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What Does It Mean to Be a Woman? An Exploratory Study of Femininities among Mazandarani, Azeri and Kurdish Female University Students in Iran

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Abstract: This exploratory study investigated women's perceptions of femininity among Mazandarani, Azeri and Kurdish female university students in Iran. The study was conducted using interviews with sixteen female university students. Analysis of interviews revealed that three main components predicted general understandings of the concept of femininity: personality traits such as emotionality and dependency, engaging in domestic and caregiving activities in private spaces, and beauty and sexual competition as intrinsic feminine attributes. There was also a general tendency among participants to approach femininity from metaphysical and biological essentialist approaches. Based on the extracted components and interviewees' articulation of the concept, four types of femininity were recognized: passive, traditional, independent and active. Passive femininity was observed among Azeri and Kurdish students; traditional and independent types existed among students of all three groups and active femininity was observed in the Mazandarani students group. Findings suggest that despite the persisting traditional perceptions and despite differences between student groups, the traditional perceptions of femininity have undergone great transformations in all groups of university students, and the traditional model has been widely re-conceptualized. Based on results, we discuss that it is more accurate to speak of femininities, rather than femininity as a singular and homogeneous concept.

Keywords: essentialism; ethnic group; femininity; gender; intersectionality; Iran

1. Introduction

Femininity is not merely a psychologically or biologically defined attribute. Despite the significance of biological and psychological mechanisms in the formation of gender, it is important to define it as a non-essentialist concept formed through socio-cultural processes. Margaret Mead was one of the prominent anthropologists who questioned the essentialist understanding of gender attributes. In her pioneering work, she indicated that modern perceptions of femininity and masculinity were not generalizable concepts (Kotak 2007, p. 621); the idea that femininity is based on both sex and gender, is against essentialist approaches, which define it as a biological matter, and take it for muliebrity (Qarakhani 2007, p. 75). Anthropologists have long discussed that femininity is rooted in an intricate system of socio-cultural contexts rather than mere psycho-biological factors (Borgata and Montgomery 2000).

General understandings of femininity have formed around biological roles such as giving birth and breastfeeding consecrated by a halo of cultural norms. As anthropologist Rosaldo (1974) suggested, women's roles have long been affected, but not defined by their sexual functions. Garrett (1987) has also discussed that femininity is considered a package of roles and responsibilities related to the biological sex, and concepts that form around these functions such as motherhood, marriage and child

rearing. She also suggested that these ideas about women, falsely depicted them as beings that were unable to live on their own and relied on men to support them (Garrett 1987, p. 44). These ideas have formed in social contexts that gave a greater cultural value to masculinity.

Ethnic group, as an important factor that affects identity formation and sense of belonging, is considered a significant factor in shaping perceptions on cultural values such as sexuality. It has been suggested that ideas that are rooted in the history of an ethnic group, including understanding about sexuality, strongly resist change (Hoseinzade et al. 2000).

Although the strong relationship between gender and ethnicity has been discussed in feminist literature (i.e., Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2005), there is not a vigorous body of literature on the relationship between gender and ethnic identity in Iran; but the significance of ethnic group in defining gender roles and beliefs has been mentioned and acknowledged in existing studies (i.e., Taleb and Goudarzi 2004; Abedi et al. 2015). Ethnic group affiliation also provides a bedrock for nurturing children with the prevalent gender ideology by providing repertoires of emotional bonds and role models in the cultural history of the group. The preferred and valued life trajectories are internalized and deviation from these defined courses can be subject to criticism or hindered by traditional social forces. Some studies in Iran show that ethnic identity was reinforced rather than weakened when it confronted the contemporary globalization forces (Jalayipour and Ghanbari 2009; Ahmadipour et al. 2012). Some other studies have reported that customs have undergone change and have sometimes weakened in some groups (Mohammadpour et al. 2009).

Understanding ethnic groups differences in approaching the concept of femininity is the main scope of this study. In Iran, although studies have been conducted on ethnic differences in birth giving rate, divorce, women's rate of occupation, family or gendered violence, women's literacy rate and gender discrimination with a mostly quantitative basis (Sadeghi 2003; Kazemipour 2004; Abedi et al. 2015), a qualitative study of different perceptions of femininity and the relation between gender and ethnic group is missing in the literature.

This article focuses on exploring the definition and analogy of the concept of femininity among female university students belonging to three major ethnic groups in Iran, namely Azeri, Kurdish and Mazandarani. To do so, we qualitatively explore perceptions of femininity held by women in all three ethnic groups; then, we illustrate typologies of femininity in the three groups and finally, investigate differences in the definition of femininity in these three Iranian groups.

