

## Sexual and Gender Oppression Situations at Iranian Universities

Nassereddinali Taghavian<sup>1</sup>, Hamed Taheri Kia<sup>2\*</sup>

1. Assistance Professor Iranian Institute for Social and Cultural Studies.

2. Assistance Professor Iranian Institute for Social and Cultural Studies.

### Article history:

Received date: 2021/01/17

Review date: 2021/07/20

Accepted date: 2021/07/27

### Keywords:

Oppression, University, Female Student, Iran

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The present article aims to study the gender oppression of female students in the context of the existing relations at Iranian universities.

**Methodology:** To this end, based on the qualitative method, ten universities in different fields were selected and in-depth interviews were conducted with 146 female students who experienced sexual harassment by male professors. Thus, we analysed interviews by thematic analysis.

**Findings:** University community is the only mixed community, gender-wise, in Iranian administrative-governmental settings, with a very different cultural diversity and circulation. Therefore, scores of situations, in which gender and sexual encounters are possible, arise amid everyday university relationships. Although the issue of male professors' sexual and gender encounters with female students has been publicized in Iran, it has been mostly ignored in research studies.

**Conclusion:** The findings of the study show that when the Islamic cultural principle of gender relationship boundaries is regarded firmly or violated by male professors, the triad of 'violence', 'discrimination' and 'exploitation' will emerge, resulting in gender oppression toward female students.

**Please cite this article as:** Taghavian N, Taheri Kia H. (2021), Sexual and gender Oppression Situations at Iranian Universities, *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*. 4(3): 232-244.

\* Corresponding author: [kia.erhut@gmail.com](mailto:kia.erhut@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

In Iranian culture, hijab<sup>1</sup> has turned into a principle influencing the division of social spaces, to which we refer as 'gendered spaces': the division of relationships into 'introvert and feminine' and 'extrovert and masculine' relationship. Thus, 'respecting gender relationship boundaries' emerges as a norm according to which female space should be segregated from male space (Gould, 2014), a norm that can be traced in the social relationships between men and women (Amin, 2002).

However, what is of importance is that the principle of 'respecting gender relationship boundaries' changed into a fundamental principle after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Sadeqi, 2008). This principle has been made into law and anyone who violates it will be prosecuted. As a result, the principle of respecting gender relationship boundaries has led to other gender-based segregations in different spaces, such as segregations concerning jobs (Rajaei, 2007; Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2009), segregations in urban spaces (Arjmand, 2017), and segregations in public education processes (Paidar, 1995) and higher education (Rezai- Rezai-Rashti, 2015). Thus, higher education and supervision of mixed education environments at universities have been among the main concerns of the Iran's Islamic government. Higher education is predominantly controlled by men, with women playing a negligible part (Sedghi, 2007); however, quite interestingly, girls currently account for a larger number of Iranian university students. Neither the population of female university students nor mixed university education is desirable to the cultural policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as women are expected to spend most of their time at home taking care of their families (Fathi, 2016). Therefore, the large number of female students at Iranian universities is by no means an indication of Iranian women's success in attaining scientific positions and entering the labor market (Rezaei, 2012).

In their everyday life, female students are faced with violence, discrimination and exploitation. And, while there are different support services for sexual victims at universities in developed countries, in Iran female students are not provided with any support mechanisms protecting their rights, all adding to the severity of the problem (Gialopsos, 2017). Yet, Eyre (2000) in her study shows that in the liberal cultural, universities encounter serious challenges in hearing the voice of those women who have suffered sexual violence. Numerous studies have tried to examine sexual encounter in public and university spaces. Lin Farley (1978) and Catharine Mackinnon (1979) have focused on sexual harassment of women at workplaces. Shortly after, sexual harassment in university settings, especially in the US, turned into one of the most important fields of study on the social and cultural state of universities. In American universities, every year comprehensive studies are conducted to survey the state of sexual harassment at universities. In one of the most recent studies, based on the systematic review of other studies, claim has been made that at least one out of ten female American university students or academics have been subjected to a form of sexual harassment (Cantalupo et al., 2018).

The Association of American Universities, as a bi-national, non-governmental institution, has run a comprehensive program to study sexual harassment in American universities, asking all American universities to conduct surveys on sexual harassment in their universities. So far, 27 universities have carried out this program and the report by the Association of American Universities indicates that 11.7% of students have experienced sexual harassment (Association of American Universities 2015). Many American universities also have independently studied the nature of sexual harassment in their universities (Kelley & Parsons, 2000; Campbell et al., 2017; Jordan et al. 2014, Huerta et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 2017). In other countries as well, studies have been conducted on the extent of sexual harassment in universities (Hardy, 2018; Klein & Martin, 2019), a brief review of which indicates that sexual harassment is more or less common in university environments all over the world. For instance, studies have been carried out in this regard in New Zealand (Jones et al., 2013), Nigeria (Taiwo et al., 2014), Lagos (Sulaiman, 2015), Zimbabwe (Shumba & Matina, 2002), South Africa (Joubert et al., 2011; Joubert, 2009), Sweden (Bondestam, 2004), and India (Vandana, 2020).

