

OPINIONS OF IRANIAN STUDENTS AT ERCIYES UNIVERSITY REGARDING GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN IRAN

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Abstract

This study examines the perspectives and experiences of Iranian students at Erciyes University regarding gender discrimination in Iran. Highlighting that equality between men and women is essential for human rights and social justice, the research addresses the persistent patriarchal norms and gender discrimination prevalent in many cultures, particularly in South and East Asia. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, women's rights in Iran have faced increased scrutiny, with systemic inequalities remaining widespread. Using qualitative research methods, including group interviews with 11 Iranian students, the study reveals a high level of awareness among participants regarding gender discrimination. They identified discrimination in various contexts such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody, and travel, alongside recognizing women's low social status and restricted access to equal opportunities in the workplace. The findings emphasize the urgent need for the Iranian government to promote women's rights and gender equality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between men and women has always been male-dominated throughout history, across all cultures, and even from the earliest periods of history. Gender-based disability and discrimination are widespread across the world, especially in South and East Asia (Bustan, 2006: 5-31).

Discussions on redefining the status of women in society in Iran began to gain prominence after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Gender discrimination in Iran is a condition where women do not have equal rights with men or where male superiority is accepted in society (Ravdarad & Nayebi, 2007). As the influence and visibility of women in decision-making mechanisms within society increase, gender equality in the country's political public life will become more pronounced, and this prominence will enhance the government's sensitivity in protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of women. In Iran, women's rights are governed by a legal system based on Islamic Law (Arkan, 2022), and in some cases, women's rights are distinct from those of men. For example, in Iran, the testimony of women is not equal to that of men, and two women are required to testify to be accepted as a witness in court (Iranian Islamic Penal Code, 2013).

The preamble of the Iranian Constitution dedicates a separate section to women, describing them as the cornerstone of the family, 'raising individuals in accordance with the ideology/regime,' 'the helper of men,' and, in Article 21, as those whose 'personality must develop' (Okyar, 2017: 121- 133). Women were foundational elements of the Iranian regime during the early years of the revolution. They played a significant and critical role, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War, by encouraging their husbands, brothers, and sons. According to the 1906 Constitution, all Iranians are equal before the law. However, despite this recognized equality, women were not granted the right to vote or be elected. This right was given to women starting on January 26, 1963. Beyond the right to vote, women are treated

as second-class citizens in all legal regulations, in both public and private spheres (Okyar, 2017). Additionally, in Iran, even when women perform the same job as men, they receive lower wages (Gugerdchiyan et al., 2014).

According to Article 1133 of Iran's Civil Code, men can apply for divorce at any time, while women can only apply for divorce in "extraordinary circumstances". All this information indicates the creation of two types of citizens in Iran. On one side, there are first-class male citizens who enjoy the benefits of Sharia rules, and on the other side, there are second-class female citizens who bear the burden of these rules and continue to do so (Civil Code of Iran, 1928). Gender equality is not only a human rights issue and a condition of social justice but also a fundamental prerequisite for development and peace. A transformed partnership based on gender equality is essential for sustainable, people-centered development. A continuous and long-term commitment is crucial for women and men to work together and face the challenges of the twenty-first century for themselves, their children, and society.

Investigating the perspectives of Iranian students at Erciyes University on this issue can provide a different perspective on gender discrimination in Iran. This research can offer a broader understanding of the conditions of women living in Iran and help people living in Turkey gain more insight into the viewpoints of those living in Iran. Additionally, by addressing the experiences of Iranian students in Turkey, this research can foster understanding and interaction between cultures.

1.1. Research Objective and Questions

This research aims to understand the perspectives of Iranian students regarding gender discrimination in Iran. The equality of rights between men and women in Iran is a contentious issue, and this study seeks to understand the views and experiences of women concerning gender equality. The aim of the research is to better understand the thoughts and experiences of Iranian

students regarding gender discrimination and to present findings that can draw the attention of policymakers and society to this issue. Therefore, the results of the research can help draw attention to women's rights and gender equality among policymakers and the broader community.

In line with this aim, the research focus and sub-questions are as follows:

1.2. Research Focus Question:

How are the awareness levels and attitudes of Iranian students studying at Erciyes University shaped regarding gender discrimination in Iran?

1.3. Sub-Research Questions:

What are the awareness levels of Iranian students at Erciyes University about gender discrimination in Iran?

In which areas do women in Iran experience gender discrimination?