2. Research Background

While there are studies that use the concept of femininity in the Iranian context (Qarakhani 2007; Zokaei and Qarakhani 2007; Isazadegan et al. 2013), femininity has been mostly approached as a homogeneous concept without taking intersectionality or ethnic diversities into account. Iran is home to Persian (50%), Azeri (24%), Mazandarani and Gilaki (8%), Kurdish (7%), Arab (3%) ethnic groups and some non-Persian, non-Turkic groups such as Armenians, Assyrians and Georgians, as well as three million Afghan and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi migrants and refugees (Rashidvash 2013; Kia 2006). This huge diversity brings about differences in cultural perceptions of social concepts and roles, including gender-based roles and concepts. This study's contribution is thus both methodological and thematic.

Research literature on gender ideology and ethnic groups in Iran has mostly been conducted on sexual and gendered attitudes and behaviors in Iranian ethnic groups. Most of these studies were conducted using quantitative methods and focused on birth rate, onset and average age of marriage, and other life-course demographic indexes. For example, Sadeghi (2003) has indicated that women in different Iranian ethnic groups hold different beliefs about ideal number of children, marriage and gender equality. Kazemipour (2004) has studied the relationship between ethnicity and age of marriage. He has shown that in 2002 in Iran, Baloch ethnic group had the lowest average age for marriage (20.8 for women and 23.9 for men). Among Azeri, Kurdish and Mazandarani, the Azeri have

the lowest and the Mazandarani have the highest average marriage age. [Taleb and Goudarzi \(2004\)](#) have also studied Baloch ethnic group and have reported that there is a gender gap in education in this group and that 56% of adult Baloch population are against women's occupation in public jobs and believe that women must adopt traditionally praised gender roles such as mothering and housekeeping. Baloch women have the highest rate of birth giving among all Iranian ethnic groups. There have been other reports on ethnic differences of marriage norms and child birth ([Abbasi and Sadeghi 2005, 2006](#)). [Abbasi and Torabi \(2006\)](#) have indicated ethnic group is a significant factor affecting the tendency to practice endogamy. Their study has illustrated that the Kurdish are more inclined to endogamy than other Iranian ethnic groups.

Some studies have also indicated that there are differences in terms of prevalence and forms of violence against women in different ethnic groups. Shahabadi and Amini (cited in [Mohammadpour et al. 2009](#)) have reported Azeris as the ethnic group with the most prevalence of violence against women. There is also evidence that the traditional ethnic beliefs and attitudes are gradually changing; consequently, traditional forms of marriage such as imposed and arranged marriage of girls have been fading ([Mohammadpour et al. 2009](#)).

There is also international literature discussing perceptions of gender and the relation to ethnic beliefs in other contexts. [Alesina et al. \(2010\)](#) mentioned the relation between ethnic group and sexuality, and explained the existence of different gender ideologies among ethnic groups by referring to the economic and ecological factors ([Alesina et al. 2010, 2011](#)).

The ideologies at the intersection of gender and ethnic group are not only shaped by the ethnic group's internal dynamics, but are also affected by external factors. In a study in the United States, [Harris-Perry \(2011\)](#) has reported that stigmatizing adjectives are used against African-American women as an indication of existing ethnic and gender discriminatory stereotyping; in this regard, characteristics such as 'sexual lasciviousness', 'devotion' and 'indignation' are attributed to this group. [Morey and Yaqin \(2011\)](#) have discussed gender clichés that target Muslim women in the United Kingdom and the United States. Though these gender clichés are countered by public and academic resistance (i.e., Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw as prominent figures in the academia), they remain globally existent.

3. Research Method

This article is conducted by an exploratory research approach. Exploratory research is conducted when there is no substantial background data on a specific topic. Exploratory research, as in grounded theory, is not based on some predetermined theoretical frameworks that guide the process of analysis. It is open to conceptualizations based on what the researchers encounter during the research process.

Data for this research was gathered by semi-structured interviews conducted in 2014 in the city of Babolsar, in Iran. Interviewees who self-identified as belonging to one of the three ethnic groups were chosen by targeted sampling among female university students residing in single-sex university dormitories. The researchers of the study were from different ethnic origins but did not self-identify during the interviews. Interviews were conducted in dormitory rooms or in the dormitory areas. Interviewees' ages ranged between nineteen and twenty-two. The average age was twenty. Respondents were from three different ethnic groups including Azeri ($n = 5$), Kurdish ($n = 5$) and Mazandarani ($n = 6$). Interviews' average duration was approximately an hour. A combination of open and semi-structured questions was used to encourage respondents to share their ideas on the concept of 'femininity' using their own life experiences. Student dormitory was chosen for sampling because it offered the possibility and ease of sampling from different ethnic groups. Students residing in this dormitory came from different regions of the country with diverse ethnic populations.