In Iran studies on sexual harassment are rare, a deficiency that is even severer in universities. In a study on this subject, Tayefi (2017) examines accounts by female students who have experienced sexual harassment at university. Although the findings of this study have been only published in the virtual space and the study has failed to do an in-depth analysis of the problem or provide an accurate understanding of the phenomenon of sexual harassment, useful preliminary information can be gathered from it. In a qualitative study by Keshavarz (2017), Iranian university students' accounts about 'professors' gender discrimination toward female students, sexual abuse of girls, and girls' feeling of lack of security' and 'the prevalence of corruption and bribery among professors and female students' have been reported. In this study, sexual abuse of female students by professors has been highlighted as a serious problem of female students. Since this study mainly seeks to identify 'female students' problems', it does not deal with the roots of this problem and no in-depth understanding of sexual harassment is offered.

In a qualitative study on 'suffering and violence' in Iranian universities, Izadijairan (2017) reports and analyzes accounts of sexual harassment and violence at universities. In this study, there are accounts typical of the gendered milieu and masculinism dominating university settings in Iran. However, in this study, sexual harassment has not been examined independently, providing us with no comprehensive, deep understanding of this issue. The National Plan for the Assessment of University Student Life (2015) employed a qualitative approach to the assessment of 'verbal aggression', 'physical damage' and 'threatening and duress' by friends of the opposite sex. The ratio of male and female students' experiences with each of the three above-mentioned items have been '22.3% to 18.4%', '8.5 to 4.6%' and '17.2 to 15%' respectively, indicating that male students have been subjected more to verbal and physical aggression on the part of female students. Although, sexual harassment (by male students or male professors) is not directly assessed in this survey, an overall picture of violence by each gender toward the other one can be obtained.

The last study to be referred to here is by Faraji and Hamidi (2016); this study examines the state of 'Iranian women's covering and hijab' at a national level and also provides statistics and figures on sexual harassment of women in Iran. The findings of this study indicate that 30.6% of Iranian women have experienced sexual harassment, 7.3% of whom have stated that the harassment was inflicted on them in educational and university settings. Overall, none of these studies have directly dealt with sexual and gender encounters between professors and students. The importance of the present study lies in the production of theoretical literature and construction of concepts to be used in future studies on sexual encounters at universities. Therefore, the main goal of this article is to introduce the controversial issue of sexual victimization of female students by Iranian male professors.

## 2. Methodology

The present study, which falls under the rubric of applied research, employs the qualitative method. The data have been collected through in-depth interviews and the research population and field were limited to female students from universities in Tehran associated with Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, so that samples and interviews would be easier to manage. The samples were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling. First, the female students who had somehow experienced sexual and gender insecurity at university environment were selected and, then, interviewed. In the interviews, they were asked to introduce other female students who had faced a kind of sexual and gender insecurity or harassment. The final sample is composed of female students from different academic levels and majors, from science and engineering to the humanities and arts. The following table presents the number of students and their universities.

Table 1. Table (1) to appear about here

| University                                  | Number of Interviewees |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Alzahra University                          | 2                      |
| Amirkabir University of Technology          | 19                     |
| Pars University (Private)                   | 22                     |
| University of Tehran                        | 2                      |
| Khajeh Nasir Toosi University of Technology | 15                     |
| Kharazami University                        | 3                      |
| Soore University (Private)                  | 14                     |
| Shahid Beheshti University                  | 17                     |
| Allameh Tabataba'i University               | 31                     |
| Iran University of Science and Technology   | 21                     |
| Total                                       | 146                    |

Also, we conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews in order to reach the female students' lived experience of sexual victimization. Reaching the lived experiences through different narratives by divergent narrators provides phenomenological analysis with the content of different perspectives about the same experienced phenomenon. Then for the valuation of the qualitative data and analysis we discussed different aspects of experienced phenomenon with the research team to exchange and validate the ideas.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The interviews were coded in the Atlas software. For the first stage of open coding, nearly eighty codes produced, and then the codes were grouped, and finally the categories of violence, exploitation and discrimination were arrived at under the general concept of gender oppression. These three categories will be examined in the following. Moreover, for the sake of research ethics, we tried to gain female students' trust to tell their secrets. Also, we avoided judging them

### 3. Findings

The categories of violence, exploitation and discrimination are three analytical concepts to make analytical nodes which make connections so as to draw the map of sexual exploitation of relations between male professors and female students. Some kinds of implications of complicated and strict Islamic administrative surveillance of the sexual relations are those three challenging concepts related to sexual situations which female students experience.

**Sexual and gender Oppression:** In the cultural policymaking of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the principle of respecting the gender boundaries between men and women in their social relationships is of great importance and violating it is considered as offense and can result in prosecution. Therefore, the cultural unconscious is sensitive to the boundaries of gender relationships (de Groot, 2007). According to Butler (1988), gender is a process through a stylized repetition of acts and, for Iranian population, respecting the Islamic gender boundaries is the main obligatory gender identity repetition.