In what areas do the legal regulations in Iran support or encourage social discrimination?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the study "Gender Discrimination" by Kellison (2022), gender discrimination is widely practiced, particularly against women or individuals who do not conform to strict social norms of masculinity and femininity. This article aims to examine the different strategies used by religious ethicists in their analyses of gender discrimination, especially within the context of Muslim and Christian traditions in the West.

According to the study "Gender Discrimination Policy" by Bobbitt-Zeher (2020), this section examines the use of policy as both a weapon against and a tool for sustaining gender inequality. It first addresses the legal conceptualization of discrimination policy, including issues of intent and impact. Then, it reviews the international, constitutional, and legal levels of anti-discrimination policies. Finally, it examines key policy issues that shed light on how discrimination persists, including the absence of anti-

discrimination policies, policies with discriminatory effects, and the implementation, enforcement, and effectiveness of discriminatory policies. The discussion is divided into two parts: the first focuses on workplace discrimination, and the second turns to other areas. The study concludes with fundamental guidelines for anti-discrimination policies (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2020).

The study "Negotiating Challenges and Aspirations in a Gendered Work Environment: The Voices of Women Working in the Iranian Broadcasting Media" by Ghasemi (2020) presents findings from in-depth interviews with 30 Muslim women working at the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). This research aims to shed light on how women negotiate the challenges and aspirations they face in a male-dominated work environment. According to the study's results, two primary challenges were identified: (a) the gendered stratification of job positions and opportunities, and (b) the complexity of adhering to physical proximity and religious behavioral norms required by the job (Ghasemi, 2020).

In a study conducted by Bidarbakhtniya and Jerjerzade (2019), factors influencing gender-based wage gap between male and female workers in Iran are examined. The results of the research indicate that increasing the level of education among women reduces gender inequality in wages in the country. However, even for equal work and equal education, there still exists a significant wage gap between genders. This discrimination is observed to be more prevalent in the private sector compared to the public sector.

In a study conducted by Rafeatjah and Kheyrikhah (2013), the views of managers were surveyed to examine the obstacles faced by women in the workplace in Iran. It is emphasized that in Iranian traditional culture, women's economic activity is considered unnecessary because men are generally regarded as the breadwinners of the family. However, women can utilize their skills in the social sphere and participate in employment. The participation of all individuals is necessary for

sustainable development. In this study, barriers and problems hindering women's employment were examined by utilizing the experiences and expertise of senior managers. Additionally, solutions and suitable conditions for women's employment were put forward. The results indicate that all managers believe in the economic, social, and psychological importance of women's employment. While women emphasize economic necessity, men emphasize social necessity. The majority of managers share the view that women's employment is beneficial for both families and society. Therefore, it was concluded that structural and cultural barriers need to be taken seriously for women to be employed in society and appropriate conditions to be created.

Archer (1984) discusses in the study "Gender Roles as Developmental Pathways" that gender roles are discussed as developmental pathways in four descriptive dimensions. The first three dimensions - rigidity, complexity, and consistency - are associated with processes operating at specific developmental stages. The fourth dimension, continuity, pertains to the overall developmental trajectory. Limited evidence suggests the following: There is a more rigid male role in childhood, although evidence regarding adults is less clear. There is some evidence that the male role in childhood is more complex and inconsistent. Developmentally, the female role becomes less flexible during adolescence, while the male role becomes more flexible and diverse. The role of women throughout adulthood, especially in relation to events like the birth of the first child, shows more variability. These findings are discussed in relation to broader societal and historical implications, as well as their connection to challenges associated with gender roles.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a focus group interview was conducted with 11 participants who are Iranian students studying at Erciyes University. The participants were selected from different cities and socio-economic groups, with the majority being between the ages of 20-30. Additionally, students

from various academic departments were included in the study.

During the interview, the participants' behaviors and reactions were carefully observed, and audio recordings were made. These recordings were divided into important sections based on the research questions, and the participants' perspectives were organized into two separate sections along with key terms. Some participants' personal experiences were also recorded. The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods, specifically coding and systematic interpretation analysis. Researchers identified main themes and sub-themes by considering the key terms, topics, and other significant elements that emerged during the coding process. This systematic interpretation analysis process will help to achieve a deeper understanding of the data and fulfill the research objectives. The aim of this research is to understand the perspectives of Iranian students regarding gender discrimination in Iran. For this purpose, a qualitative research method has been used. The qualitative research method is employed to understand people's experiences, thoughts, and feelings, often requiring an in-depth study. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), a source providing information on qualitative research methods, qualitative research focuses on qualitative data to understand social phenomena, events, or behaviors.

