Their results indicated

that the element of gender identity formation is associated with greater conflict and lesser alignment.

Soleimani and Amirpour (2018), in a study titled “A Sociological Examination of the Impact of Women’s Participation in Religious Associations on Their Lifestyle,” showed that the most important motivations of participating women include the desire for growth and advancement, collective solidarity and social participation, and the productive use of leisure time. The functions of participation in *hey’ats* on their lifestyle encompassed reduced aggression and anxiety, a sense of inner peace, increased self-confidence, and diminished family tensions.

Fayyaz et al. (2010) and Dastouri (2010) have referred to the structural transformations of religious associations after the Revolution, demonstrating that from the late 1990s onward, new forms of religious associations with structures and identity elements distinct from traditional types expanded.

A review of previous research reveals that valuable studies have been conducted in the field of women’s religious associations. However, most of these studies have either been carried out in the metropolis of Tehran (Karami Ghahi et al., 2021; Fayyaz et al., 2010), in the city of Mashhad (Soleimani & Amirpour, 2018), or have adopted historical and documentary approaches (Kahirdeh & Damavandi, 2023; Dastouri, 2010). Moreover, the study by Sabourian and Vatandoust Valeh (2024) has primarily focused on generational motivations. Although Morshedi et al. (2021) have addressed the typology of *hey’ats* in Yazd, the concrete and operational functions of women’s religious associations in the local context of Yazd have received comparatively little attention.

What has remained neglected is a field-based and in-depth examination of the concrete and operational functions of women’s religious associations within a specific cultural-religious setting such as Yazd. Furthermore, none of the previous studies have systematically categorized and analyzed the functions of women’s *hey’ats* across five distinct domains (cultural-educational, charitable-supportive, counseling and empowerment, socio-service and recreational, and political).

In addition to the aforementioned substantive gap, the present study also offers theoretical innovation. A review of the literature indicates that previous research has predominantly drawn on micro-level and specialized theories or phenomenological approaches. None, however, has systematically employed the three complementary frameworks of functionalism, social capital, and religious civil society to analyze women’s religious associations. The present study seeks to fill this theoretical and substantive gap simultaneously.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To sociologically analyze the functions of women's religious associations (*hey'ats*) in Yazd, this study draws on three theoretical frameworks: functionalism, for identifying the manifest and latent functions of the associations; social capital theory, for analyzing networks of trust and cooperation; and religious civil society, for examining the position of *hey'ats* as intermediary institutions independent of the state.

### **Functionalism**

Functionalism is one of the most influential approaches in the sociology of religion. Émile Durkheim, the founder of this approach, argues in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that the primary function of religion is the creation and maintenance of collective solidarity. According to Durkheim, religious rituals, by bringing individuals together and generating collective effervescence, strengthen the sense of belonging to a moral community (Durkheim, 2004). This solidarity not only binds individuals to one another but also reproduces shared norms and values.

Robert K. Merton, a neo-functionalist theorist, refined the Durkheimian approach by distinguishing between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are those consequences that are intended by actors and readily observable. Latent functions, by contrast, are consequences that are neither intended nor immediately observable, yet exert profound effects on the social system (Ritzer, 2014: 147–150). This distinction is crucial for analyzing religious associations, because many of their social functions (such as counseling, economic empowerment, or political networking) fall into the category of latent functions—purposes for which mourners do not typically attend *hey'ats*, yet from which they benefit in practice.

From a functionalist perspective, women's religious associations in Yazd possess both manifest functions (such as mourning, lamentation, and celebratory *mowludi* gatherings) and latent functions (such as informal education, psychological support, economic networking, and political activism). The present study focuses primarily on the identification and analysis of latent functions, as these have received comparatively less attention in previous research. The central question from a functionalist standpoint is what role each of these latent functions plays in the stability, cohesion, and reproduction of the social system.

### **Social Capital**

Although the concept of social capital has roots in Durkheim's work on collective solidarity and the mediating role of voluntary associations, it has been de-

veloped in its contemporary form by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam. Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.” Bourdieu regards social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that accrue from possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Afshani & Sattarzadeh, 2023; Taleban, 2023).

Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital: bonding social capital, which refers to strong, dense ties among members of a group (such as family, close friends, or members of a *hey’at*), and bridging social capital, which refers to weaker but more extensive ties with individuals outside the group. Bonding social capital provides members with emotional and practical support, yet it can lead to exclusivism and distrust of outsiders. Bridging social capital, by contrast, facilitates connections among different groups and contributes to broader social solidarity (Taleban, 2023).

Women’s religious associations in Yazd constitute arenas for the production and reproduction of social capital. Through regular participation in *hey’ats*, women create networks of relationships based on trust and norms of mutual assistance. These networks enable them to access both material resources (financial aid, interest-free loans, bridal trousseaus) and non-material resources (counseling, psychological support, information). In this study, social capital is employed primarily as a framework for analyzing networks of cooperation, trust, and resource exchange among association members. The central question from the perspective of social capital is what kinds of networks the associations generate, how these networks are converted into resources, and what relationship exists between bonding and bridging social capital in the activities of the *hey’ats*.

