

Article

It Is All in Their Positioning: Academic Women's Silence in Iran

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Keywords: Iran, academic women, silence, positioning theory, gender

<https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.34634>

AIB Insights

Vol. 22, Issue 3, 2022

From a gender perspective, Iran is an unequal country, ranking 150 out of 156 in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Survey. We examine women's silence in an academic setting in Iran using positioning theory to understand discursive practices that contribute to women's silence. We argue that women's silence in Iran is regularly reinforced with storylines that impact upon, and constrain, women's sense of self on an interpersonal and individual level. These storylines emanate from the macro, meso and organizational environments. We provide recommendations to local and international organizations operating in Iran that are conducive for creating new storylines to reduce women's silence.

INTRODUCTION

Women face inequality throughout the world (Mezias, Newbury, & Budde-Sung, 2019), but especially in Iran. The World Economic Forum's (2021) Global Gender Gap survey reveals that Iran ranks 150 out of 156 countries in terms of gender equality, suggesting inequality for women is high. There are a multitude of factors contributing to this inequality stemming from the context of Iran, including unjust and discriminatory laws, the strong influence of the patriarchal interpretation of the Islamic religion, and cultural values that strongly position women as being the caretaker of the family. This virtuous burden creates the storyline¹ that women are less suited for professional, managerial or leadership roles. This contributes to women facing inequality in the workplace including a lack of participation in managerial or leadership positions, disrespect for women in the workforce, and a raft of injustices at the micro, meso and macro levels. As a result of the multiple storylines positioning women in disempowered positions, women are regularly silenced or become silent.

In this paper we consider academic women's silence in a university in Iran using positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). Firstly, we provide the context for women in Iran in relation to other Middle Eastern countries. Then we explain positioning theory, which we use to understand how women are positioned to be silent or become silenced by others. Fi-

nally, we provide recommendations for organizations, both local and international, that are operating in Iran on how they can contribute to creating new storylines for reducing women's silence.

THE CONTEXT OF IRAN IN RELATION TO OTHER MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES

According to the Global Gender Gap survey women face a lack of equality in the Middle Eastern region generally including Iran. [Table 1](#) indicates Middle Eastern countries share the same religion, that being Islam, and most countries have a similar score for gender parity ranging from Yemen being 0.492, to Jordan being 0.638. The outlier country in the Middle East is the United Arab Emirates, known for its 'western orientations' with it being ranked 72 out of 156 countries and having a gender parity of 0.716, which is greater than all other Middle Eastern countries. Middle Eastern countries have close to parity in terms of education, meaning that men and women equally access education. Unfortunately, this parity does not translate into economic or political participation. Murray & Zhang-Zhang (2018) specify that whilst women in Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) are encouraged to get educated, factors including cultural stereotypes, unfavourable laws and discrimination in the workplace, prevent women from being employed resulting in a lack of economic parity. Iran the focus of our pa-

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¹ A storyline is a term used by Davies & Harré (1990) to explain a person's position in life. I.e. when one takes up a position, for instance, a female, or male, they will use storylines to explain their position in life.

Table 1. Gender equality of Middle Eastern countries and Iran

	Dominant religion ¹	Equality rank out of 156 ²	Gender parity ²	EconomicParticipation ²	Political Participation ²	Educational Attainment ²
United Arab Emirates	Muslim	72	0.716	0.510	0.403	0.987
Jordan	Muslim	131	0.638	0.533	0.066	0.991
Lebanon	Muslim	132	0.638	0.487	0.129	0.964
Bahrain	Muslim	137	0.632	0.518	0.066	0.985
Oman	Muslim	145	0.608	0.453	0.041	0.977
Saudi Arabia	Muslim	147	0.603	0.390	0.077	0.980
Iran	Muslim	150	0.582	0.375	0.036	0.953
Syria	Muslim	152	0.568	0.285	0.067	0.953
Iraq	Muslim	154	0.535	0.228	0.136	0.807
Yemen	Muslim	155	0.492	0.282	0.001	0.717

1. Sourced from the globaledege.msu.edu/global-insights/country.

2. Sourced from the World Economic Forum 2021 Global Gender Gap Survey

per is one of least gender equal countries in the Middle East scoring 0.582 in overall parity. Iran follows the trend of the other Middle Eastern countries in respect to parity in educational attainment, but a lack of parity in economic participation. This similarity in context amongst most Middle Eastern countries, suggests that our findings presented below may be relevant to these countries.

Country context can have a profound effect on the role of gender in business (Franzke & Froese, 2019). Women in Iran face inequity due to a patriarchal culture, society and interpretation of Islam dominant in the country along with unequal laws pertaining to women's rights and agency. Previous research indicates that 20% of the workforce are female, including in the university sector, and women's salary is only 18% of men's (Beyerle, 2008), suggesting bias and discrimination against women influencing their participation in the workforce.

