

IRANIAN WOMEN'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS GENDER AND ITS PERCEPTION IN THE SOCIETY: A FLY IN THE OINTMENT

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ABSTRACT

Inequality between men and women, distressing increase in gender discrimination, rape, misogyny, and polygamy are conspicuous on the headlines. The irrefutable interdependence of gender, culture and social status has recently been considered as one of the momentous motives for such controversial issues in each society.

Objective: Considering the pivotal role of culture in forming individuals' minds and behaviors, the current research scrutinizes women's attitudes towards their gender and its appreciation by men in Iranian culture.

Methods: Adopting quota sampling technique to choose the participants, sixty-eight women were appointed from different professions to answer the questions in a semi-structured interview. Contrary to what is generally illuminated in the literature concerning propounded gender differences among Iranian male and female participants, the obtained results through Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method of data analysis illuminated totally different women's attitudes towards their gender, its appreciation by men as members of society, and the role of culture in attitude change and formation of new behaviors.

Results: Sense of freedom, being appreciated by the society, high access to facilities, more job opportunities, no sense of abasement on the one hand, and being restricted by our Hijab on the other hand were the emerged themes and results of the research.

Conclusion: Cultural ideological perspectives simply define the gender stereotypes and functions in the society and what is now portrayed about the status of women in an Iranian context is rather more like a dream than reality

Key words: Women's ideology; Culture; Iranian educational context; Religious beliefs; Social inequality; Gender; Attitude change.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is defined as "the beliefs, way of life, art, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a particular society" (Longman Exams Dictionary, 2006). The interdependence of ideology and culture is illuminated by Kramsch (2001) as

People who identify themselves as members of a social group (family, neighborhood, professional or ethnic affiliation, nation) acquire common ways of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the same group. These views are reinforced through institutions like the family, the school, the workplace, the church, the government, and other sites of socialization through their lives. Common attitudes, beliefs and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language-for example, what they choose to say or not to say and how they say it (p.6).

Meanwhile, Diehl and Prins (2008, p. 108) indicated "cultural identities not as fixed entities, but as something which people actively mobilize through communication, which take different shapes depending on the situation, and which are shaped by particular economic, historical, social and political contexts". Learning a new language is also the same as learning a new culture, as it is manifested over time that each language strives to broaden its cultural values and ideologies to manipulate people's mind. The idea that language regulates the thinking process was first proposed by Sapir (1884-1939) and Whorf (1897-1941) and later called Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (1956). The embedded idea behind such theory indicates the idea that the way people discern the world is determined by their language, and these are corroborated by two sub-theories of a) linguistic determinism- how we think is determined by the form and structure of our language; and b)

linguistic relativity- every language provides the users with its own specific idiosyncratic lens to see the outside world.

Boas (1911) indicates how different illustrations of *snow* are illuminated through different eras among Eskimos. Rahimi and Naderi Farsani (2007, p. 9) believed that "The concept of attitude and attitude change are prevalent and indispensable in the modern world teeming with intricate communicative and political activities". The role of culture in changing attitudes towards different phenomena is exhaustively explored as Cacioppo, Petty, and Crites (1994) considered it

as a modification of an individual's general evaluative perception of a stimulus or set of stimuli. Thus, changes for any reason in a person's general and enduring favorable or unfavorable regard for some person, object, or issue fall under the rubric of attitude change. (p. 261)

Clark (1999) also propounded that

attitudes may change as a direct result of persuasion, a form of social influence aimed at encouraging people to reexamine specific attitudes and beliefs, and to consider the adoption of new ones. The underlying assumption is that attitude change will promote behaviour change. (p. 45)

Representation of *water* (Nazeri Teimoori, 2004) in Persia, for example, once again stressed the fact that each culture has its own features, like snow among Eskimos. Hence, if you are supposed to live in a new society, you have to observe these customs and respect cultural identities.

آب را پیدا می کند، آدم آدم را (ab ab ra peyda mikonad, adam adam ra)

Water finds water, man finds man

Birds of a feather flock together!

آب آمد، تیمم باطل شد (ab amad, tayammom batel shod)

Water came, ablution is canceled

No need to use a substitute when the original is at your disposal

آب از آب تکان نخواهد خورد (ab az ab takan nakhord)

Water won't shake from water

It was calm and quiet! / Everything was moving peacefully! /

Everything was going on without a hitch.

آب از آسیاب افتاد (ab az asiab oftad)

Water fell from the mill

There was no danger anymore! / The dust settled!

آب از دستش نمی چکد (ab az dastash nemichekad)

No water drops from his hand

He is tight-fisted! / He won't lose the dropping of his nose! / He is a skinflint!

آب در هاون می کوبد (ab dar havan kubidan)

He pounds water in the mortar

He carries water in a sieve! / He makes bricks without straw! / He beats the air! / He runs his head against the wall! / He flogs a dead horse!

Culture has its own effects on people's behavior especially in formation and modification of individuals' identity, personality and way of thinking. Women in Iranian context are highly appreciated and it is manifested from very beginning in all people's mentality towards them. So, concerning gender as a totally cultural phenomenon, Kay (2007) conscientiously illuminated its representation in each society as

Gender has long been recognized by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and historians (amongst others) as a crucial structure influencing the organization of societies and the positioning of women and men in relation to both public and private divisions of power and authority. The socially constructed and culturally defined understandings of femininity and masculinity upon which the gender order of any society is founded, affect the roles and responsibilities attributed to women and men, both in the private sphere of home and family and in the public domains of economic, political and social interaction, and, indeed, in intersections between the two. (p. 1)

Here we illuminate women's status in Iranian context from different aspects namely as *women in childhood*; *representation of women in movies*, *religious contexts* and *higher education* to accentuate how their current social status are affected by prescribed cultural values and ideologies.