### **Religious Civil Society**

Civil society refers to the realm of voluntary, independent, and self-governing institutions situated between the state and the family, through which citizens organize themselves to pursue collective interests. However, the concept of civil society requires localization within the context of religious-traditional societies such as Iran. “Religious civil society” denotes the ensemble of voluntary and self-governing institutions with religious roots that operate independently of the state while remaining defined within the framework of religious values and norms. Religious associations (*hey’ats*), *husseiniyehs*, religious charitable centers, and women’s religious organizations can be regarded as prominent instances of religious civil society in Iran (Mashalchi & Morshedi, 2021: 214–217).

Contrary to the common assumption that civil society is inherently secular, these institutions demonstrate that religion is not necessarily an obstacle to civil society; rather, it can provide a fertile ground for its formation and strengthening.

Women's religious associations in Yazd can be analyzed as institutions of religious civil society. These associations are popular, self-governing, and independent of the state; members participate in them voluntarily; they perform functions that extend beyond pure ritual (such as social services, support for the needy, counseling, and empowerment); and they simultaneously operate within the framework of religious values and norms. From the perspective of religious civil society, the central question is the extent to which these associations have succeeded in functioning as intermediary institutions between the state and the family, and what relationship exists between their autonomy and their interaction with governing institutions.

The three theoretical frameworks outlined above complement one another. Functionalism addresses the question "What functions do the associations perform?" Social capital theory addresses the question "From what mechanisms (networks, trust, norms) do these functions arise?" Religious civil society addresses the question "What is the position of these associations within Iran's socio-political system?" Women's religious associations in Yazd operate as institutions of religious civil society that, through the production of social capital (networks of trust and cooperation), perform multiple latent functions (educational, charitable, counseling, service-oriented, and political) for their members and the local community. Although these functions may at first glance appear parallel to the manifest function of mourning, in practice they contribute to social cohesion, women's empowerment, and the strengthening of collective solidarity.

### **Methodology**

Given the exploratory and in-depth nature of the topic, the present study adopted a qualitative approach and employed inductive qualitative content analysis in order to identify the functions of religious associations from the perspective of the women themselves through an understanding of their lived experience. The study population consisted of women who were members and active participants (including supervisors, eulogists, attendants, and other roles) in women's religious associations (*hey'ats*) in the city of Yazd. The research sample comprised 32 of these women, selected through purposive sampling with a maximum variation strategy (in terms of age, length of membership, and role within the association). The sampling process continued until data saturation was

reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer added new information to the findings. Inclusion criteria were: a minimum of five years of continuous activity in women's religious associations, residence in the city of Yazd, and informed willingness to participate in the study. Interviewees were selected from various neighborhoods of Yazd (including Mahdiabad, Safaiyeh, Kasnaviyeh, Fahadan, Khairabad, and others) in order to incorporate spatial and cultural diversity into the sample. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 77 years, and their length of activity in the associations ranged from 5 to 35 years. The data collection instrument was the semi-structured interview. Interview questions were designed around five principal axes: motivations and reasons for first attending a religious association; activities performed by the individual within the association; changes that participation in the association had brought about in the individual's life; challenges and difficulties experienced; and the individual's perspective on the social functions of the association. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants (mostly in mosques and *husseiniyehs*) and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes each. All interviews were recorded with the prior consent of the participants and subsequently fully transcribed. The data were analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis in five stages: familiarization with the data; extraction of initial codes (more than 243 codes); organization of codes into sub-themes; extraction of main themes (five themes); and finally, definition and naming of the themes. The coding and analysis process was conducted manually using Word and Excel software. To enhance the credibility of the findings, strategies of member checking (presenting a summary of the findings to five interviewees), peer review (presenting the findings to two other researchers), and structured analytic procedures were employed. Adherence to ethical principles—including obtaining informed consent, confidentiality of information, the right to withdraw from the study, and limited use of the data—was also emphasized. The interviews were conducted from March 2025 to November 2025. Table 1 presents the list of participants.

**Table 1: List of Participants**

| Pseudo-nym     | Age | Years of Activity | Role (Responsibility)                            |
|----------------|-----|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Zahra</b>   | 45  | 11                | Association manager                              |
| <b>Fatemeh</b> | 28  | 7                 | Ordinary member                                  |
| <b>Sakineh</b> | 52  | 14                | Attendant (responsible for collecting donations) |