Iran is a Muslim country which is governed by *Sharia* law informed by Islam. Whilst the laws are not explicitly anti-women, there are instances where women's freedom and agency to make decisions about their lives is taken away. For example, a husband must give permission to a woman to get a passport or to travel overseas or to work in a particular profession, and a man has the right to divorce his wife, but a woman has no such right. These behaviors put women at a disadvantage in society as well as in the workforce (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Rezai-Rashti, 2015). Iran follows a very traditional culture which places a strong importance on the family and distinct roles of men and women in a family; women's primary role is designated as being a mother, wife and caretaker of the family. This conflicts with the role of being a worker, professional, academic, manager or leader. There is a deep rooted tradition of authoritarianism in Iran which is demonstrated by a high score on power distance in the GLOBE study (5.43) (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). This, coupled with a low score on gender egalitarianism of 2.99, suggests a male-dominated and patriarchal society (GLOBE, 2004). Iranians avoid direct com-

munication and conflict preferring to use vague and indirect language (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003), which promotes confirmatory thinking and may further hinder expression of progressive ideas, exacerbating women's silence. These macro factors cumulatively position women to refrain from speaking up.

POSITIONING THEORY AND WOMEN'S SILENCE

To provide insights into women's silence we utilise positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), which is about rights and duties that different people have according to their position in life and social settings; not everyone has the same rights and duties, especially women, who tend to have less rights, and more duties. A position determines the communication modes that people can use. An individual's understanding of their social identity, their world and place within it is discursively created, and this discourse emanates from political, cultural and social contexts. A person's position is based on (a) their first-order positioning, which is how people initially position themselves without any influence from the external environment (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991), (b) second-order positioning which is what a person is forbidden or permitted to do by others (Harré, 2016), and (c) positions that determine people's behaviour informed by how they perceive their beliefs, rights, duties and obligations (Van Langenhove, 2020). As a result, (c) is the interaction between (a) and (b). Therefore, a person's behavioural positioning is influenced by their first-order and second-order positioning. We represent this in [Figure 1](#).

WOMEN'S SILENCE IN IRAN

Based on 20 semi-structured interviews with women (15) and men (5) conducted at an Iranian university by the first author, we provide insights into how women are being si-

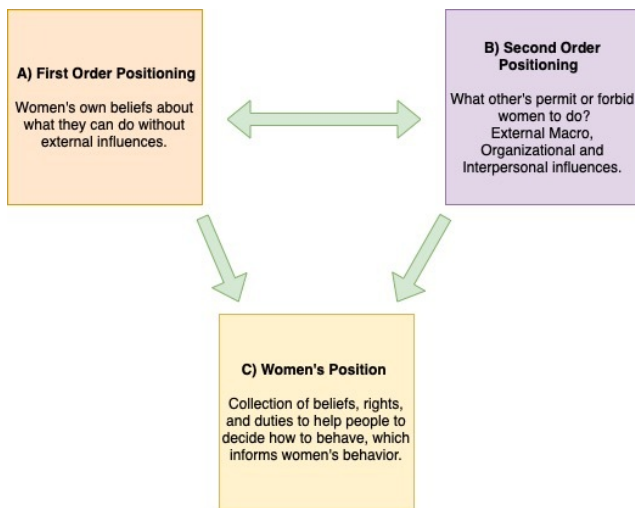


Figure 1. Women's positioning in Iran

lenced. The women interviewed had mainly more junior level or less powerful positions academically (i.e., lecturer, assistant professor) and managerially (i.e., office manager). The men interviewed held more senior and powerful positions such as heads of departments or senior managers at the University. The women interviewed for the study were on average 50 years old, whilst the men were on average 45 years old. Interviews were conducted in Farsi, and then translated to English by the first author, and then checked by the fourth author. The University has an international orientation, as it encourages staff to publish in international journals, collaborate with international academics, including having sabbaticals in foreign countries, and it has international students. The international orientation of the university makes the findings relevant for international organizations that are operating within, or from Iran. Ghorbani and Tung (2007) make similar arguments in their study around the applicability of their findings to multinationals operating in Iran.

FIRST-ORDER POSITIONING

For women's first-order positioning, women reported their fear of speaking, and how they lacked confidence and self-esteem to speak. Ghorbani and Tung (2007) also report that women in Iran lacked self-confidence. Their internal voices also indicated that they preferred to avoid conflict and arguments as reflected in the following quote by a female participant: "A woman does not dare to comment, and she cannot say 'I disagree'. She is ashamed to speak. Women are shy or dare not argue, because it is not in their nature to do so."