Women in childhood

Gender presides over human beings' thinking and behavior. Owens (2001) puts forward the notion of genderlect, as gender differences alter the content and style of language use. Haas (1975) also indicated that the most striking resemblance of adults' speech among children might emerge at the age of 4-5 and this might be evident as they are romping around with their friends and toys, while gender differences are palpable in the parents' style of addressing their children (Owens, 2001). In Persian culture, for example, the following concepts about gender differences are manifested in songs, stories (using lovely, stunning, and beautiful names for calling girls; and brawny, virile, rough, and coarse features for boys) and their role plays from very beginning as

خورشید خانوم (Khorshid khanom) (Lady Sun)

فرشته کوچولو (Fereshte kuchulu) (Little Angel)

خانوم موشه (Khanum mushe) (Lady Mouse)

جوجه نوك طلايي من (Juje nok talai) (My Golden Beak Chick)

ستاره کوچولو (Setare kuchulu) (Little Star)

خانوم پرستار (Khanum parastar) (Lady Nurse)

خانوم معلم (Khanom moalem) (Lady Teacher)

عسل بابا (Asale baba) (Dad's Honey)

آقا گرگه (Agha gorge) (Mr. Wolf)

آقا خرسه (Agha kherse) (Mr. Bear)

آقا دزده (Agha dozde) (Mr. Thief)

آقا پلیس (Agha polis) (Mr. Police)

خلبان کوچولو (Agha khalaban) (Little Pilot)

Children's imitation of parents at the very beginning of their childhood is highlighted by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), while there might be no sign of such behavior in their adulthood, and still there are some gendered performances as

Imagine a small boy proudly following his father. As he swaggers and sticks out his chest, he is doing everything he can to be like his father -- to be a *man*. Chances are his father is not swaggering, but the boy is creating a persona that embodies what he is admiring in his adult male role model. The same is true of a small girl as she puts on her mother's high-heeled shoes, smears makeup on her face and minces around the room... In other words, gendered performances are available to everyone, but with them come constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity (p. 10).

Truck graffiti as another cultural manifestation of ideologies in the public is considered as the chauffeurs' beliefs and perceptions towards different concepts, so they try to voice such ideologies as writings on their trucks.

عروس جاده (Aruse Jade)

Road's Bride

مادران زیباترین آهنگ عشقند. (Madaran Zibatarin Ahang e Eshqand)

Mothers are the most stunning music of love

Adopting such lovely words and statements delineated the idea that the type of used language for beloved ones are mostly the same as the ones for females, and this might be reconfirmed by Berko Gleason and Greif's (1983) finding that fathers tend to use more edicts and commandments or insulting words and aspersions to boys rather than to girls.

Women in Movies

Framing our perceptions and attitudes towards the surrounding culture through media is thoroughly investigated, as Innis (1950, cited in Woelfel, Hernandez & Allen, 1972, p. 1) "asserted that the nature of media technology prevailing in a society at any point in time strongly influence how the members of that society think and behave". Cameron and Kulick (2003, p. 57) also asserted that "the relationship between language and gender is almost always indirect, mediated by something else" as having different roles will definitely reconstruct their mentality towards the world. Women are highly cherished in Iranian movies. They are not supposed to be advertised as an object for quenching men's sexual appetite. Mother in Iranian movies has the same features of *Sun*- in the sense that she generously devotes herself to all members of family and forgets herself in favor of others. Such undeniable and pivotal role of *mother* as lifeblood of Iranian families to show how sons and daughters- like butterflies are captivated and attracted towards their *mom* as a candle is portrayed in an Iranian movie like *Mother* (Ali Hatami, 1990), as it begins with gathering young members of family round their old mother and reviving their common sweet childhood memories. (Figure 1.)

Or

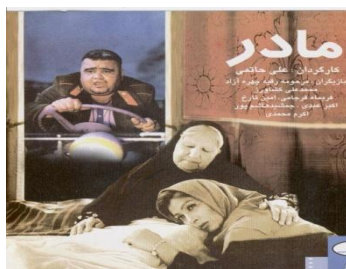


Fig.1. A scene from Mother (Ali Hatami, 1990)

While Lehman and Luhr (2008) propounded the mother/ whore dichotomy in movies, though such generalization is not totally true in all societies, it might be considered as a sign of such ideology in other cultures. Lehman and Luhr (2008) believed that

Women are frequently represented in movies as being either good, dutiful mothers and wives or independent and sexual beings. This polarization of women is often referred to as the mother/ whore dichotomy, which implies that if women are not traditional mother figures, safely under the protection of a man, they are whore in spirit, if not profession. The sexual woman is usually represented as dangerous to herself and/ or men. (p. 276)

Lehman and Luhr (2008) further provided representation of women in different movies, *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953), for example, to show how ideologies are hidden in movies to change people's attitudes. The film includes

not only a highly sexual woman who is the mistress of a gangster but also the wife of a police detective who stays home, cooks, and takes care of the children. The only time that we see the detective's wife outside the home is when she prepares to pick up a baby-sitter. However, the moment she turns the ignition key in the car, she is killed in a car-bomb explosion. The other woman is first brutally scarred when a gangster throws hot coffee in her face and later killed in a shooting. Implicitly, the film categorizes the kitchen and the nursery as the safest place for a woman; a woman who leaves them courts disaster. (p. 277)

Providing an example of such movie in a Western culture does not mean that all movies are the same and there is no appreciation of women in such cultures the same as what it is portrayed in the movies. But considering the undeniable role of media and movies in manipulating people's ideologies, it indicates that there would be such ideologies in those cultures.