|                 |    |    |                                                           |
|-----------------|----|----|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ghodsieh</b> | 67 | 30 | Informal counselor ("mother of the association")          |
| <b>Somayeh</b>  | 35 | 10 | Ordinary member (sewing workshop manager)                 |
| <b>Leila</b>    | 32 | 8  | Ordinary member                                           |
| <b>Roghayeh</b> | 48 | 17 | Head of the interest-free loan fund                       |
| <b>Batool</b>   | 77 | 35 | Founder and patron of the association                     |
| <b>Esmat</b>    | 52 | 15 | Association manager                                       |
| <b>Robab</b>    | 72 | 30 | Long-standing patron of the association                   |
| <b>Narges</b>   | 42 | 18 | Eulogist (maddah)                                         |
| <b>Khadijeh</b> | 55 | 25 | Coordinator of pilgrimage trips                           |
| <b>Zeynab</b>   | 25 | 5  | Attendant                                                 |
| <b>Sara</b>     | 27 | 5  | Young member                                              |
| <b>Marzieh</b>  | 38 | 12 | Head of educational classes                               |
| <b>Masoumeh</b> | 48 | 16 | Association manager                                       |
| <b>Maryam</b>   | 50 | 14 | Attendant                                                 |
| <b>Hamideh</b>  | 42 | 15 | Public relations officer of the association               |
| <b>Golrokh</b>  | 38 | 12 | Coordinator of celebrations and mowludi gatherings        |
| <b>Mehri</b>    | 55 | 28 | Head of charitable affairs and bridal trousseaus          |
| <b>Parvin</b>   | 48 | 22 | Coordinator of the distribution of votive offerings       |
| <b>Shahla</b>   | 33 | 8  | Ordinary member                                           |
| <b>Tahereh</b>  | 52 | 25 | Head of Qur'an and religious rulings classes              |
| <b>Soudabeh</b> | 44 | 18 | Coordinator with the Organization for Islamic Propagation |
| <b>Razieh</b>   | 46 | 20 | Head of cultural-artistic affairs                         |

|                  |    |    |                                         |
|------------------|----|----|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>Kolsoum</b>   | 58 | 22 | Family affairs counselor                |
| <b>Shahbanou</b> | 62 | 35 | Association patron                      |
| <b>Fereshteh</b> | 53 | 24 | Coordinator of pilgrimage caravans      |
| <b>Mahrokh</b>   | 29 | 8  | Basij coordinator                       |
| <b>Ehtezam</b>   | 40 | 14 | Coordinator of skills-training courses  |
| <b>Forough</b>   | 36 | 10 | Head of virtual space and online groups |
| <b>Firouzeh</b>  | 28 | 6  | Young member                            |

### Research Findings

Based on line-by-line analysis and careful examination of the interview transcripts, the conceptualization process was carried out in several stages. First, 243 initial concepts were extracted from the raw data. In the next stage, similar concepts were categorized into 67 sub-categories. Finally, through axial and selective coding, five main categories (the five functions) emerged from the sub-categories, as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Main Categories and Their Instances**

| <b>Functions</b>                           | <b>Instances</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cultural-Educational Function</b>       | Holding summer Qur'an and religious rulings classes for children; teaching sewing and handicrafts; organizing celebrations of the Imams' birthdays with cultural programs; workshops on lifestyle and marital skills; religious question-and-answer sessions.                                                |
| <b>Charitable-Supportive Function</b>      | Monthly assistance to impoverished families in the neighborhood; purchasing and donating bridal trousseaus; participating in campaigns for the release of non-intentional prisoners; collecting aid for flood and earthquake victims; distributing votive offerings during Ramadan and the days of Muharram. |
| <b>Counseling and Empowerment Function</b> | Counseling on marital and family issues; assisting in the resolution of spousal disputes; guidance for finding employment and establishing home-based workshops; introducing young women and men for marriage; psychological support for women facing crises.                                                |
| <b>Socio-</b>                              | Organizing pilgrimage trips to Mashhad and Qom; group                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

|                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Service and Recreational Function</b> | picnics and outings; establishing interest-free loan funds and providing interest-free loans; holding celebratory ceremonies on religious festivals; friendly gatherings.                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Political Function</b>                | Collective participation in the 22 Bahman (11 February) demonstration; encouraging members and their families to participate in elections; collecting popular donations for the front during the war; presence at Quds Day ceremonies; organizing special ceremonies for national-religious occasions. |

Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with 32 women active in the religious associations of Yazd, which continued until data saturation, the findings are presented in three sections: first, as background, the motivations of women for participating in the associations are described; then the main theme of the research—the five functions of the associations—is presented with full definitions and direct quotations; and finally, as a complementary section, the pattern of transformation in women’s agency over time is described.

### **Background: Women’s Motivations for Participating in the Associations**

Participants articulated diverse reasons for first attending a *hey’at* and for continuing their involvement. These motivations can be grouped into several principal categories. Some women regarded psychological calm and the reduction of life stresses as their most important reason, describing the association as a space for emotional release and the attainment of peace. Others emphasized the social dimension of participation and cited loneliness and a lack of social interactions as their primary motivation. Still others identified the religious upbringing of their children and role-modeling for the next generation as their driving force. What was common to all these motivations was the gradual transformation of attendance from a personal choice into a constant need and habit. Almost all participants stressed that, after a period of time, the *hey’at* had become an inseparable part of their lives.