As a data collection method, a focus group interview was used. A focus group interview is a research method that involves face-to-face interaction with a group of people to gather in-depth information on a specific topic. This method allows participants to express their thoughts and experiences interactively. In the selection of participants, it is important that Iranian students have experience with gender discrimination. Therefore, the majority of participants should be Iranian and female. Additionally, it is crucial that participants come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and vary in age range.

In this research, a qualitative research method was used. The qualitative research method is employed to understand people's experiences, thoughts, and feelings, often necessitating an in-depth study. The research field is Erciyes University. Iran is a country where intense debates on gender equality occur, and thus, this field was chosen to understand the perspectives of Iranian students regarding gender discrimination.

For the selection of participants, one of the researchers, being Iranian, communicated with students and selected participants using the snowball sampling technique. It was determined that most participants should be Iranian and that both men and women, with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and age ranges, should be included. Most participants are studying in the medical faculty and are self-financed. The sample size was determined to be sufficient to allow for a productive discussion in a focus group interview with 11 participants. In this context, 4 male and 7 female students participated in the focus group discussion.

2.1. Data Generation Techniques

As a data generation method, the researchers used a focus group interview to understand the perspectives of Iranian students regarding gender discrimination. A focus group interview is a research method involving face-to-face interaction with a group of people and is used to gather in-depth information on a specific topic. This method allows participants to express their thoughts and experiences interactively.

2.2. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods such as coding and systematic interpretation analysis.

Coding is one of the qualitative data analysis methods and allows researchers to break the data into meaningful parts. During this process, the

researcher identifies specific keywords and topics, grouping the data in a meaningful way. This coding process helps in better understanding and analyzing the data. A systematic review is a method used to collect, summarize, and synthesize all existing evidence in a study. Systematic reviews enable researchers to use a reliable and objective approach to answer a specific research question.

The researcher identified main themes and sub-themes during the coding process by considering the key terms, topics, and other significant elements that emerged from the data. This systematic interpretation analysis process will help achieve a deeper understanding of the data and fulfill the research objectives. In conclusion, the data obtained using qualitative data analysis methods will be analyzed through coding and systematic interpretation analysis. These analysis methods will aid in better understanding the data and achieving the research objectives.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is the unfair treatment or inequality that individuals face due to their gender. This type of discrimination can be observed in various areas of individuals' social, economic, and political lives and is considered a serious issue in many societies (Kellison, 2022). Gender discrimination has been deeply rooted in many cultures throughout history and has been observed in numerous societies where women hold a lower status compared to men. This discrimination can involve restrictions or disadvantages for women in areas such as education, employment, politics, property rights, and family relationships.

Gender discrimination has been the subject of numerous research and academic studies. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir, known for her book "The Second Sex," examined gender discrimination and provided a significant theoretical framework regarding women's social gender roles and inequalities. This work laid the foundations of the feminist movement and played a crucial role in the

struggle for gender equality (Beauvoir, 1949). Another important reference is the book "Gender Trouble" by Judith Butler. In this work, Butler argues that gender is a social construct and that gender roles are not inherent but socially constructed. According to Butler, the norms and expectations in this construction process form the basis of gender discrimination (Butler, 1990).

In the fight against gender discrimination, there exist a series of international agreements and documents. One of these is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which aims to establish international standards for granting women equal rights and eliminating gender discrimination (CEDAW, 1979). Although progress has been made in the fight against gender discrimination, it is important to note that there is still much work to be done in this area. Gender equality is a fundamental issue in terms of justice and human rights, and continuous efforts should be made worldwide to end gender discrimination.

3.2. Gender Roles

Gender roles are a culturally and socially constructed reflection of the specific behaviors, expectations, and roles that society attributes to individuals based on their biological sex. These roles are associated with the characteristics, roles, and behavioral patterns that a society assigns to a particular gender. Gender roles encompass how individuals should behave, which roles they should assume, what skills they should possess, and what responsibilities they should bear.

Gender roles are shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors. Various institutions such as society's beliefs, values, norms, education system, media, and family can influence individuals in learning their gender roles. For example, in many societies, men are expected to be strong, active, competitive, and to assume leadership roles, whereas women are often associated with emotional, caregiving, and domestic roles. These gender roles can manifest in various aspects of

individuals' lives. For instance, in the workplace, women are often underrepresented compared to men and hold fewer leadership positions. Additionally, the expectation for men to suppress their emotional expressions due to gender roles can lead to emotional difficulties.