Women in religious contexts

In Iranian culture, death notices including deceased's photo are utilized to report recent death of a person and provide some more information concerning upcoming funerals, relatives' names and a brief poem to show relatives' grief on such a loss. However, providing no image of women in such notices elucidates the Iranian hidden ideology of showing respect towards women not only in real life situations- when they are alive, but also such attitude is kept after their death. It is believed that females are not objects to be advertised, while they are respected treasures of kindness, generosity, love, and benevolence. Images of a red rose or a candle-as symbols of their kindness, generosity, and love are used in such cases as it is represented in Figure 2. Some poems are also written to show depth of such a grief on the loss of an amazing creature.



Fig.2. Representation of women in Iranian death notices

شیراز ه کتاب هنر مادر است و بس

Shiraz e Kitab e Honar Madar Ast O Bas

Mother is the Only Binding of Book of Arts

سرمنشا بقاء بشر مادر است و بس

Sar Mansha e Baqa e Bashar Madar Ast O Bas

Mother is the Only Fountainhead of Mankind's Survival

دامان مادر است میهن مکتب رجال

Daman e Madar Ast Mihan e Maktab e Rejal

Mother's Lap is Motherland for Training Men

بنیانگذار فتح و ظفر مادر است و بس

Bonyan Gozar e Fath O Zafar Madar Ast O Bas

Mother is the Only Founder of Triumph and Success

As a binding for a book which holds book pages together, mother is regarded as the only source for people's survival. All the time, she is available at home and tries to provide warmth and support to the family, and at the same time she is the source of inspiration. It not only denies other females' roles as members of a larger society, rather it gives them a sense of hope which increases their motivation for further success both as a mother or wife, and as a member of larger society who may experience divergent (in)justices in the society.

مهر فلک گرچه بسی نور گستر است

Mehr e Falak Gar Che Basi Noor Gostar Ast

In Spite of Wide Spread Shining of Sky's Sun

رخشنده تر ز مهر فلک مهر مادر است

Rakhshand e Tar Ze Mehr e Falak Mehr e Madar Ast

Mother's Sun is shinier than Sky's Sun

ای آسمان به جلوه خورشید خود مناز

Ei Aseman Be Jelveye Khorshid e Khod Manaz

Hey Sun! Don't Flaunt Your sunshine

مادر ستاره ایست که خورشید پرور است

Madar Setareh Ist Ke Khorshid Parvar Ast

Mother as a Star, Trains the Suns

Again the generosity and kindness of mother is compared with the sun. All the people around the world seize the warmth and shining of sun, so such all-embracing kindness is everlasting and outperforms the sun's warmth. Providing a brief overview of women in an Iranian culture, it enthusiastically engages readers with representation of women in Persia.

Women and higher education policy

Contrary to some reports on the gender discrimination in Iranian higher education, providing a brief description of Iranian educational cycle illuminates how cultural ideologies are advocated through these preparatory years of learning. As there is no co-education from the primary levels to high school for male and female students, it might be considered as gender discrimination by some students and their parents. Therefore, providing an overview of Iranian educational system might help learn what is happening among Iranian people. Iranian students are supposed to go through an obligatory twelve-year-process of learning based on pre-designed curricula and materials by the Ministry of Education free of charge. Male and female students participate in totally distinct and segregated schools during these years, as there would be no classes having both genders therein. There is no co-education whatsoever. It is a law ratified by the parliament and government and accepted by almost all the parents and students all over the state, though there is a chance for female students to have some male teachers in high school (the teacher should meet some prescribed qualifications and criteria specified by the Ministry of Education, such as marital status, etc.). Likewise, some male students might have female teachers at the primary level.

There would be an entrance exam referred to as کنکور, **Konkur** (referring to the French word *concours*, and denoting the word *conquer*) for those who wish to be considered as an undergraduate (university student) which is titled as an *academic marathon*, or *gate keeper* by students and their parents. They all do their best to pass such a test and attain the best results for having a chance to be accepted in high ranking state universities. This journey might end after a four-year-study in a field, or our academic glob-trotter might continue that educational life for graduate and post-graduate

studies. It also needs to be highlighted that students experience co-education at their higher education. A brief analysis of the number of registered students in each department at all the universities from 1988 to 2010 is provided by Statistical Center of Iran to show how

male and female students are participating in universities and there is no discrimination among students based on their gender. The number of students is increasing as it is portrayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of registered male/ female students at different departments and universities from 1988-2010