Ms. Zahra, 45 years old with 11 years of experience and herself the manager of an association, spoke about the personal dimension of participation: “Life is full of problems; a person needs a place to receive consolation. For me, the *hey’at* is like a refuge. Whatever stress I have, I go there; when I cry during the *rawza*, I feel lightened.” Ms. Fatemeh, 28 years old with 7 years of experience and representing a younger generation, highlighted the social aspect: “I was alone at home. My husband was at work, the children at school. I had no one. In the *hey’at* I met the sisters and made friends. Now every week I wait for the day the *hey’at* is held so that I can see them.”

**The Five Functions of Women's Religious Associations in Yazd**

Analysis of the interviews revealed that women's religious associations in Yazd possess five principal functions beyond mourning and lamentation. These are presented under a single overarching theme—"the functions of women's religious associations"—with five sub-themes.

**Cultural-Educational Function**

The cultural-educational function refers to the ensemble of activities that women's religious associations undertake to increase religious knowledge, raise awareness, teach life skills, develop artistic and cultural competencies, and elevate members' level of understanding. This function extends beyond the time of the main ceremony and includes educational classes, skills workshops, lecture sessions, occasion-based programs (such as celebrations of festivals and *mowludi* gatherings), and artistic activities (such as sewing, painting, and handicrafts). In this function, the *hey'at* is transformed into an informal educational center in which women, alongside learning religious matters, also acquire practical life skills.

Ms. Esmat, 52 years old with 15 years of experience and manager of one of the associations in the Mahdiabad neighborhood, stated: "We do not gather only to cry and mourn. We hold Qur'an classes for the children, sewing and religious rulings classes for ourselves. We even organize counseling workshops for women who have family problems. Our *hey'at* has become like a cultural house." Ms. Robab, 72 years old with 30 years of experience and one of the long-standing patrons of an association, referred to the transformation of the association's functions: "I remember in the old days the *hey'at* was only a *rawza* and nothing more. But now it is different. Now we hold birthday celebrations, recite *mowludi*, and have religious question-and-answer sessions. The children come with enthusiasm. The *hey'at* has taken on a new life."

**Charitable-Supportive Function**

The charitable-supportive function denotes the set of actions that women's religious associations undertake to assist the needy, support vulnerable strata of society, alleviate the financial difficulties of members and neighborhood residents, and create informal social security networks. This function encompasses activities such as collecting cash and in-kind donations, preparing and distributing livelihood packages, purchasing bridal trousseaus for young couples in need, securing the release of prisoners convicted of non-intentional offenses, and aiding victims of unexpected disasters (such as floods and earthquakes). In

this function, the *hey'at* plays the role of a popular relief institution that usually operates more rapidly and flexibly than state institutions.

Ms. Sakineh, 52 years old with 14 years of experience, an attendant in the Sa-faiyeh neighborhood association and responsible for collecting donations, said: "Every month we set up a box. Everyone contributes according to their means. At the end of the month a sum accumulates. With it we buy provisions for a few impoverished families. No one knows; we do it only for the satisfaction of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him)." Ms. Sara, 27 years old with 5 years of experience and an active member of the Kasnaviyeh neighborhood association, spoke about the release of prisoners: "Last year we participated in the campaign for the release of prisoners. Everyone contributed what they could. Through the collective effort of all the sisters we were able to free two non-intentional prisoners. It was the night of the Eid; their families were very happy. Nothing gives that kind of joy."

### **Counseling and Empowerment Function**

The counseling and empowerment function refers to the role that women's religious associations play in resolving members' personal, familial, psychological, and economic problems. This function goes beyond mere financial assistance and includes informal counseling (in areas such as marital issues, child-rearing, and psychological difficulties), teaching life skills, referral to specialists, and assistance in creating employment and income-generating opportunities for women (entrepreneurship). In this function, the *hey'at* becomes a multi-layered support network in which older and more experienced women advise younger ones, share their experiences, and rush to one another's aid in times of crisis.

Ms. Ghodsieh, 67 years old with 30 years of experience, known in the association as "Mother" and to whom many members turn for counseling, stated: "Many young girls who have just married do not know how to behave with their husbands. They come to me. I tell them about my experiences. Sometimes a simple word saves a family's life." Ms. Somayeh, 35 years old with 10 years of experience, who was able to establish a sewing workshop with the help of the association, said: "I always wanted to have my own work. In the *hey'at* several of the sisters helped me. One gave me a sewing machine, another fabric, another introduced customers. Now I work for myself and also provide work for others. This was the blessing of the *hey'at*."

### **Socio-Service and Recreational Function**

The socio-service and recreational function comprises the set of activities that women's religious associations undertake to create and strengthen social rela-

tions, fill leisure time, organize pilgrimage and recreational trips, and provide welfare and micro-financial services to members. This function responds to women's fundamental need for belonging to a group, having friends and confidants, and escaping social isolation. It also includes services such as the establishment of interest-free loan funds and the provision of interest-free loans to members for meeting urgent financial needs or starting a small business.