Based on the analysis of the field data, which will be presented in the following, 'gender relationship boundaries' is a principle that, whether followed or violated, can result in the triad of exploitation, violence and discrimination. On the one hand, respecting gender boundaries causes female students not to engage in a proper scientific and educational relationship with male professors. Even in cases where professors can provide students with the opportunity to have access to social, cultural and economic sources and assets, they give priority to male students. On the other hand, when these boundaries are violated and the relationship is no longer a 'professor-student' relationship and develops a sexual aspect, female students usually suffer pain and distress and the relationship is accompanied by violence for the female students. The male professor violates the boundaries, and while he no longer performs the role of a professor, views the female student as a sexual object. In other words, the professor violates these boundaries with the aim of sexual exploitation, which is inevitably accompanied by a kind of violence.

Thus, the dualism of 'respecting gender relationship boundaries' and 'violating gender relationship boundaries' leads to violence, exploitation and discrimination. Gender oppression is the result of disrupting the balance between respecting and violating gender relationship boundaries. In the mixed setting of university, the balance between professors, as an elite scientific group, and female students is disrupted at times. The triad of violence, discrimination and exploitation will be examined here.

**Gender Discrimination:** Gender discrimination arises from discriminatory attitude of the society toward men and women. Male and female gender roles are based on a kind of unequal valuation of men and women, in which women are usually given an inferior status. Thus, women are normally deprived of equal access to social, cultural and economic rights. In general, discrimination can be defined as depriving some social groups of rights that are essentially provided for all. This inequality is more noticeable with regard to gender and differences in male and female roles, numerous instances of which can be seen at universities. In their interviews, many female students shared their experiences with such discriminations, which had been very painful to them. Like violence, discrimination can take both individual and structural forms, i.e., neither are people's attitudes toward men and women the same, nor do rules and regulations treat men and women equally.

During both my Bachelor's and Master's education, all my male classmates had jobs related to our major, and most of them got their jobs because of our professors. But the girls didn't have this opportunity, which could be because of marriage and having children and stuff (Economics student, Alzahra University).

Female students turn into a 'superfluous gender', apparently supposed to just enter university and then graduate from it. This superfluous gender has no special talent and even its growing presence is because of male students' laziness, a problem which should be concerned about: 'when I went to the board to solve a problem, my professor turned to the male students (while also pointing toward them) and said that they should be ashamed of themselves that a girl was solving a problem while the boys were sitting' (Philosophy student, Kharazmi University). University classes are among the most important places where female students start to turn into the 'superfluous gender'. Since in university classes the principle of respecting gender behavioral models should be followed, female students automatically turn into a special object, and the concept of 'superfluous gender' exactly conveys the same meaning.

An instance of the concept of 'superfluous gender' is where male professors join in talks opened up by male students about special subjects concerning girls in the framework of discussions that digress from the main topic of discussion. In such a situation, female students become more and more isolated: 'we had a professor, in political science, who found it unacceptable for female students to be outside their homes more than eight hours ... he always said that male students were better than female students (Political Science student, Allameh Tabataba'i University).

However, regarding gender interaction between male professors and female students, an importance instance to be mentioned here has happened at Alzahra University, which is a single-sex university – with no male students and only a few male professors: Alzahra University was sensitive to students' pregnancy. Pregnant students would have problems with their supervisors. One of our female professors told us in the first semester that students who had a job should stop going to work and those who were married shouldn't get pregnant during their studies (Economics student, Alzahra University).

The remark quoted from a female professor above has a masculine tone it, indicating the discriminatory attitude and behavior of some professors toward female students. In these types of attitude or behavior female students are either deprived of some rights or insulted and belittled. Yet, discrimination can take structural forms: Most discrimination is because of our covering. When you're wearing a bright-colored dress in hot weather, you'll have to answer questions about it at the entrance. At the library or other places in the university you're asked if you're a student or not. There are tough regulations about female students' covering; boys have much less trouble about their clothes and can wear short-sleeved shirts and bright-colored clothes to university. But girls can wear neither bright colors nor

thin clothes in hot weather, and they always have to answer questions about their covering. It seems you have to wear dark-colored clothes to be a student. Your clothes, the length of the sleeves, and how loose or tight your clothes are can be very important; they shouldn't be too short or tight. These are ridiculous concerns we're dealing with. But male professors can wear causal clothes, tight or short-sleeved, they're free to choose but we aren't at all. These are discriminations against us because of our gender (Philosophy student, Kharazmi University).

Behavioral discrimination, on the part of male professors against female students, is reproduced in the legal and administrative system of universities. Regulations regarding female students' entrance to and presence at universities and even more private settings such as dormitories are among legal and administrative discriminations: 'the dormitory regulations for girls are terribly discriminatory. Our male classmates don't have such problems at all, about having their friends over or leaving or coming back to their rooms; they're much freer than us' (Political Science student, Allameh Tabataba'i University). Female students encounter structural gender discriminations that determine the everyday relationship between them and their male professors and the professors' view on the sexual and gender presence of female students at university to a great extent.