Research and studies on gender roles have helped us understand how these roles are constructed and their impact. For example, West and Zimmerman, known for the term "Doing Gender," argued that gender is a performance and that individuals display this performance in their interactions. Their work emphasizes that gender is a social construct and that individuals perpetuate this construct by repeatedly engaging in specific behaviors (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Another important reference is Judith Butler's book "Gender Trouble." Butler argues that gender is not natural but socially constructed and suggests that gender roles should be questioned. According to her, it is important for individuals to freely choose their own gender identities and expressions instead of conforming to society's gender norms (Butler, 1990).

Research on gender roles has highlighted the complexity and multifaceted nature of this topic. To gain more insight into this area, it is recommended to consult academic studies from disciplines such as sociology, gender studies, psychology, and feminist theory.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1. Awareness of Gender Discrimination among Participants

In this focus group discussion, participants unanimously agreed that Iranian culture and religious beliefs impose oppression on women. They perceived that laws are used as a tool to restrict women's freedoms. Participants believed that certain traditional practices, such as women covering themselves, undermine women's self-confidence and make communication more difficult.

Additionally, participants expressed feeling that men have certain rights while women face

restrictions in accessing these rights. Particularly, some participants mentioned that families demand high dowries for their daughters' marriages, which they believe limits women's freedoms. Participants also stated that women do not receive equal treatment as men in their professions and education. They pointed out that women are often pushed towards traditionally female-associated jobs such as handicrafts or makeup, while men are encouraged to pursue more "serious" occupations. As a result, participants indicated awareness of gender discrimination in Iran and expressed experiencing this discrimination within their families and society. They agreed that women should have equal rights but acknowledged that more effort is needed to achieve this goal.

4.2. Gender Discrimination in the Iranian Education System

In this focus group discussion, participants shared their experiences and views on gender discrimination in the education system in Iran. Male participants mentioned that in high school biology classes, there are separate sections for female and male anatomy, highlighting the continuation of societal pressures on women due to certain religious beliefs. They also expressed beliefs that those who do not pray or wear the headscarf should be punished. Some participants voiced opinions about certain departments being exclusively for either boys or girls, and they also mentioned restrictions such as girls not being able to become judges.

Female participants criticized the segregation of schools and expressed their belief that better communication could be achieved when people are together in society. They believed that the idea of discrimination is taught from elementary school onwards. They mentioned that in some regions, girls do not attend school and traveling to other countries is impossible for them. It was noted that in new textbooks, there are topics specifically for girls, but these mostly relate to home education and encouraging girls for marriage. Participants mentioned that religious books are taught in

schools, but they found the content to be toxic, containing messages that women should always submit to men. They also noted that in some universities, women are required to wear long hijabs, some departments have a low intake of female students, and there are separate dining halls for men and women.

In conclusion, participants provided several examples of gender discrimination in the education system in Iran. They highlighted different practices between men and women, limitations for women in certain professions, and the pressure exerted on women by religious beliefs. These views indicate the need for further research on gender discrimination in education in Iran.

4.3 Gender Discrimination in Work and Employment in Iran

There are different opinions regarding gender discrimination in work and employment in Iran. Male participants believe that women accept low-paying jobs and unskilled work instead of seeking positions that match their qualifications. It is also argued that this situation violates men's rights. However, it is noted that employers consider qualifications and productivity in hiring decisions.

The views of female participants indicate that women face numerous challenges and experience gender discrimination in hiring practices in Iran. These difficulties include not being hired for jobs or being dismissed from their positions, as well as being forced to leave work due to pregnancy and breastfeeding reasons. It is also mentioned that employers decide on hiring women based on their own interests. However, it has been noted that some women experience a sense of significant independence and empowerment even in low-paying jobs. The discussion also touched upon the need to consider individual circumstances in the hiring of women and emphasized the importance of treating everyone equally. It was mentioned that women should be encouraged to develop their skills and are capable of working in challenging jobs. However, the belief that women are still barred

from certain jobs due to their gender remains widely accepted.

There are different views on gender discrimination in employment in Iran, highlighting the importance of this issue. The challenges women face in finding employment and their exposure to gender discrimination emerge as significant issues. Therefore, employers should prefer qualified candidates in their hiring decisions and ensure that everyone is hired under equal conditions. Women should be encouraged to develop their skills, recognizing their capacity to work in challenging jobs.