Ms. Leila, 32 years old with 8 years of experience, who says the *hey'at* has replaced her previous friends, stated: "I used to have friends who were only good for entertainment. But since I came to the *hey'at*, I have found sisters who are useful both for this world and for the hereafter. We go on pilgrimage trips together, we cry together, we rejoice together. These friendships are deep and lasting." Ms. Roghayeh, 48 years old with 17 years of experience, who has taken a loan from the association's interest-free fund, said: "When our son-in-law needed money for his marriage and we did not have it, I went to the *hey'at*. We received a loan without any interest. Many of these loans get things done. Now many families in the neighborhood know that if they are in need, they can count on the help of the *hey'at*."

### **Political Function**

The political function refers to women's presence and role-playing in the public sphere and national issues through religious associations. This function encompasses the set of activities that transform *hey'ats* into centers of social and political mobilization without causing them to lose their primary religious function. Instances of this function include: collective participation of members in national-religious demonstrations (such as 22 Bahman and Quds Day); active presence at ballot boxes and encouragement of others to participate in elections; support for the front and the war during the Sacred Defense (through collecting donations and preparing supplies for combatants); and, more generally, the expression of collective identity on occasions that have a political-religious character.

Ms. Batool, 77 years old with 35 years of experience, who remembers the years of the war, said: "In those years when there was war, we did not sit idle. In this very *husseiniyeh* we sewed clothes for the combatants, collected blankets and money. Some sent their children to the front. In those days the *husseiniyehs* were fortresses and we were behind the fortress. All of this was political and national work." Ms. Maryam, 50 years old with 14 years of experience, who every year takes the association to various demonstrations, stated: "Every year in the demonstrations we go with a group of women and children. We carry flags, we chant slogans, we tell the people that we are here and we stand by our Revolution. This is part of the fixed program of our *hey'at*."

### **The Pattern of Transformation in Women's Agency in Yazd's Associations**

The third section of the findings is devoted to the transformation of women's roles and agency in the religious associations of Yazd over time. By "agency" is meant women's capacity for active engagement, decision-making, influence, and the assumption of managerial roles within the associations, in contrast to the passive and spectator-like position that was common in the past. Participants with long experience (more than 20 years) reported significant changes in this regard. This transformation manifests itself in several dimensions: a shift in the type of presence (from the margins to the center); a change in managerial structure (from administration by men to administration by women); a change in the attitude of the new generation (from unquestioning acceptance to questioning and critique); and a change in communicative tools (from purely face-to-face interactions to the use of virtual space for coordination and collective action).

Ms. Khadijeh, 55 years old with 25 years of experience, who has been involved in associations since childhood, described this transformation as follows: "I remember in the old days women only sat in a corner of the *husseiniyeh* and cried. No one dared to speak or do anything. But now it is different. We have our own *hey'at*, we make our own decisions, we provide our own assistance. Women have learned that they can be effective. This has changed a great deal." Ms. Masoumeh, 48 years old with 16 years of experience and manager of an association, referred to the transformation in the management of the associations: "In the past, to hold a ceremony we had to obtain permission from the neighborhood cleric or from the men. But now we ourselves know what to do. We set the program, we prepare the budget, we divide the work. We have shown that we can administer the *hey'at* even without the presence of men."

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In what follows, each of the five functions identified in the research findings is interpreted through the three theoretical frameworks (functionalism, social capital, and religious civil society) and compared with the findings of previous studies.

#### **Cultural-Educational Function**

Women in the *hey'ats* of Yazd described these institutions as educational and cultural centers that go beyond spaces of mourning. Qur'an classes, sewing instruction, religious rulings sessions, religious celebrations, and life-skills workshops constituted instances of this function.

From a Durkheimian perspective, religious rituals primarily generate "collective effervescence" and "mechanical solidarity" (Durkheim, 2004). The findings

of the present study, however, indicate that Yazd's associations also perform a further latent function: cultural education and empowerment. Merton terms such consequences "latent functions"—outcomes that are not intended yet contribute to the stability and cohesion of the social system. By providing skills-based and religious instruction, the associations contribute to the reproduction of cultural capital and the enhancement of members' capabilities. This latent function leads to a reduction in social harms and an increase in families' resilience in the face of economic and social crises (Ritzer, 2014: 147–150).

The cultural-educational function of the associations can be understood as a site for the production of "human capital" and "cultural capital" within social networks. Bourdieu maintains that cultural capital (knowledge, skills, legitimate tastes) is transmitted through the family and educational institutions. The findings of the present study show that religious associations, as informal networks, also facilitate the transmission of cultural capital among women. Women who participate in sewing or Qur'an classes not only acquire new skills but also network with others and reinforce mutual trust. This process increases social capital and facilitates access to other resources.