The complicated nature of the structural discrimination puts the female students in a highly ambiguous situation, such that they cannot even find a way in the administrative system of the university to defend their rights. In fact, the administrative system of university is not efficient enough to deal with this problem; neither is there a strong legal resolution to find solutions for these problems. There is no legal authority for female students to turn to for legal advice or rely on for help. This situation can be referred to as the 'big discrimination': About the structure and law I have to say that nothing protects female students against the discriminatory attitude of some professors. We had a professor who'd support you if you buttered him up. It seems you have to behave like a toady to be treated fairly (Sociology student, Shahid Beheshti University).

The lack of a fair mechanism in the administrative system of Iranian universities to protect the rights of female students and some male professors' attitude toward female students encourage female students to think of solutions that can somehow strengthen this discriminatory structure. As can be understood from the last quote from the sociology student, in order to gain support, female students have to give privileges to male professors, which can be considered a kind of 'exploitation'. Thus, sexual exploitation should be regarded as an important manifestation of gender oppression at university.

**Sexual Exploitation:** Sexual exploitation can be defined as behaviour or remark aimed at obtaining 'sexual pleasure' from a person without their consent. Exploitation usually occurs in situations where there is an unequal social relationship and the perpetrator uses his or her authority in the relationship to sexually abuse the victim. This means that the authority in one type of social relationship – such as the employer-employee or professor-student relationship – is used in another type of social relationship, the most important of which is the field of sexuality. In sexual exploitation by a male professor, the scientific and educational authority of the professor is used to put pressure on the female student to give in to his sexual demands. Examples of this form of sexual harassment have been given by some students in their interviews: Our statistics professor has a lustful look. Rape is not just physical. You need just to be wearing a short dress, and you'll have his lewd glance at you. He flirts with girls who wear makeup in a way that makes you feel terrible (Educational Science student, Kharazmi University).

The female student is under the dominant look of the professor and thus the female student, who has to be present in class, is available for a kind of pleasure. The female students' required presence and their seated position in their chairs provide the male professor in his standing position with the possibility of a dominant look. The professor's gaze is the action that breaks the boundaries of sexual relationship at university; this look changes its nature and involves components that produce sexual pleasure for the professor.

The diversity in the time and spaces of the male professor's encounter with the female student allows for different types of exploitation: We had a professor who would always tell us to close the door when we entered his room. And he asked us questions that were none of his business: 'why haven't you got married yet? Why don't you have a boyfriend? What do you do then (sexually)? Let's meet more often' we had two such professors. Another professor always paid me compliments on my appearance, or said that I looked great ... and stuff (Economics student, Alzahra University).

Here, the professor changes the 'professor-student' construct to another construct, which can be called the 'professor-friend-student' relationship. In Western culture, friendship between a professor and students can be part of their social relationships. However, Lee (1998) shows that close friendships between a professor and a student can sometimes end up with sexual violence. Also, this type of intimacy is usually supported by Iranian students (Hemmati & Mahdie, 2019). However, throughout this change, there can be more possibilities for bringing up suggestive or sexual conversations. The closer a friendship between a male professor and a female student is, there more opportunities of crossing sexual relationship boundaries there will be. When the boundaries of such a friendship is extended, the professor-student relationship is less and less relevant and the male professor is constructed as a 'man' rather than a 'professor'; thus, the professor loses its status as 'professor' in the eyes of the female student.

There are, however, professors who are apparently stricter about observing the gender relationship boundaries and try to rely more on the professor-student relationship and the authority arising from it to achieve their goal; 'once, one of my professors, who was a famous cleric and sometimes appeared on TV, put his phone number under my paper in the exam session without attracting attention' (Philosophy student, Kharazmi University). The 'man-professor-famous cleric' combination shows the authority that is mixed with sexuality very well; and the stressful atmosphere of the exam session provides a good opportunity for the male professor to get closer to the female student and display his authority to her. In this situation the female student can provide the professor with a privilege and change the professor-student relationship to her benefit.

For male professors who want to display their authority, class and exam session situations can provide the best opportunity to reveal their masculine domination. These situations limit the body and the female student does not have the chance of carrying out an action or reaction. Unlike the situation in the professor's office, where the student is freer to act, class and exam sessions provide the male professor with a better opportunity to put the female student in a sexual trap: 'during the exam my professor got closer to me and whispered in my ear that my ring was beautiful or I was more beautiful that day and ...' (Sociology student, Shahid Beheshti University).

Thus, in class and exam situations, the professor uses the 'professor-student' relationship, instead of the 'professor-friend-student' pattern, to highlight his professor-man authority. Here, the female student faces another aspect of the professor's character, to which we refer to as the 'red authority of professorship'. Here, the male professor reveals his red authority of professorship to make the female students yield to his sexual desire. Here, final scores, exams, and presence and absence in class are used as tools for the professor's purpose: I'd warned him about his behavior several times, because of which he failed me. He failed me three times in one of my courses and threatened me that even worse would follow ... In the end, I had to take and pass the course in another university. It made me fall behind in my studies for one whole year (Sociology student, Shahid Beheshti University).