Departments	Medical Sciences		Social Sciences & Humanities		Basic Sciences		Engineering		Agricultural & Veterinary Sciences		Arts		TOTAL	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1988	37,659	27,857	41,377	26,205	23,834	12,871	59,429	2,689	12,870	288	3,718	1,912	178,887	71,822
1989	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	***
1990	44,697	31,869	62,070	31,617	31,506	15,950	68,765	3,147	15,138	445	4,575	2,297	226,751	85,325
1991	44,064	33,599	79,188	37,794	34,604	18,850	68,443	3,392	15,824	706	4,953	2,628	247,076	96,969
1992	45,559	36,784	91,851	41,114	36,422	20,074	71,699	4,505	18,462	635	5,074	2,555	269,067	105,667
1993	49,370	41,748	117,634	51,187	38,987	22,797	81,560	5,349	20,055	608	4,608	2,661	312,214	124,350
1994	51,552	46,343	128,924	61,497	39,977	24,283	86,381	7,801	21,026	2,126	5,242	3,303	333,102	145,353
1995	52,868	72,242	303,804	223,163	57,630	48,811	181,458	22,494	58,474	8,820	9,398	8,931	663,632	384,461
1996	50,249	74,659	344,776	272,534	60,779	60,607	203,181	29,783	63,182	10,327	10,612	11,849	732,779	459,759
1997	50,837	80,530	368,260	297,094	68,362	68,977	217,754	27,879	65,791	13,717	11,751	13,716	782,755	501,913
1998	49,949	84,371	332,554	328,632	63,667	79,715	220,619	37,630	60,008	19,599	13,261	18,145	740,058	568,092
1999	45,533	87,762	334,149	363,943	57,183	88,579	255,923	52,285	61,040	23,001	15,079	20,403	768,907	635,973
2000	44,190	97,475	343,928	422,939	60,008	104,236	289,200	62,563	69,239	29,490	19,252	27,248	825,817	743,951
2001	38,840	92,847	321,607	431,662	56,463	109,225	291,264	67,592	70,214	35,430	19,688	31,677	798,076	768,433
2002	36,991	94,943	312,446	464,578	55,672	125,609	333,446	85,791	68,873	42,130	18,046	35,232	825,474	848,283
2003	36,115	100,943	340,487	524,482	63,909	145,177	365,184	94,743	80,582	50,937	30,832	58,728	917,109	975,010
2004	35,135	97,705	372,857	591,572	68,695	163,701	455,043	125,093	83,963	58,893	22,215	42,599	1,037,908	1,079,563
2005	34,729	103,209	411,453	661,338	75,609	181,660	518,306	158,622	89,264	68,856	27,546	57,977	1,156,907	1,231,662
2006	38,188	103,677	517,651	823,637	93,308	209,929	567,557	208,086	85,118	73,286	44,452	63,622	1,346,274	1,482,237
2007	79,837	135,066	799,974	715,911	160,890	183,726	749,802	259,848	104,102	89,738	41,121	71,837	1,935,726	1,456,126
2008	44,869	106,021	582,588	934,438	92,510	208,562	749,324	250,649	102,455	100,991	48,723	87,562	1,620,469	1,688,223
2009	54,814	117,017	666,441	1,004,686	83,961	187,581	926,366	322,578	114,659	118,158	69,915	124,702	1,916,156	1,874,722
2010	56,354	122,811	736,647	1,113,546	93,681	210,554	1,013,255	346,321	116,436	122,549	62,345	122,094	2,078,718	2,037,875

Literature review

Gender in different contexts

Ettner (2002, p. 50) reviewed representation of men and women in Chinese language and found that "certain features of contemporary Chinese language reflect male-dominant social attitudes and, conversely, notions of female inferiority still extant in Chinese society". Zhang (2002) also propounded that

as an oral form of popular culture, Chinese proverbs on the one hand reaffirm the gender hierarchy legitimized by the dominant male-centered cultural system, and thus appear to lend support to the [though] Chinese women occupied an inferior social position within the dominant cultural hierarchy, in everyday life experiences gender relations might have been much more fluid and variable than what is implied by the male-centered social system. (p. 79)

Changing attitude also plays a pivotal role among men and women, as Abrams (1989, p. 1185) investigated the theme of gender equality in a workplace context to illuminate efforts to put an end to the "exclusion of women from many occupations and to reveal and challenge the male-centered attitudes that structure the workplace". She, further pointed out that

...It will require men and women to take careful stock of perspectives and experiences different from their own. Women must learn to be comprehending and pragmatic about the attitudes they oppose; and men must see beyond a workplace made in their own image, to numerous inhabitants who are not. (p. 1248)

The fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women was held at United Nations (4-15 March, 2013) with the theme of elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls, while it is briefly indicated in UN International Women's Day (March 8) page that

Up to 50% of sexual assaults are committed against girls under the age of 16. Globally, 603 million women live in countries where domestic violence is not yet considered a crime. Up to 70% of women in the world report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime. Over 60 million girls worldwide are child brides, married before the age of 18. (United Nation, 2013)

In reviewing the statements of all representatives from different countries, violence against women in all its forms is regarded as offensive and intolerable, so providing safe and free society is considered as the priority of all participated members.

Gender in Iranian contexts is thoroughly investigated as a contributing factor to other features, but still there is a gap in literature concerning women's ideologies and perceptions towards their gender, its appreciation by males, and the effect of culture on such ideology. So, the researchers reviewed with the following research articles concerning the role of gender in analysis of textbooks, interactions, and so forth.

Gharaghani, Eslami Rasekh, Dabaghi, and Tohidian (2011) identified significant differences among same gender (M-M/ F-F) and opposite gender (F-M/ M-F) interactions as

... In the same gender interaction, significant difference was seen between Persian and EFL English responses in applying power-politeness and accordingly in solidarity-politeness. The participants used more power-politeness in English indicating that EFL learners are not competent in using solidarity-politeness strategies....There was no significant difference in using power-politeness strategies between Persian and EFL English greeting in opposite gender interactions. The participants used the same kind of politeness strategies in Persian and English greetings. As in Persian, in opposite gender interactions, the speakers used usually power-politeness, so there was L1 cultural transfer in EFL learners greeting in English in using politeness strategies. (p. 101)

Aliakbari and Sadeghdaghi (2012) identified similarities concerning participants' outlook on higher education, criteria for singling their friends out, pool of nominees for choosing friends, and the breadth of conferring with friends, while patent differences were observed among male/ female participants on "topic of conversation" (p. 66), how much time they spend with their participants, their preferences for disbursing money and criteria for choosing cars.

Investigating the interdependence of gender on social skills and problem behaviors, Abdi's (2010) findings indicated that

Iranian female kindergartners were rated as having higher cooperation, assertion, responsibility and self-control and total social skills (although there were no statistically significant differences between two sexes on self-control based on teacher rating as well as assertion and responsibility with based on parents' ratings)...And girls being rated by informants attained high scores on externalizing, internalizing, hyperactivity and total problems behaviors (despite the fact that there were no statistically significant differences between two sexes on internalizing). (p. 1178)

On the other hand, Fallahi (2010) unearthed Iranian EFL instructors' gender propensity on the assessment of EFL writing samples of the opposing gender, for example female instructors are biased on scoring writing samples of male students.