4.4. Age Inequalities and Gender Discrimination in Iran

In Iran, there are legal inequalities and gender discrimination issues as perceived by the participants. Their perspectives indicate a societal order where laws are discriminatory against women and men can exert control over women's lives. Many laws are seen to be biased against women, with men playing a decisive role in women's lives. For instance, it is mentioned that women need permission from men for matters such as marriage or leaving the country. Additionally, it is noted that laws such as the stoning law still exist, causing difficulties for women during divorce processes. While men are obligated to serve in the military, there is no such requirement for women.

Regarding child custody, it is noted that the situation is against women's interests. Inheritance laws also indicate that women do not have equal rights as men. In court, it is stated that the testimony of two women equals that of one man, which illustrates the lower social status of women. Moreover, the fact that a father who kills his child may receive only a few years of imprisonment indicates the inadequacy of the justice system in protecting women's rights. These situations highlight the need for more efforts to protect women's rights and achieve gender equality in Iran. It is important to update legal regulations to protect women from discrimination and to strengthen

women's rights in the social structure. There should be greater representation of women and equal opportunities in areas such as education, employment, and political life. Only through these measures can a more equitable social structure regarding gender equality be established in Iran.

4.5. Participants' Suggestions for Achieving Gender Equality

Participants suggest various recommendations to reduce and cope with gender discrimination. Firstly, it is emphasized that families should empower both girls and boys to defend themselves. Additionally, raising children with self-confidence and belief in their own values is considered crucial. However, attention is drawn to the fact that some families still try to impart outdated beliefs to their children. Another suggestion is that girls should receive self-defense training. Developing self-confidence, enhancing skills, and striving for success are also seen as important steps. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the change in attitudes should start within families, and children need to be closely monitored.

Taking a stand against discrimination and advocating for our rights are crucial steps. It is highlighted that we need to teach these behaviors to the younger generations as well. It is emphasized that everyone can contribute something and each step can make a difference in the situation. These suggestions represent a few examples of individual and societal actions that can be taken to combat gender discrimination. However, achieving gender equality requires primarily changing legal regulations. In the process of societal change, raising children, family attitudes, the education system, media, and other factors are all crucial. Implementing these recommendations could be a significant step in combating gender discrimination.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that Iranian students studying at Erciyes University have a high level of awareness regarding gender discrimination. It is known that

women in Iran face discrimination in various aspects such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody, and travel. Furthermore, there is high awareness that women have lower social status and lack equal opportunities in the workplace compared to men. Women in Iran are engaged in various social movements to combat gender discrimination and inequality. These movements include organizing women's rights advocates, conducting campaigns on social media platforms, and advocating for increased opportunities in education and employment for women.

The legal regulations in Iran contribute to women facing gender discrimination. For instance, there are laws requiring women to obtain permission from men in matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody, and travel. Additionally, there are practices that indicate women have lower social status. These circumstances underscore the need to amend legal regulations in Iran to achieve gender equality. As a result, it is evident that women in Iran face gender discrimination, and there is a high level of awareness for combating it. Addressing the social, economic, and legal inequalities faced by women requires not only societal movements but also changes in legal regulations. The Iranian government should exert more effort to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. Furthermore, educational institutions can play a role in increasing awareness and addressing gender discrimination.

Key findings from the focus group discussions include:

Awareness of gender discrimination: Participants exhibited a heightened awareness of the pervasive nature of gender discrimination in Iran, acknowledging its detrimental effects on various aspects of women's lives.

Discrimination in education: Participants identified gender-based segregation within educational institutions, limited access to certain

academic programs, and discriminatory treatment within the classroom environment.

Discrimination in employment: Participants discussed the challenges faced by women in securing employment, discrimination in hiring practices, and unequal treatment within the workplace.

Legal inequalities: Participants highlighted discriminatory laws that restrict women's rights, such as those related to marriage, inheritance, and child custody.

Societal biases: Participants identified harmful gender stereotypes and cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination against women.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the urgent need to address gender discrimination in Iran. By raising awareness, challenging harmful stereotypes, and advocating for legal reforms, it is possible to create a more just and equitable society for all.

To achieve gender equality in Iran, several strategies must be implemented. First, education and awareness campaigns can help to challenge harmful stereotypes and foster a more inclusive society. Second, updating and reforming discriminatory laws is essential to ensure that women have equal rights and protections under the law. Third, supporting programs that empower women and girls can help them to overcome barriers and achieve their full potential. Fourth, promoting gender equality within institutions, such as schools, workplaces, and government agencies, is crucial for creating a more equitable environment. Finally, encouraging community-based initiatives and partnerships can help to address gender discrimination at the local level. By implementing these strategies, Iran can make significant progress towards achieving gender equality and creating a more just and equitable society for all its citizens.

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