The 'red professor' is a professor who makes the exam session and final score situations more stressful for female students so the female student violates the gender relationship boundaries, as well, not out of free will or for the purpose of having access to social, cultural and economic resources, but merely out of 'fear': My first semester score was 20 out of 20, but in the second semester with the same professor it was 8. I was shocked and went to his office and talked to him about it, and he said 'after all this time you have come to me to talk about this? I'm so disappointed.' This is what he said exactly. He expected me to talk about something else (Political science student, Allameh Tabataba'i University).

The red professor uses other means, other than 'exam scores', to make the situation more stressful; he even resorts to threats to fulfill his sexual desire. Another female student speaks about the time her professor violated the gender relationship boundaries: He told me ... honey [calling her by her first name]! Can we imagine we're married tonight? Just tonight; I told him I would sue him. And he told me he knew people with a lot of power and threatened he would not let me pass even one more course' (Counseling student, Kharazmi University).

The red professor tries to make every situation as stressful as possible. However, what damages the professor-student relationship most is when the female student's trust in the professor is betrayed by the professor. As already mentioned, the professor establishes friendship with the female student and builds up trust so that a more liquid relationship is later developed between them. Thus, a more liquid time and spaces will develop between the male professor and the female student; the liquid time and space enable the male professor to act more freely to break the boundaries. This usually happens outside university; for example, because of the trust the female student has in the professor, she goes to his private office or even home, where sooner or later she will be faced with sexual exploitation: There was a crowd of us from the same university. We went out with our professor several times to cafes, parks, mountains ... even to his home a few times. Visiting the professor at his home was kind of ordinary for us. One of the girls from our crowd had a closer relationship with the professor and there seemed to be emotions between them; the girl's feeling toward the professor was more than that of a student to a professor. After a while we quite unexpectedly heard that that girl had dropped out of university. Later we came to know that once the professor had her alone in his home and apparently wanted to have sex with her and she'd refused and the professor had got angry and stuff. I think all her dreams had turned into a nightmare and decided not to go to university anymore (Sociology student, Allameh Tabataba'i University).

The liquid time and space arise from the trust developing between the male professor and the female student. However, sometimes this space is created within university, in the professor's office, where he can feel secure: I was in my third year when it happened. Before that I had a very good relationship with my professor. He always helped me and was available. But one day I went to his office to talk about my classmates' assignments, and after a few minutes I realized he was acting strangely. He was restless, stood up several times and came toward me and went back to his chair, and suddenly held me by my head and tried to kiss me. I was shocked and didn't know what to do. I pulled myself out of his hand and dashed out of his room. I couldn't go back to university for two weeks (Psychology class, Kharazmi University).

In the last two accounts it can be seen that the male professor uses the emotions developing between them to sexually exploit the female student, which can hurt her feelings severely. It shows that 'sexual exploitation' is closely associated with 'sexual violence' and its application by the male professor to satisfy his desires. Sexual Violence: Sexual violence, which is closely associated with sexual exploitation, is using physical or structural force, directly or indirectly, to attain sexual pleasure, which occurs when the sufferer refuses to agree to the demand for sexual relationship. In the university setting, some male professors even resort to violence to satisfy their sexual desire. Quite naturally, this usually occurs in private spaces such as personal offices either inside or outside university, or even in professors' homes. As already discussed, sexual violence usually occurs after basic trust is won by the professor. Sexual violence involves verbal, emotional, and physical aspects (Gross et al., 2006).

The verbal aspect of violence appears when the professor expresses remarks that make the situation stressful and intolerable for the female student: We had a theology professor and once he was discussing feminism and women's rights. I started to disagree with him on some points. And then he asked me if I was married or single. The question shocked me because it had nothing to do with our discussion. I told him that I was single. Then he said 'your mother has failed to take good care of you. If I were you mother, I'd try to find a husband for you. All your intellectual tumult is because you're single'. The class, especially the boys, burst into laughter. I felt terrible' (Philosophy student, Kharazami University)

In the above-mentioned situation the gender boundaries are violated because the professor talks about something nobody expects. It is an ambiguous communication of sexual intentions and it conclusively links to sexual aggression (Schuster & Krahé, 2018). The female students' gender position suddenly turns into a topic for a heated discussion in class. The violence is where the female student, who is expecting a scientific discussion in class, becomes the topic of discussion, putting her in a difficult situation, which can be referred to as verbal violence: Two of our professors, who were so-called psychologists, always made sexist remarks. Gave us some shallow, disgusting examples; I never liked to be in their class. Always accused girls like me of having no religious belief and advised us to leave Iran and do whatever we liked in another country. When they were expressing these words, I could see a kind of pleasure in their eyes, a kind of sexual pleasure, which was rooted in their psychological complexes (Psychology student, Kharazmi University).