Using self-rating scale to investigate gender differences on depression among Iranian and British adolescents, Salimi, Taghavi, Azad-Fallah, Karaminia, Tayebi, and Adib (2007) identified both male/ female participants experienced an emotional torture- as females being at the top for having more concerns than male participants; undeniable social roles are among the contributing factors as Iranian women were more vulnerable to the emotional factors than British adolescents, as cultural divergences might be considered as the pivotal role in Iranians' high rate of depression, especially girls than participants from a totally different cultural background as UK.

There are also some further investigations of gender representation in Iranian EFL textbooks and teaching materials, as Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012, pp. 45-46) identified issues of "visibility in texts and illustrations" indicating the dominance of males over females in texts and illustrations, and "male and female occupational roles" confirming males' priority for different job vacancies.

Women's Rights in Iranian Constitution

Islamic Revolution of 1979 had its effects on the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the new constitution acquired its legitimacy in a referendum (1980), where both Iranian men and women of various cultural, educational and religious backgrounds voted for it. Providing such a chance for people of different social backgrounds to participate in societal and political events is provided in the Article 19 (No Discrimination, No Privileges) as "All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege." (ICL, Iran Constitution)

The status of women in an Iranian constitution can be portrayed by quoting the following statements as

"Through the creation of Islamic social infrastructures, all the elements of humanity that served the multifaceted foreign exploitation shall regain their true identity and human rights. As a part of this process, it is only natural that women should benefit from a particularly large augmentation of their rights, because of the greater oppression that they suffered under the old regime. The family is the fundamental unit of society and the main center for the growth and edification of human being. [...] This view of the family unit delivers woman from being regarded as an object or instrument in the service of promoting consumerism and exploitation. Not only does woman recover thereby her momentous and precious function of motherhood, rearing of ideologically committed human beings, she also assumes a pioneering social role and becomes the fellow struggler of man in all vital areas of life. Given the weighty responsibilities that woman thus assumes, she is accorded in Islam great value and nobility".

Article 21 (Chapter III, The Rights of People) on the Women's Right, gives prominence to the following issues:

"The government must ensure the rights of women in all respects, in conformity with Islamic criteria, and accomplish the following goals:

1. Create a favorable environment for the growth of woman's personality and the restoration of her rights, both the material and intellectual;
2. The protection of mothers, particularly during pregnancy and child-rearing, and the protection of children without guardians;
3. Establishing competent courts to protect and preserve the family;
4. The provision of special insurance for widows, aged women, and women without support; and
5. the awarding of guardianship of children to worthy mothers, in order to protect the interests of the children, in the absence of a legal guardian".

Beeman's (2001) report on a recent trip to Iran draws our attention to the current status of Iranian women in continuum of pre and post Islamic Revolution. He stressed that

"Contrary to American belief, women in Iran are better off today under the Islamic Republic than they were under the regime of the Shah of Iran. I was able to see this surprising development on a recent trip to Iran, my first in many years. Women have always had a strong role in Iranian life. Their prominent and often decisive participation in public political movements has been especially noteworthy. Brave and often ruthlessly pragmatic, women are more than willing to take to the streets in a good public cause...."

The special and prevalent status of women in political, social and educational movements is highlighted by appointing women in different professions as university instructors, news reporters (domestic/ international), armed forces, government positions as deputy president, head of organizations, members of Parliament, spokeswomen and etc. This is one of the pivotal ideologies of Islam to bestow the highest and worthiest reputations on women.

Considering the ideal situations which Islam provides for people and its interwoven nature with all parts of human beings' life might be the reason for conversion to Islam, especially among female foreigners. In her edited book titled as *Women embracing Islam: Gender and conversion in the West*, van Nieuwkerk (2006) presents different issues concerning themes of gender and conversion to Islam, as

"This book intends to go beyond the claims, competitions, and statistics, and to investigate why women are attracted to Islam. What are their motives and backgrounds and to what kind of Islam are they converting? To which messages are they attracted and in which ways? It will show the wealth of experiences behind conversion, as well as analyze the narratives that express this experience. Conversion is not only a momentary experience but an ongoing process of religious, social, and cultural transformation. How do converts create, embody, and transmit their new identity? What are the reactions and responses of society toward converts? What is the role converts play in society at large? What is their contribution to discourses on gender and Islam? This book will address these issues and provide empirical and comparative materials from Europe, the United States, and South Africa". (p. 2)

Providing unbelievable blessings for its followers all over the globe, Islamic ideologies is embraced by different social and ethnic groups as Sultán (1999, as cited in Nieuwkerk, Karin van, p. 7) indicated that "female converts in Sweden are particularly attracted to Islamic conceptions of manhood and womanhood and to its clear moral boundaries and rules, an observation I can confirm for Dutch converts. Or Hofmann (1997, as cited in Nieuwkerk, Karin van, p. 7), on the other hand, "theorizes the plausibility of Islamic notions of the family and construction of masculinity and femininity for German converts".

Gender representation is exhaustively investigated from different perspectives and males' and females' feedbacks concerning their representation are thoroughly illuminated, but still there is a gap concerning men's or women's feedback about their gender, its

appreciation by members of society, and the effects of culture on gender representation. Hence, the current research is supposed to answer the following questions:

How do women feel about their gender in an Iranian culture?

Does culture have any effect on appreciation of women by other members of society?