As institutions of religious civil society, religious associations perform functions that extend beyond pure ritual. The provision of educational and cultural programs has transformed *hey'ats* into multi-purpose local centers that, in the absence or weakness of state institutions, respond to the educational and leisure needs of the community. This demonstrates that institutions of religious civil society in Iran, contrary to the common assumption that confines them to ritual, possess the capacity to assume diverse functions and respond to the plural needs of society.

This finding is consistent with Soleimani and Amirpour (2018), who reported "the desire for growth and advancement" as one of the principal motivations of women. It can also be linked to Karami Ghahi et al. (2021), who identified "gender identity formation" as a main category, since the acquisition of new skills forms part of women's identity-formation process. Nevertheless, the present study places greater emphasis on the "skills-based and practical" dimension of the educational activities (such as sewing and handicrafts) and shows that this function is considerably more prominent in Yazd than in Tehran. This difference may stem from the more traditional context and the more concrete needs of Yazd women.

### **Charitable-Supportive Function**

Women in the *hey'ats* of Yazd reported extensive charitable activities, including assistance to the needy, the purchase of bridal trousseaus, the release of non-

intentional prisoners, and aid to victims of unexpected disasters. This was the most salient function, mentioned by almost all participants.

From a functionalist perspective, the charitable-supportive function of the associations can be analyzed within the framework of Durkheim's "organic solidarity." In modern societies, intermediary institutions (such as *hey'ats*) contribute to social cohesion and the reduction of class conflicts by creating networks of cooperation and mutual aid. This function operates as a "latent function": women attend the association with the intention of mourning, yet in practice gain access to a network of mutual support that meets their material and spiritual needs. Merton refers to such consequences as "delayed outcomes" that may remain hidden from the actors themselves yet exert profound effects on the social system.

The charitable-supportive function constitutes the clearest instance of the production of "bonding social capital." Putnam maintains that dense, trust-based networks facilitate collective action and the exchange of resources (Talebani, 2023). In the *hey'ats* of Yazd, members, through participation in charitable activities, not only assist the needy but also reinforce mutual trust, norms of assistance, and collective obligations. This bonding social capital, in turn, increases motivation for future participation and sustains the cycle of social-capital production. Interestingly, certain charitable activities (such as aid to flood victims in other provinces) can also be regarded as instances of "bridging social capital," since the network of cooperation extends beyond the members of the association itself.

From the perspective of religious civil society, the charitable-supportive function of the associations can be analyzed as "non-state social services." In societies where the state is unable to fully cover citizens' welfare needs, civil-society institutions (including religious ones) play a complementary or even substitutive role. The *hey'ats* of Yazd, by providing extensive charitable services, have in practice assumed part of the responsibilities of social welfare. This has two implications: on the one hand, it demonstrates the high capacity of religious institutions to respond to societal needs; on the other, it may lead to a weakening of demands for state services. This tension constitutes one of the challenges of civil-society theory in the Iranian context.

Kahirdeh and Damavandi (2023) referred to women's role in collecting popular donations during the imposed war. The findings of the present study show that this function continues not only in wartime but on a continuous, everyday basis in the *hey'ats* of Yazd. Soleimani and Amirpour (2018) did not specifically address the charitable function and focused more on individual functions. The present study therefore adds new knowledge to the literature and demonstrates

that the charitable-supportive function is one of the most prominent—and perhaps the most important—functions of women’s associations in Yazd.

### **Counseling and Empowerment Function**

Women in the *hey’ats* of Yazd described these institutions as places for resolving their personal, familial, and psychological problems. Informal counseling by older women, assistance in resolving marital disputes, guidance in finding employment and establishing home-based workshops, and psychological support for women facing crises constituted instances of this function.

From a functionalist perspective, the counseling and empowerment function can be analyzed as a response to “anomic needs.” Durkheim, in his discussion of “anomic suicide,” shows that under conditions of normative breakdown and social crisis, individuals require supportive resources that help reconstruct the meaning of life and reduce anomie. Religious associations, by providing counseling and psychological support, meet this need. From Merton’s viewpoint, these functions can be regarded as “manifest functions” that are recognized and demanded by the members themselves. The findings indicate that many women explicitly state that they turn to the *hey’at* to resolve their problems; thus this function has moved beyond the latent state and become a manifest one (Ritzer, 2014: 147–150).

The counseling and empowerment function plays a key role in the creation and strengthening of “psycho-social capital.” Within the framework of social capital, trust-based networks make not only material resources but also emotional and informational resources available to members. Older and more experienced women in the associations function as “key nodes” in the network who provide counseling, share experiences, and offer emotional support in times of crisis.

From the perspective of religious civil society, the counseling and empowerment function can be analyzed as “informal support services” that occupy the gap between state services and the family. In Iran, many women lack access to professional counselors for cultural or economic reasons. Religious associations, by providing informal counseling and referral to other resources, fill this gap. This function demonstrates that institutions of religious civil society play a role not only in the domain of material services but also in mental health and social empowerment. Moreover, assistance in creating employment and entrepreneurship for women (such as sewing workshops) indicates the capacity of these institutions to enter the economic sphere and foster economic empowerment.