Sexual violence, which occurs once the gender relationship boundaries are broken, takes different forms and can be accompanied by physical violence. We have defined two types of relationship based on the gender relationship boundaries between a male professor and a female student: the 'professor-student' relationship, in which these boundaries are strictly protected, and the 'professor-friend-student' relationship, in which the boundaries are shifted and broken. Both types generate sexual violence for the female students, from violence in the professor's look or remarks to physical violence: The head of our department fired his administrative assistant because he had sexually assaulted me. He supported me throughout the case, but later he expected me to make it up for him, and tried to sexually abuse me. One day, there was an argument between us in his office and he told me to say nothing. There were other people there, and he realized I was very sad; he told the others to leave the room. He wanted to make it up to me. He came to me held my hand said 'give up'. I said 'what do you mean? What does this mean?' He said he had feelings for me and that I shouldn't have been angry with him. He was fifty five and married. He was holding my hand firmly and wouldn't let me go and I just told him to stop that. Finally, I pushed him away and threatened that I would shout for help. Another time when I was leaving his room, he hysterically held my hair in his hands and said 'you know nobody in the world can satisfy me as much as you do' (Sociology student, Alzahra University).

Another case is about a male professor who establishes friendship with his student, wins her trust, and later reveals that he has feeling for her. The female student is happy that a knowledgeable professor has feelings for her and thus trusts him. The professor, whose wife and children live abroad, invites her to his home and without her consent tries to have sex with her: I didn't know what intention he had, and I thought he was really in love with me. When I entered his room I felt he had created a romantic atmosphere to seduce me; candles were burning and romantic music was on. I felt uncomfortable and decided to leave very soon. But he held me by my hand and hugged me. I was shocked. I felt I was paralyzed. I couldn't do anything. He took me to the sofa and treated me very violently. I just wanted it to finish sooner ... It was terrible (Communications student, Allameh Tabataba'i University).

All such violent events, in their different forms, cause severe damage to the self-confidence of the female students and isolate and marginalize them. The marginalization of these students is a form of serious violence that arises from discrimination, violence, and sexual exploitation: Violence in society has different layers. When one wants to shatter these girls' self-confidence it is even more violent. Physical violence has very bad psychological effects, it damages your pride ... When you lose your self-confidence, and you'll be easily hurt. The way security personnel tell you about your clothes and hijab is irritating. They treat you as if they own you ... they turn their gaze to you, which is annoying (Educational science student, Kharazmi University).

Lewd looks, impolite remarks and harsh treatment make female students feel the unfavorable masculine atmosphere of the university. The triad of gender oppression – i.e., exploitation, discrimination and violence – is associated with different spaces and times, which increase the severity of sexual oppression. In such situations the boundaries of gender relationship shift. Thus, gender oppression

is like a machine that operates differently in different situations and its operation depends on the degree of violence it produces.

#### 4. Discussion

While in the cultural history of Iran, at least since the Qajar Era, the issue of encounter between men and women in public spaces has always been of importance (Najmabadi, 2005; Papoli Yazdi & Dojam Khoui, 2017; Sadeqi, 2013), in the post-revolutionary Iranian society a new form of governmental cultural policymaking has emerged, in which the state or the government plays a direct role in sexual relationships. Thus, the sexual relationships in the mixed population of the university are under strict Islamic administrative surveillance.

The protection of men-women relationship boundaries have been made into law and breaking it can result in prosecution. At the same time, the formation of mixed populations in public places is one of the serious challenges the Iranian government faces in controlling bodies. In such a setting, universities are the only public space owned by the state where large mixed populations from both genders are present.

In the present article it was shown that the principle of respecting gender relationship boundaries has led to a dual state, which results in gender oppression in the form of exploitation, violence and discrimination. On the one hand, protecting the gender boundaries can prevent female students from establishing scientific and educational relationships with male students. On the other hand, when these boundaries are violated, and the relationship between the professor and student changes its nature into a sexual one, female students will face painful experiences and even violence. Gender oppression has been regarded as the relationship between the dominating male and the dominated female.

When the principle of gender relationship boundaries is closely followed women might be deprived of opportunities to have intimate relationships that pave the way for the development of trust and progress. However, when this principle is abandoned women might enter relationships that can pave the way for sexual abuse. This dual situation of gender oppression is created in the social relationships established at university. These social relationships are not limited to the university environment, and spaces outside university and even virtual spaces can help create such relationships. Yet, female students suffer from an oppression that is characterized by sexuality.

Female students' experiences with encounters with the male professors who try to appear to be respecting the gender relationship boundaries are quite different. Male professors, who are unable to establish a friendly relationship with students, change the professor-student relationship in a way that female students face a lot pressure and stress. Female students are put under a lot pressure by male professors, who use their authority to make them enter relationships outside the professor-student relationship, resulting in violence toward or gender exploitation of the female students. Those professors who put female students in such situations have been referred to as 'red professors' in the present study.

The red professors sometimes turn female students' issues into topics for discussion, putting them in a situation where they can experience verbal violence in the remarks of these professors. The red professors display their authority and status and engulf female students in class and exam sessions by their gaze and suggestive remarks.

Another group of male professors, instead of exposing their authority, rely on friendship and trust to attain their goals. These professors first develop an emotional relationship with the female students and build up trust and thus find a better time and space to extend the professor-student relationship to a sexual relationship. The female student becomes eventually aware of the intentions of the male professor and faces sexual violence.