Methodology

Participants

Reviewing the available literature concerning the effect of gender from divergent perspectives in an Iranian context, we found that almost all the participants are selected from the academic members of society. Adopting quota sampling technique, the sixty-eight participants in the current research were selected from different professions (students, nurses, managers, university instructors, secretaries, saleswomen, housewives, and cab drivers) with an age range of 15-47.

Instruments

Questionnaires, checklists and interviews were the most frequent utilized instruments in most available researches, while none of them specifically met our aims and priorities for the current research. Hence, the first drafts of interview questions were totally revised based on different proposed criteria by the researchers and suggestions from colleagues in the field of social psychology.

Procedure

As it was mentioned, most of the participants in the current research studies were selected from academic settings, so based on the priorities of our research, sixty-eight participants were selected from different professions to unearth how women's ideologies and

beliefs from a relative representative population of society (job vacancies available for women) are portrayed in an Iranian context.

All the participants were selected from Tehran- Capital of Iran. They were totally assured prior to the interview concerning the confidentiality of all data, as we had to tape-record the interviews and they were asked to feel free to mention whatever they like and voice their inner ideologies concerning the raised questions in the interview. The transcription of data took more than one month to come up with the most frequent clues from the interviews based on the Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method of data analysis as a brief description of findings is provided at the next section. The frequency of participants in each profession is also presented in the Figure. 3.

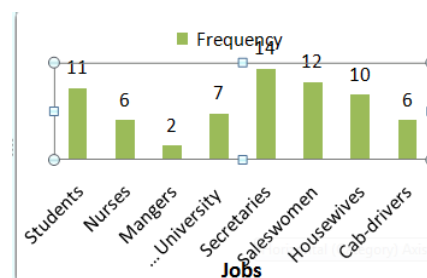


Fig. 3. Number of participants from different professions

RESULTS

The analysis of transcribed data provided us with the following themes based on the participants' ideologies (Table 2).

Table 2. Obtained themes from analysis of interviews transcription

Sense of freedom Being appreciated by society High access to facilities More job opportunities No sense of abasement	Being restricted by our Hijab
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All the statements are directly translated from interviews, so some of them are presented here and those written in CAPITALS are to accentuate the participants' presenting such ideology in a louder voice to emphasize her agreement or disagreement with a theme of interview.

Students' perspective

Interviewing students with an age range of 15-16-year-old from three schools located at the central part of Tehran, we came up with the same ideas concerning the issues of male/ female representation in the textbooks, as complaining about this issue was raised at the beginning of each interview. None of them expressed interest and enthusiasm to read these perplexing and baffling stuff. Startling attitudes towards their gender and discrimination (if any) between male and female students of the same age were obtained as

There are no reasons for being distressed and perturbed as a girl. We all have different kinds of activities and pursuits as skiing, swimming, gym classes, ...

The acceptance rate of university entrance exam indicates how successful we are as a GIRL.

It does not matter if there is no co-education (male & female students in the same class) in our schools. There are some other classes outside school in which boys and girls are together like TEFL, University Entrance Exam Preparation programs, Music, and so forth and Nothing Special happens.

We all have our parents' TRUST and this is a blessing for a girl, so WE do our best to reconfirm their parental generosity.

They mentioned age means change. So being a fifteen-year-old girl means changing for fifteen years, and parents as a guru showing the right path to us towards success, now we can say I AM A GIRL AND I LOVE TO BE A GIRL. (emphasized by almost eight students)

Nurses' perspectives

These participants with an age range of 28-37-year-old were selected from three private (let me say) high ranking hospitals.

Four participants had Master of Science (M.Sc.) and two Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) in nursing, so they referred to their freedom and autonomy for pursuing higher degrees and finding the desired job opportunity at first to show their satisfaction of being considered as a female member of society. Remarkable findings were also identified as

Being accepted at university as a young girl in a different city, we faced no force and pressure from the parents to discard this opportunity. Seeing such a trust, we did our best to attain our predetermined goals and objectives.

My husband accepted my present status as a nurse! When you see respect from the other side, you DOYOUR BEST to appreciate his trust. Convincing my three-old-year-child to show how hard it is to be considered as a nurse, my husband tries to show how optimistic he is, and this means A LOT!

It does not matter to be single or married. It is important that we love our profession and treat the patients with motherly love. We have male colleagues too, and this is not a sign of danger for a girl. We all respect each other!

There is a sense of security wherever we work. We are cherished as a woman not only in work places, but wherever we go. We have a rich cultural background and it provides us with a sense of respect for us.

Mangers' perspective

As there was no pressure on interviewees to accept or reject our interview, it was so hard to find female managers who eagerly participate in the data collection procedure. These two were at the age of 43, working as sale-manager of a company (Iranian representative of foreign companies in selling academic and research apparatus). Holding M.Sc. in Mechanical Engineering from abroad, and Mining Engineering from Iran, these two managers were totally satisfied with their current status.

All women have the fear of being neglected! That might be our fault! I'm SURE it is. We need to change our mentality towards the world. This era does not accept a woman waking up early at the morning....thinking what to prepare for lunch...spending hours and hours in the kitchen...some minutes for serving lunch...being worried about evening meal....and this process happens again and again!!! Not rejecting such attitude, as I am sure SHE would be the symbol of a great MOM and WIFE. But we believe each of us as women has more potentialities that make us a global symbol!

The rate of those being accepted in foreign universities is increasing. Our two daughters are studying abroad, getting full scholarship for pursuing their M.A. and Ph.D. This shows how Iranian women are successful in almost all parts of their life.

University instructors' perspective

All these seven part-time and full-time instructors were at the age range of 32-46-year-old from different universities. Six of them were married with one or two children, their husbands working as the university instructor too.