Soleimani and Amirpour (2018) referred to individual functions such as “reduced aggression and anxiety” and “a sense of inner peace,” which align with the

counseling and empowerment function identified in the present study. That study, however, emphasized the psychological outcomes of participation, whereas the present study focuses on the counseling process itself and the active role of older women as counselors. Karami Ghahi et al. (2021) referred to “conflicts” in women’s gatherings but did not address the conflict-resolution function (through counseling). The present study therefore complements their work by showing that *hey’ats* are not only sites of conflict but also sites of conflict resolution.

### **Socio-Service and Recreational Function**

Women in the *hey’ats* of Yazd described these institutions as spaces for creating social relations, spending leisure time, organizing pilgrimage and recreational trips, and receiving financial services (interest-free loan funds).

From a Durkheimian perspective, this function can be analyzed within the framework of “positive rituals” (as opposed to negative rituals associated with avoidance and prohibition). Durkheim maintains that celebrations and joyful gatherings, like mourning ceremonies, play an important role in generating collective solidarity (Durkheim, 2004). The findings of the present study show that the *hey’ats* of Yazd, in addition to mourning ceremonies, also organize festival celebrations, pilgrimage and recreational trips, and friendly gatherings. These activities perform a “collective renewal” function: they provide women with fresh energy and motivation to continue life and engage in social participation. The interest-free loan fund can likewise be analyzed as a latent economic function that contributes to the reduction of poverty and the enhancement of families’ economic resilience.

This function plays a key role in the creation of “extensive social networks.” Putnam maintains that informal social networks and horizontal relations among citizens increase social capital (Taleban, 2023). Pilgrimage and recreational trips organized by the associations provide opportunities for deepening relations and forming lasting friendships. The interest-free loan fund is itself a financial institution based on social trust. In a society where access to formal financial resources (such as banks) is limited for many women, these funds, relying on mutual trust and peer monitoring, make financial resources available to members. This constitutes a classic example of “social capital as a resource”: the network of relations (membership in the *hey’at*) is converted into a direct economic resource (receipt of a loan).

From the perspective of religious civil society, the associations, by providing financial services (interest-free loan funds) and facilitating social interactions, function as “local safety nets.” In the absence or weakness of formal financial

institutions, these funds play a vital role in micro-finance and support for women's small businesses. This demonstrates that institutions of religious civil society can also perform effective functions in the domains of economy and social welfare. Moreover, the pilgrimage and recreational trips organized by the associations constitute an example of "non-state leisure services" provided by civil-society institutions to citizens.

Soleimani and Amirpour (2018) identified "spending leisure time" as one of the principal motivations of women, which is fully consistent with the findings of the present study. Sabourian and Vatandoust Valeh (2024) showed that the generation of the 1990s emphasizes "establishing social relations and collective enthusiasm," while the generation of the 2000s is "enthusiasm-oriented." This finding aligns with the socio-recreational function identified here and indicates that younger generations pay greater attention to the social and invigorating aspects of the *hey'ats* than older generations. The interest-free loan fund function does not appear in any previous study and constitutes an important innovation of the present research.

### **Political Function**

Women in the *hey'ats* of Yazd reported participation in demonstrations, presence at elections, support for the front during the Sacred Defense, and the expression of collective identity on national-religious occasions. This function demonstrates that the associations are not merely places of worship but also centers of socio-political mobilization.

From a functionalist perspective, the political function of the associations can be analyzed as the "reproduction of collective values." Durkheim maintains that religious rituals strengthen not only internal solidarity but also solidarity with the larger society and the values that govern it (Durkheim, 2004). In the findings of the present study, the associations' participation in the 22 Bahman demonstration and support for the front during the war constitute instances of this linkage between religious rituals and national-political rituals. From Merton's viewpoint, this function can be regarded as "manifest" (since women also recognize the political purpose of their presence), yet at the same time these functions contribute to the "political cohesion" of society—a latent function at the macro level.

The political function can be analyzed within the framework of "network-based political mobilization." Putnam shows that civil-society institutions (such as clubs, voluntary associations, and religious groups) function as "schools of democracy" and teach citizens civic skills and political participation. The findings of the present study indicate that the *hey'ats* of Yazd play a similar role.

Women in the association learn how to make collective decisions, how to mobilize resources, and how to bring their voice into the public sphere. These skills are converted into political participation (such as presence at elections and demonstrations). The networks of trust created in the *hey'at* reduce the cost of political mobilization and increase the effectiveness of collective action.