Overall, based on the data collected and analysed in this study, the gender oppression faced by female students is based on the triad of discrimination, exploitation and violence, resulting in female students'

distrust in cultural and scientific relationships at university, undermined self-confidence, marginalization, and having the feeling of being the superfluous gender at the Iranian university.

Suggestions for future inquiries: Besides qualitative studies, there is a necessary need for quantitative studies in order to have insights regarding the frequency and prevalence of sexual harassment in larger population.

Notes:

1. In Iranian contemporary history, i.e. since the Qajar Era, hijab, a covering for the whole body worn by women in public, has been of great importance (Najmabadi, 2005). In general, hijab signifies female bodies being covered in social relations as necessitated by Islamic teachings (Gould, 2014); however, there are serious contentions as to the Islamic origin of the obligatory nature of hijab (see, for example, Mir-Hosseini, 2007). Yet, hijab is a social issue of great importance in the Islamic culture of Iran, and the everyday life of women is substantially influenced by it. In Iranian culture, it no longer denotes a covering for women's body, but has gradually changed into a principle for dividing the social and cultural space into 'introvert' and 'extrovert' spaces. The introvert space is sacred and strangers cannot enter it, manifestations of which can be seen even in Iranian traditional architecture (Sadoughianzadeh, 2013).

2. Iranian university has a special security guard which is called Herasat. It has two major duties. The first is to control students' divergent behaviors such as smoking, the relation between opposite sex and female students' style of wearing. The security officers stand near the entrance gate of the university and they check female students' wearing. They issue a warning to female students with an unusual dress.

The second duty of the university security guard is to control students' political movements. In this case, they monitor and collect information about student political activists so as to share information with the National Security Agency.

Notes on contributors: Nassereddinali Taghavian is an Iranian native who lives in the capital, Tehran. He has a PhD in philosophy of education from Kharazmi University in Tehran and now works as assistant professor at the department of women studies in Institute for Social and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran. He is also a university lecturer. His interests and fields of studies include higher education, women in Iran's higher education, philosophy and sociology of education, philosophy of language education, and social and political philosophy.

Hamed Taheri Kia is a PhD of Cultural Policy and an assistance professor in the Department of Communication and Virtual Space at the Iranian Institute for Social and Cultural Studies. His fields of research are about digital studies, cultural transformations and post-qualitative methods.

## References

- Amin C M. (2002). *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*. University Press of Florida.
- Arjmand R. (2017). Introduction. In R. Arjmand (Ed.), *Public Urban Space, Gender and Segregation* (pp. 1-15). Routledge.
- Association of American Universities. (2015). AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct. <https://www.aau.edu/key-issues/aau-climate-survey-sexual-assault-and-sexual-misconduct-2015>.
- Bahramitash R, Salehi Esfahani H. (2009). Nimble Fingers No Longer! Women's Employment in Iran. In A. Gheissari (Ed.), *Contemporary Iran* (pp. 77-124). Oxford University Press.
- Bondestam F. (2004). Signing up for the status Quo? Semiological analyses of sexual harassment in higher education: A Swedish Example. *Higher Education in Europe*, (29: 133-145).
- Bounds D, Delaney K R, Julion W, Breitenstein S. (2017). Uncovering indicators of commercial sexual exploitation. *Interpersonal Violence*, (00: 1-17).
- Butler J. (1988). *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. Theatre Journal, (40: 519-531).
- Campbell J C, Sabri B, Budhathoki C, et al. (2017). Unwanted sexual acts among university students: Correlates of victimization and perpetration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (36: 1-23).
- Cantalupo N C, Kidder W C. (2018). A systematic look at a serial problem: Sexual harassment of students by university faculty. *Utah Law Review*, (3: 671-876).
- De Groot J. (2007). *Religion, Culture and Politics in Iran: From the Qajars to Khomeini*. I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- Eyre L. (2000). The discursive framing of sexual harassment in a university community. *Gender and Education*, 12: 293-307.
- Faraji M, Hamidi N. (2016). *Pushesh va hijab-e zanan-e Irani [Iranian women's wearing and veiling]*. Islamic Development Organization.
- Farley L. (1978). *Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job*. McGraw-Hill.
- Fathi M. (2016). Becoming a woman doctor in Iran: the formation of classed and gendered selves. *Gender and Education*, (30: 59-73).
- Gialopsos B M. (2017). Sexual violence in academia: Policy, theory, and prevention considerations. *School Violence*, (16: 141-147).
- Gould R. (2014). Hijab as commodity form: Veiling, unveiling, and misveiling in contemporary Iran. *Feminist Theory*, 15: 221-240.
- Gould R. (2014). Hijab as commodity form: Veiling, unveiling, and misveiling in contemporary Iran. *Feminist Theory*, (15: 221-240).
- Gross A M, Winslett A, Roberts M, Gohm C L. (2006). An examination of sexual violence against college women. *Violence Against Women*, (12(3): 288-300).
- Hardy K. (2018). #MeTooPhD reveals shocking examples of academic sexism. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from [shocking-examples-of-academic-sexism](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/oct/10/me-too-phd-reveals-shocking-examples-of-academic-sexism)
- Hemmati R, Mahdie A. (2019). Iranian PhD students' experiences of their learning environment and scholarly condition: a grounded theory study. *Studies in Higher Education*, (4: 187-208).
- Huerta M, Cortina L M, Pang J S, Torges C. M. (2006). Sex and power in the academy: Modelling sexual harassment in the lives of college women. *PSPB* (32: 616-628)..
- Izadijairan A. (2017). *Khoshunat va ranj dar zendegi-e daneshjuie: Pajuhesh-e ensan shenakhti dar daneshgah-haie Iran. [Harassment and misery in students' life: An anthropological scholar at Iranian universities]*. Iranian center for social and cultural policy.
- Jones SL S, Boocock K, Underhill-Sem Y. (2013). Accessing Information About Sexual Harassment in New Zealand's Universities. *Women's Studies Journal*, (27: 36-48).
- Jordan C E, Combs J L, Smith G T. (2014). An exploration of sexual victimization and academic performance among college women. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, (15: 191-200).
- Joubert P, van Wyk C, Rothmann S. (2011). The incidence of sexual harassment at higher education institutions in South Africa: Perceptions of academic staff. *Acta Academica*, (43: 167-188).
- Joubert P. (2009). *Sexual Harassment of Academic Staff at Higher Education Institutions in South Africa [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]*. University of North-West.