Women reported that they were socialised to behave this way, deferring to the authority of males, including men in the family. This developed in them and acceptance of their subordinate position in the society. Women reported they internally silenced themselves, because they feared retribution from male colleagues, and that speaking up could have 'consequences', for their performance appraisal or survival at the University. A similar finding was reported by Aiston & Fo (2021) that women in Hong Kong universities use self-silencing as a strategy to get ahead in their careers. These

findings indicate the women's first-order positioning influences them to be silent (Davies & Harré, 1990).

SECOND-ORDER POSITIONING: WHAT OTHERS PERMIT WOMEN TO DO

For second-order positioning it is apparent that the external context, occurring at the macro, organizational and interpersonal level had potent effects on silencing women. From a macro perspective we found that religion, laws and culture had a cumulative effect on silencing women. Several participants noted that the patriarchal interpretation of Islam (Murray & Zhang-Zhang, 2018) expected women to keep silent. For example, a female participant reported that she felt uncomfortable speaking to a man "because under Islam looking at a man could be seen as sinful". Another woman participant reflected on how laws in Iran do not outrightly support women, as there is no equal opportunity or sexual harassment law in place. Even if there were laws in place, participants noted that "culturally laws weren't implemented." The strong impact of culture in Iran, positioned women as caregivers first, wife second, and worker third, which is similar to other GCCs (Murray & Zhang-Zhang, 2018). We found evidence of women being positioned as inferior to men, for example, "women's testimony in a court of law is worth half or a third of men's", thus devaluing women's voices.

The organizational environment of the university was male dominated where men were in positions of power and decision making and women were subordinated to lower-level management or academic positions. Women were seldom given any senior management positions which can be explained by Acker's (1990) gendered theory of organizations. This status quo was further legitimized by a male participant who explained, "there is a cultural reason for why universities in Iran have never had a female president". We found that women were silenced due to the power and control men had in the organization, and the strong bureaucratic rules that existed in the organization (Acker, 1990).

At an interpersonal level, it was found that women were often excluded from male decision-making, informal communication and discussion. This finding is consistent with Ghorbani and Tung's (2007) reporting of the existence of the 'old boys' network' in Iran. A woman reported that she found it pointless to contribute to organizational decision making because in her mind, decisions were already made informally before a formal meeting occurred. In addition to exclusion, women experienced harassment, and ridicule from male colleagues, and there were descriptions of the organization being a "violent system which is not suitable for women." The cumulative influence of these exclusive and abusive discursive practices, put women in a subordinate position where they feel excluded and threatened, limiting their ability to speak.

SILENT POSITIONING OF WOMEN

With women's own internal views of themselves inhibiting them from speaking, along with the discursive practices emanating from the external environment further hindering them from speaking out, women regularly position

themselves and are positioned to remain silent. Some indicative quotations of women's silent position include:

Women who are introverted have two things in common. One is the status of women as well as the supportive environment. If the two collide, that is, a woman is completely introverted and the environment does not support her, the two can lead to silence.

or

Given women's background, they have either learned to be silent, or the environment does not allow them to speak.

FUTURE PROSPECTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL AND MULTINATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN IRAN: CHANGING WOMEN'S POSITIONING

The gap between the goals of seeking gender equality and reality is still distant (Budde-Sung, Bullough, Kalafatogulu, & Moore, 2019). Nonetheless, in our study, we did find new, promising storylines emerging from the observations made by female and male participants for example a male participant observed that "*the traditions of the past have faded*" which was the result of increased education of females in Iran. A similar observation was made by Ghorbani and Tung (2007) who concluded that the values towards women in the workforce in Iran were changing and becoming supportive. To move women's position from being silent to voiced, we argue that both internal and external discursive practices need to change. Informed by optimistic storylines emanating from the participants of our study (that is from the interviewees), the following is suggested to change women's position from silent to voiced within organizations in Iran, both locally and internationally:

FIRST-ORDER POSITIONING

- Develop empowerment training for women to improve confidence.
- Form and develop women's groups/unions to support each other to build confidence and progress women's equality.

SECOND-ORDER POSITIONING

Interpersonal:

- Create training for men to change their attitudes towards women in the workplace.
- Incentivize men to contribute to care-giving responsibilities at home.

Organizational:

- Implement affirmative action to increase the number of women in the organization and in management.
- Implement Work-Life Balance policies so women can balance home and work responsibilities.

Whilst these recommendations maybe a tall order, especially in a patriarchal country such as Iran, having more women participating in the workforce and leadership roles, will allow the economy to be more productive by untapping underutilized human resources (Murray & Zhang-Zhang, 2018). In addition, this gives women in Iran better human rights, including the human right to work and have a family, free of harassment, discrimination and inequality.

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Submitted: October 14, 2021 EDT, Accepted: March 31, 2022 EDT



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