Before starting the interviews, respondents were informed about the project's goals and research focus and topic. They were assured of the confidentiality of the interview process, and their personal information. All interviewees were given pseudo-names. Interviews were conducted in Farsi; from which, extracts were then translated into English by the lead researcher. Analysis has been conducted

using manual coding. Patterns, emphasized and repeated concepts were extracted, and common classes were recognized in the transcriptions. Common classes are components generally existing in a cultural context and legitimately used by members of the cultural group for characterizing people, things and events. Most people use these components subconsciously for thinking and categorizing realities (Safiri 2009). Results are reported in the form of a typology of the concept of femininity and its relation to women's ethnic affiliation.

The findings of this qualitative study are not considered as representative of the general Iranian female population; but rather an exploration of possible diversities in the perceptions of femininity among young educated Iranian women. It is noteworthy that the participants' access to university education, as well as their opportunity to reside away from their parents and male guardians might have triggered shifts in their perceptions of gender norms and concepts. The findings of this research are thus skewed towards the population of young Iranian women who enjoy higher education, and a relative relaxation of gendered social norms.

4. Components of Femininity

4.1. Feminine Spaces and Roles

Gendered roles are practices expected from people merely because of their gender (Eagly 1987). Gendered division of labour has been an essential prerequisite of formation of gender relations (Walby 2001). Roles such as taking care of children and the elderly, and keeping peace in the family have been widely considered feminine (Ferrant et al. 2014; OHCHR 2016). In the patriarchal traditional division of labour in Iran, women were expected to be in carer roles rather than work as providers for the family. They were expected to adapt to their societies' expectations reflected in their husbands' demands. They provided services for their families, while organizing the household and easing the way for a better family environment (Ezazi 2006).

This study's respondents' approaches towards this traditional division of labour widely varied, but most of the respondents related private space activities to women's roles and public sphere activities to men. Samira a Kurdish respondent explained:

Among us [the Kurdish] working outside home is considered a male activity. It is not bad for women to work outside home but their main duty is to take care of the house chores.

In the case of working women, their job was not considered the primary breadwinning activity, as explained by Ronak, a Kurdish interviewee:

I think women are not the primary breadwinners of the family, even if they are working and have a career. I know women who hand in their wages to their husbands each month. They do not even have enough independence to decide about their own salary.

Yalda, an Azeri interviewee explained:

Women help in earning a living while men help in raising the children. Among us [the Azeri] usually caregiving men are very rare. There are more of them in new generations but still much less than women.

That men's work at home was referred to as 'help' indicated a perceived legitimized gendered division of labour; while a man working at home was considered a good and modern man (hence the reference to the generation) because he helped, he could legitimately skip doing the housework. (Rastegarkhaled 2006) has reported that 60% of working women in Tehran were not happy with working outside home and did not recognize working outside the house as a feminine task. He has also reported that 77% of his sample did not get any help from their husbands in doing the house chores. This finding indicated that despite the changing position of women as workers in the public space, the traditional idea that women belonged to the private space (Fakouhi 2005, p. 238) was still prevalent.

As Yalda pointed out in the previous quote, she saw a gap between the generations and signs of changing gender relations; but most respondents believed that the changes have not been considerable. Sahra (Kurdish respondent) explained:

As much as I have witnessed, no, men do not take care of children in my surroundings ... my brother is acting like my father with his own children now. Boys learn from their fathers, and these attitudes continue to exist.

There is evidence that in some areas, especially in rural regions, working outside home is not considered a gendered activity, while working inside the house is; so, women have dual functions as caregivers and breadwinners. In rural areas, because of the vicinity of the work and the living spaces, women adopt working roles alongside their housekeeping activities without getting similar help from men in household chores (Rastegarkhaled 2006, p. 34). Azade (a Mazandarani respondent) pointed out:

In Mazandaran [province] cities men work outside and women at home, but in rural areas [in Mazandaran] men and women work outside together and women also take care of the house chores.

The difference that Azade mentioned between rural and urban areas is backed by a few studies that show women in rural areas have more economic participation than their counterparts in urban areas (Donyaye Eghtesad 2014; Tabnak 2015), but there is not substantial literature that has explored relative ethnic and geographical differences. There was a general perception of women as caregivers traceable among all our participants. Azeri and Kurdish respondents attributed caregiving activities to women, while some Mazandarani interviewees believed that both men and women were responsible for earning money, while women should oversee most house chores and domestic activities.