I liked to be a teacher. Experiencing different kinds of troubles and predicaments, I did my best to achieve what I was looking for! And now I am in the right place. Being as a little girl in a situation that education is not accepted by the members of your family, it is just God's help that I am here. My parents' ideology was based on the theme that each girl just needs to be able to Read and Write her name. That is fair enough!!! I endeavored to change their mentality and I was successful. That means the Great Success! Some other girls found such a chance to pursue their academic life. Now I LOVE to be a Girl, though some years back I hated to be a girl!

We as a couple teach at different universities. Though there were some conflicts at the early years of marriage, now there is just cooperation and love so we can continue our academic career.

Being a Girl is a fame for female members of society. It seems that universities are dominated by girls. Each year there is a rise in the number of those being accepted at high ranking universities, so Thanks God for being a GIRL.

There is a change in females' mentality towards the society. We see girls at all departments, different universities, medical colleges, parliament, and high positions at the government.

Secretaries' perspective

A total number of fourteen secretaries with an age range of 25-34-year-old participated to answer the interview questions. They were working in different travel agencies, clinics, language institutes, and companies.

Convincing my parents to let me work as a secretary was a Herculean task. There might be due to some previous gloomy feelings!

We have male colleagues...Nothing worrisome happens in terms of our interactions, we respect each other! So, it does not matter to be a male or female, young or old, it is important to believe in yourself and

consider yourself as a flower that needs much care and respect from the society. Parents provide such a respect for sure, and having tactful and polite colleagues is what we need to feel relaxed!

There are some misconceptions and delusions about being a secretary. There might be some happenings somewhere in a city, but it does not mean we as women have no right to work as a secretary. I am a Woman and I am a SECRETARY.

In each society there are some mentally-ill people who like to put you in trouble. They come and have some proposals...but it depends on the woman, her inner feelings, and her faith. Everything is changing and we need to cope with the new situations. We need to be among other members of the society- as for sure in each society whether in Iran or abroad there are obtrusive behaviors from some mentally-ill people. We should believe in ourselves and that is ENOUGH! As I am a Woman and nothing bad happens!

Saleswomen's perspectives

Twelve married participants of the current group were at the age range of 28-45-year-old selected from different markets and bazaars scattered at different parts of the city. Eight of these women had Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Social Sciences as psychology, law, and Persian literature.

Whether you are male or female, you can achieve whatever you deserve. Having more than 5 years experience as a saleswoman, I am sure I am totally aware of what is happening among people from different backgrounds, social status, cultural discriminations and ...theoretically being instructed through getting my B.A. in social psychology, I am now a psychologist (being among people and experiencing what is happening in reality).

My husband came to the shopping center with his sister and that was the basis for our present life as a couple. I consider that as a chance for girls that might change their life! Though it might not be always True, but I like to be a woman (now a MOM and WIFE) and hopefully everything is on the right track!! Being a woman does NOT mean to be isolated and segregated from the society. It means doing your best to be considered as the symbol of all female members of that community.

Paying tuition fee for my children (two university students, one high school, one primary school), paying the bills, paying rental monthly, and all unexpected incidents that might happen as you get up every morning...So there remains no other choice than working as much as you can.....It is true for more than half of women as they have to work to survive. So first as Girl from years back, and now as a Mom and Wife....I am just thankful to God for blessing me with the gift of being healthy. That is my treasure.

Housewives' perspectives

Knocking at doors for an interview might not be considered as a polite behavior though will not be considered as an obtrusive one. These ten 34-47-year-old housewives participated in the interview as they were shopping with their sisters, kids, or mom. Four participants had B.Sc. and B.A. in Computer Engineering, English literature, Theology, and Geography, while all other six interviewees preferred not to mention their level of education.

There is no reason for complaining over being a woman. It is important that YOU can NOT enjoy your academic life as I HATE housekeeping! As I remember from the very beginning, I was more eager to have toys like machine, air-plane, plastic guns, sword, than those tiny dolls. I love being a Woman, but playing your role as an active member of society is the one I LOVE.

It is NOT related to your gender. I LOVE my husband and children, but playing the role of a washing machine is the role I really HATE it! As a suggestion for women, please PRIDE yourself on being a Woman.

Cab-drivers' perspective

In fact there was no predetermined decision to choose these members of the society not for any biased attitude, rather as they are more engaged with their cliché routine lives that we may not pay attention to them. These six 38-42-year-old participants had positive feedback concerning their gender (being considered as a female),

their current job as an active member of society, their family members' attitude towards their position and so forth.

An interesting point of my job is learning a new language which is specifically designed for drivers. My children show interest concerning the way I try not to talk among members of family (though it might not be considered as a language, rather learning just some new terms and phrases as this job demands). There are some other women as bus-drivers and some others in the villages who drive tractors. So it is NOT related to you as a woman, rather doing your best to achieve the BEST you deserve is IMPORTANT.

It is our fault that there are always MISCONCEPTIONS concerning our culture...it is indicated from different foreign channels that there is NO right for females in Iran...I am a cab-driver as my profession, and there are lots of women all over the state dealing with different stuff and job positions as a teacher, employee, secretary, vice-president, member of parliament, baby sitter, and ... I like to congratulate women for having such a chance for being a woman, mom, or wife in Iranian culture...which women are highly cherished and appreciated by other members of the society (Men, I men).

There are different kinds of burdens imposed on families, especially if you are a widow and you have to pay different kinds of fees. Being appreciated among the members of family is an encouragement for me to work as much as possible. In each culture there some obtrusive behaviors, but it does NOT mean that just happens to you as a woman. As a member of the Iranian society, I Congratulate girls on their virginity and being future MOM and WIFE.