This function perhaps has the strongest connection with the concept of religious civil society. In civil-society theory, intermediary institutions independent of the state play a vital role in creating a “public sphere” and strengthening “active citizenship” (Mashalchi & Morshedi, 2021: 214–217). The findings of the present study show that women’s religious associations in Yazd, despite their religious framework, operate as civil-society institutions: they are independent of the state (although they interact with it), members participate in them voluntarily, and they perform socio-political functions. There is, however, an important difference from classical civil-society theory: in the West, civil-society institutions are usually defined in opposition to the state, whereas in Iran (at least on the basis of the present findings) the associations operate more in coordination with the values and policies of the system than in opposition to it. This indicates that the concept of civil society in the Iranian context requires a localized redefinition.

Kahirdeh and Damavandi (2023) examined in detail the political role of women in *hey'ats* from the Revolution to the present. They showed that in the years leading up to the Revolution women participated in political activities indirectly, but with the intensification of the Revolution and especially during the war, women’s powerful agency emerged. The findings of the present study in Yazd confirm these transformations. Older Yazd women also spoke of their role during the war years and the changes that followed. Soleimani and Amirpour (2018) did not address the political function of the associations. Karami Ghahi et al. (2021) likewise did not address the political function and focused more on identity-individual dimensions. The present study therefore adds new knowledge to the literature and demonstrates that in Yazd (given the province’s revolutionary and religious history) the political function of the associations is highly prominent.

## **Conclusion**

The present study was conducted with the aim of identifying and analyzing the social functions of women’s religious associations in Yazd Province. The answer to the main research question is that women in the religious associations of Yazd experience five principal functions: cultural-educational, charitable-

supportive, counseling and empowerment, socio-service and recreational, and political.

From a functionalist perspective, these functions largely fall into the category of the “latent functions” of the associations; women primarily participate with the intention of mourning and lamentation, yet in practice benefit from supportive, educational, counseling, and political networks. From the perspective of social capital, the *hey'ats* of Yazd constitute arenas for the production of bonding social capital; networks of trust and norms of mutual assistance among members are converted into material resources (financial aid, interest-free loans, bridal trousseaus) and non-material resources (counseling, psychological support, information). From the perspective of religious civil society, women’s religious associations in Yazd operate as intermediary institutions independent of the state that perform functions extending beyond pure ritual and, in the gap between state services and the family, respond to the diverse needs of women.

Theoretically, this study demonstrated that the combined framework of functionalism, social capital, and religious civil society possesses high capacity for analyzing religious phenomena in the Iranian context. Practically, the findings can assist cultural policymakers in gaining a more precise understanding of the functions of women’s associations and in providing more targeted support for these popular organizations.

### **Research Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

#### **Practical Recommendations**

1. Given the multiple and effective functions of women’s religious associations, the Organization for Islamic Propagation and other related cultural institutions should increase their support for these organizations. Such support may include the provision of suitable spaces, the holding of training courses for association managers, and the facilitation of access to financial resources.
2. In light of the counseling and empowerment function of the associations, it is recommended that training courses in counseling and psychological skills be organized for experienced women and association managers in order to enhance the quality of their informal counseling services.
3. With regard to the entrepreneurial and employment-generating function of some associations (such as sewing workshops), it is suggested that institutions such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation and the State

Welfare Organization allocate special facilities to associations that are active in the field of women's employment generation.

4. In view of the differing motivations of successive generations, it is recommended that associations design diverse programs tailored to the needs of the younger generation (such as question-and-answer sessions, the use of young eulogists, and cultural-artistic programs) so as to attract and retain the new generation.
5. Given the political function of the associations and their role in social mobilization, it is suggested that the relevant institutions make use of the capacity of these organizations to increase women's socio-political participation (for example, presence at elections and demonstrations).

### **Research Recommendations**

1. Conducting comparative research among women's religious associations in different Iranian cities (Yazd, Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz) in order to identify the influence of local cultural contexts on the functions and structure of the associations.
2. Undertaking quantitative research on a larger scale to measure the prevalence of each of the five functions identified in this study and their relationship with variables such as age, education, and socio-economic status.
3. Conducting research on "conflicts" within women's religious associations (in contrast to the present study, which placed greater emphasis on alignment and empathy) in order to identify points of tension and propose strategies for conflict management.
4. Investigating the impact of virtual space on the functions of women's religious associations, given that several participants in the present study referred to the role of virtual groups in coordinating activities.
5. Examining the role of women's religious associations in societal resilience in the face of crises such as floods, earthquakes, and the COVID-19 pandemic, in light of the prominent charitable-supportive function identified in this study.

### Research Limitations

Like any other study, the present research has faced certain limitations. The sample size (32 participants), although appropriate for a qualitative study that continued until data saturation, does not permit statistical generalization of the findings to the entire population of women in Yazd. The findings of this study are primarily of the type of in-depth understanding and pattern discovery rather than statistical generalization. The focus of the research on the city of Yazd, while constituting one of its strengths (its local character), limits the possibility of generalizing the findings to other Iranian cities. As noted in the discussion, the cultural-religious context of each city can influence the functions of the associations.

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