- Kelley M L, ParsonsSource B. (2000). Sexual harassment in the 1990s: A university-wide survey of female faculty, administrators, staff. *The Journal of Higher Education*, (71: 548-568).
- Keshavarz K. (2017). *Masaleh yabi-e daneshjuian-e dokhtar dar daneshgah-haie Iran* [Finding of female students' problems at Iranian universities]. Iranian Centre for Social and Cultural Studies.
- Klein L B, Martin S L. (2019). Sexual harassment of college and university students: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, (Online Publishing: 1-16).
- Lee K, Gizzarone M, Ashton M C. (2003). Personality and the Likelihood to Sexually Harass. *Sex Roles*, (49: 59-69).
- Mackinnon C. (1979). *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*. Yale University Press.
- Mir-Hosseini Z. (2007). The Politics and Hermeneutics of Hijab in Iran: From Confinement to Choice. *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 4.
- Najmabadi A. (2005). *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*. University of California Press.
- Paidar P. (1995). *Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran*. Cambridge University Press.
- Papoli Yazdi L, Dojam Khoui M. (2017). *Bastanshenasi-e siyasat-haie jensi va jensiati* [Archeology of gender and sex politics]. Negah-e-moaser Press.
- Rajaei F. (2007). *Islamism and modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran*. University of Texas press.
- Rezaei A. (2012). Can self-efficacy and self-confidence explain Iranian female students' academic achievement?. *Gender and Education*, (24: 393-409).
- Rezai-Rashti G M. (2015). The politics of gender segregation and women's access to higher education in the Islamic Republic of Iran: the interplay of repression and resistance. *Gender and Education*, (27: 469-486).
- Sadeqi F. (2008). Religious intellectualism, globalization, and social transformation in Iran. In M. Semati (Ed.), *Media, Culture and Society in Iran* (pp. 223-237). Routledge.
- Sadeqi F. (2013). *Jensiati, nationalism, va tajadod garaei* [Gender, nationalism, and modernity in Iran]. Ghasideh sara Press.
- Sadoughianzadeh M. (2013). Gender Structure and Spatial Organization: Iranian Traditional Spaces. *Sage Open*, (3: 1-12).
- Schuster I, Krahé B. (2018). Predictors of sexual aggression perpetration among male and female college students: Cross-cultural evidence from Chile and Turkey. *Sexual Abuse*, (3: 318-343).
- Sedghi H. (2007). *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shumba A, Matina A E M. (2002). Sexual Harassment of College Students by Lecturers in Zimbabwe. *Sex Education*, (2: 45-59).
- Spencer C, Mallory A, Toews M, et al. (2017). Why sexual assault survivors do not report to universities: A feminist analysis. *Family Relations* (66: 166-179).
- Sulaiman A. (2015). Exploring the Pattern of Sexual Harassment in Lagos State Higher Institutions: A Structural Model. *Pendidikan Malaysia*, (40: 13-19).
- Tafei A. (2017). Barresi va Tahlil-e ejtemaie revaiat-haye azare jensi-e daneshjuiane dokhtar tavassote asatid-e daneshgah. [An analyzing of social narratives of students sexual harassment by professors of universities]. Telegram. Retrieved August 27.
- Taiwo M O, Omole O C, Omole O E. (2014). Sexual Harassment and Psychological Consequence among Students in Higher Education Institution in Osun State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Applied Psychology*, (4: 13-18).
- The office of consulting and health of the organization of students' affairs. (2015). *Tarh-e meli-e sanjesh-e simai-e zendigi-e daneshjouian* [The national plan to assess student's life quality]. The office of consulting and health of the organization of students' affairs press.
- Vandana A. (2020). Dalit girls and sexual harassment in the university. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, (27: 33-54).