

Gaps in and Challenges of Audience Rights in Iranian Cinema

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Extended Abstract

Research Background and Problem Statement

Iranian cinema, as one of the country's most important and influential cultural pillars, despite its notable artistic achievements and significant technical advancements, faces deep structural challenges in the area of audience rights. The absence of a clear and comprehensive legal framework, inefficient and fragmented regulatory institutions, and systematic informational constraints have led to the repeated and systemic violation of audiences' cultural rights. This is despite the fact that, in many developed countries, well-defined mechanisms exist to protect audience rights against inappropriate content and to promote informed choice. This study was designed and conducted to systematically identify and analyze these gaps and challenges within Iran's cultural and social context.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to comprehensively identify and explain the challenges and gaps related to audience rights in Iranian cinema and to propose practical, context-sensitive solutions for improving the current situation. Secondary objectives include a systematic analysis of structural barriers, the identification of functional deficiencies, and an examination of the tangible consequences of violations of audience rights in Iranian cinema. By presenting an accurate depiction of the existing conditions, this research seeks to lay the groundwork for a fundamental transformation in the governance of cinema.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach and employs thematic analysis as its main method. The required data were collected through 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cinema experts, specialists, and practitioners, selected through purposive and criterion-based sampling. Data analysis was conducted based on the Braun and Clarke (2006) model, using systematic coding in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding.

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To ensure the validity and rigor of the data, multiple data collection strategies were employed, and the findings were shared with participants for member checking and final confirmation.

Key Research Findings

The extracted thematic network was organized into 31 basic themes, 9 organizing themes, and 3 global themes:

- Macro level: Paradigmatic conflict in defining the audience, including a strict protective approach versus a rights-based approach, structural resistance to transparency, and a lack of political and legislative will.
- Meso level: Functional deficiencies, including fragmented and outdated laws, weak regulatory institutions, the absence of transparent mechanisms for audience participation and complaints, and the lack of a standard age-rating system.
- Output level: Tangible deprivations, such as limitations on freedom of choice and content diversity, poor service quality, misleading advertising, and the exclusion of specific social groups.

Results and Final Analysis

An in-depth analysis of the findings indicates that challenges related to audience rights in Iranian cinema have a hierarchical, interconnected, and systemic structure. These three levels do not merely represent different dimensions of a single issue; rather, they form an interconnected causal chain that originates in philosophical and ideological foundations (the fundamental tension between a 'protective/governance-oriented' definition of the audience versus a 'rights-based' definition), extends through fragmented laws and overlapping institutional structures, and ultimately culminates in tangible and everyday deprivation of the audience's right to choice, quality, and equal access. In other words, what manifests at the output level as an 'incomplete cinematic experience' is rooted in unresolved contradictions at the higher levels. Without addressing those foundational contradictions, any reform at the implementation level will remain merely a temporary and ineffective palliative. The roots of these challenges lie in a fundamental conflict between policy-oriented governance and a rights-based approach to the audience. This conflict manifests itself at structural, functional, and tangible levels, resulting in a vicious cycle of audience rights violations. The system lacks essential "communicative and compensatory channels," and even where there is an intent to improve conditions, the centralized and inefficient structure impedes meaningful reform.

Policy Implications and Practical Recommendations

Based on the causal chain identified in the findings, any effective solution must simultaneously address all three levels. Reforms at the output level alone—such as improving hall quality or advertising transparency—will fail if the foundational contradictions at the macro level (the tension between protective and rights-based governance) and the functional deficiencies at the meso level (lack of complaint mechanisms, weak regulatory institutions) remain unaddressed. Therefore, the following recommendations are structured according to the same three-level framework, with each level targeting a specific link in the causal chain:

- Macro level: Revising theoretical foundations and drafting a "Comprehensive Law for the Protection of Media Audience Rights," reorganizing regulatory bodies, and establishing an independent supervisory institution.
- Meso level: Launching an integrated complaints system, implementing a standard

age-rating system, empowering civil society organizations, and promoting public media literacy education.

- Output level: Improving the physical standards of cinema halls, ensuring transparency in advertising, diversifying content, and guaranteeing equitable access for all social groups.

Conclusion

The present study clearly demonstrates that addressing audience rights issues in Iranian cinema requires a fundamental transformation in the dominant mindset and a transition from directive governance to participatory governance. The realization of audience rights not only enhances the quality of cinematic productions and the audience experience but also contributes to sustainable cultural development, strengthens public trust, and revitalizes the cinema industry. This research emphasizes the necessity of recognizing audiences' right to cultural self-determination and establishing accountable and transparent institutions.

Keywords: Audience Rights, Iranian Cinema, Cultural Governance, Cultural Rights, Cultural Participation, Cinema Policy-Making