Some direct quotations are provided above to illuminate women's attitudes concerning their status in our culture. Transcriptions of data were meticulously scrutinized to come up with the most reiterative concepts and themes to test the research questions of the current study. The following table illuminates the participants' concern based on the analysis of interview transcriptions.

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

The way Iranian women feel about their gender entails an in-depth analysis of the intricate network of sociopolitical and psychological parameters. The contradictions imposed by social and religious norms of conservatism and modernity necessitate clarification of the nebulous and confusing forces. Women in Iran are confronting debilitating images of the religious and social conflicts. They are under the influence of serious quandaries and misgivings about their social roles, political effects, and their roles as family members. They feel they are in dire need of sexual and social liberation, a feat that is so difficult to accomplish considering the massive external influences they cannot ignore. In the sociopolitically constructed world today, cultural values and norms shape the way women interact with others.

Cultural ideological perspectives simply define the gender stereotypes and functions in the society. Iranian women do wish to stand on their own two feet, to remove the patriarchal shackles of denigration and subjugation. This aspiration cannot be materialized easily nonetheless. Imaginations and creativity are part and parcel of Iranian attitudes toward their rights and aspirations. However, the firm clasp of male dominated culture looms large in their minds. They are intimately tied up with her definition of what being a woman actually means and feels like. It is an arduous task to confront all the insular parochial and shallow mentalities inflicting the cultural normativities in the country. Herd mentality does not help them to ward off the bizarre combination of religious patriarchal ideas relegating them to second rate citizens responsible only for breeding children and carrying out household chores. Their dependency on men in emotional sexual and economic aspects of a religious state is no doubt the most irritating and inhibitive force catalyzing their victimization and degradation. Into the bargain, their ignorance about their rights in occupational familial legal spheres is stark egregious. Some do not have the faintest idea about the accountability of their spouses and follow their whims and desires slavishly.

The image of Iranian women is fraught with ambivalence and uncertainties, it is in fact far from clear. Iranian women do not follow

the same pattern of behavior and attitude, rather, there is a myriad of even conflicting practices. In this range of behavioral patterns, we can see excruciatingly conservative religiosity, liberalism, modernism, and even bohemian, hedonistic epicurean tendencies. Their attitudes towards "hijab" for instance is multifarious, some wholeheartedly embracing it and some others abhorring the practice immeasurably. For some, it is a sign of modesty, dignity, grace and protection from the lustful eyes and approaches of men they are interacting with. For others it is an emblem of idiocy, ignorance and male dominating gibberish. These women face insurmountable obstacles in connecting to a society which produces, disseminates and inculcates strictly austere lifestyles. They have no sense of belonging to this cultural structure and may develop feelings of paranoia, isolation, alienation, frustration and anathema. They cannot comply with the cultural norms of the society and have no choice save segregation. Even the ones who choose to abide by the sociopolitical regulations have little feeling of satisfaction and happiness. The counter cultures and resistance have been just hopeless at loggerheads with the colossal forces of ideological pressures exercised by the state. Most of these cultural restraints and constraints are transmitted from generations to generations and have gathered momentum and force in this perpetual incessant process. Hence, Iranian women with secular liberal tendencies find it very difficult to resist them. People might be able to break free the cultural networks, this is, in effect, a very formidable nettle to grasp.

Iranian women have very limited alternatives since religious culture is probably most controlling as compared with other kinds of cultural norms such as ethnic, organizational, national, regional, etc. This can be one of the most blatant instances of the deterministic role a culture can play in the formation of female identity. This has led to a wide gap between the female section of Iranian society and this schism has rendered them disorganized, fragile and vulnerable. This situation is more pathetic when those who feel they own the power to create formal and informal culture believe in rigid religious instructions which can function as external policing of the women with different world views. Ironically enough, these same cultural attitudes have brought about feelings of belonging, collectivism, harmony and satisfaction for Iranian women holding religious or traditional worldviews. This network of competing conflicting views encompassing discrepancies and commonalities as well as compatibilities and incompatibilities has made analysis of female identity in Iran very interesting and difficult indeed. The social roles adopted by Iranian women are inextricably bound up with the cultural frameworks of the society and their degree of agreement or disagreement with such structures. Their womanhood, gender, sexuality, profession, marriage, and social functions can be hugely affected by such a framework. Therefore, their obedience or resistance to these structures of power can be conducive to their success or failure, inclusion or exclusion from the centers of clout and financial gains. Unluckily, a significant part of female population is not well-acquainted with their rights and responsibilities as women in the complicated postmodern world of relativism, transience, and fake identities. Some serious measures must be taken to give women the necessary awareness and consciousness about the effective role they can play in enhancing the educational objectives.

Inspiring insightful cultural frameworks fostering equity and equality and removing patriarchal influence are absolutely necessary in the volatile sensitive and dynamic cultural and political atmosphere in Iran. The culture of collaboration, cooperation, collective decision making and harmonious reconstruction and reformulation of cultural practices is what Iranian women need to aspire for now. This dynamism and flexibility can reduce the split among the different female identities and remove the devastating discrepancies in the long run. Iranian women do have the self-esteem, self efficacy and the necessary emotional as well as intellectual competency to cope with the complexities and idiosyncrasies of the situation they are in. They can indubitably effectively prove their femininity, strength and influence in the postcolonial and globalized culture of 21st century.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The participants in the current research are from the Capital of Iran, so investigating such a theme in different cities from divergent cultural and sociopolitical backgrounds would provide more light on the issue as the current research sparks off the need for such investigations in an Iranian context. Women were from different professions as it provide more innovative data concerning having a relative representative sample of population, though more participants might be selected in further investigation of the research. That would provide more insightful hints and information if we can include men as members of society to learn their attitude concerning women.

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