4.2. Female Personality and Characteristics

Gendered clichés are common beliefs among people that attribute different mental and personality characteristics to men and women (Spence and Helmreich 1978); for example, women are usually labeled as having a higher tendency to extroversion (Weisberg et al. 2011). Such clichés are commonly accepted as reality. Williams and Best (cited in Khamse 2007, p. 122) have reported that adjectives such as ‘sentimental’, ‘dependent’, ‘sensitive’ and ‘emotional’ are usually ascribed to women.

It was a commonly held opinion among our respondents that ‘women are more emotional’. Interviewees did not necessarily think of women’s sentimentality as an indication of weakness in their character, but sometimes as an advantage. Sara, an Azeri interviewee noted that:

When it comes to sentiments and emotions women are superior to [men], as in affection towards one’s children, it is higher in women than it is in men.

The gendered attribution of adjectives was beyond the emotional-logical duality. Adjectives such as ‘diversity seeking’, ‘profit seeking’ and ‘unfaithful’ were perceived as male and ‘dependence’ was considered a female characteristic. Elnaz, an Azeri interviewee explained:

Men and women are different ... Men evaluate their situation better than women and seek the most profitable situations.

Laya, another Azeri interviewee, explained the differences between men and women’s mentality by referring to her religious beliefs:

Women are more compassionate. They are kinder and calmer. They are different from men. There are Hadith [religious teachings by the prophet or his disciples] which say in some cases women’s characteristics should be opposite to those of men’s.

Anti-essentialist and egalitarian ideas were also existent among our respondents. Some interviewees questioned the dualities attributed to men and women, and saw more similarities than differences between genders. Roya, a Kurdish interviewee said:

I think there are not very fundamental differences. Men just learn not to show their emotions because if so, their masculinity will be jeopardized; otherwise there are not so many great differences.

Azeri respondents all agreed in the essence of gendered mental clichés. They held this essentialist idea that built-in gendered mental differences existed. In the Kurdish group, some respondents related the existing differences to different processes of socialization for men and women, and explained it in social terms, while others considered the differences as natural or as facts. Most Mazandarani respondents believed in the essential gendered mental differences of men and women, while some respondents questioned the common gendered ideology based on patriarchal understanding of different gendered attributes.

4.3. Feminine Beauty and Competition

Internationally, [Wolf \(2002\)](#) among others (from early feminists such as [Wollstonecraft 1796](#) to later studies such as [Davis 1994](#); [Hollows 2000](#); [Jeffreys 2005](#))) have discussed that the current aesthetics of female beauty are socially constructed. Studies in Iran have shown that women care more about their appearance than men ([Rezaei et al. 2010](#), p. 11). Beauty is an important part of Iranian women's everyday life. Enacted dress codes, including regulations that enforce head and full body covering, the patriarchal system of the society, and the globalized mass media's portrayal of women have all affected Iranian women's tendencies to undergo body modification and beauty practices ([Sadrnabavi and Fooladian 2014](#)), to attain standards of feminine beauty, and marriageability ([Motamedi et al. 2016](#)).

Findings of our study showed that 'beauty' as a concept was perceived to be essentially of a feminine nature. Maryam (a Mazandarani respondent) gave examples from nature to prove that among the human beings, opposite to animals, feminine beauty served different social and biological purposes. There was a general perceived difference between what was considered the natural beauty (with which one is born), and what was called the 'artificial' beauty (that could be created by cosmetic interventions). The latter was looked down upon by some of the participants and justified by others, while the former was considered an intrinsic part to the state of being feminine. The idea of female beauty was linked to other concepts such as 'delicacy' by the respondents. As well as natural beauty, 'artificial' beauty or the socially constructed processes of beautification and body management were also considered feminine. Most forms of body management were attributed to femininity. As Zahra (Mazandarani respondent) explained:

Women are created in a way that they get more beautiful by arranging eyebrows or having plastic surgeries, but men look uglier by doing the same things.

Besides this common idea of femininity and beauty, there were other respondents who believed that perception of beauty was relative to one's sex. 'Men are beautiful in women's eyes and vice versa', said Roya (a Kurdish interviewee). Considering beauty as a feminine characteristic was universally accepted among Azeri respondents. Four Kurdish and four Mazandarani respondents also believed that beauty was a feminine characteristic.

Among some of our participants, there was an understanding that women's practice of beauty was a result of men's tendency to seek diversity, and a male natural urge to unfaithfulness (discussed also in the previous section). As such, women practiced beauty to maintain the interest of their husbands.

Some interviewees expressed their disgust over men's unfaithfulness and practice of polygamy; however, two interviewees spoke in favor of polygamy. A Kurdish respondent believed that if man were 'just' and provided equal services to all the wives, polygamy was not inherently harmful. Laya, an Azari interviewee also shared her point of view on polygamy:

In special cases like when the first wife is either indifferent or sick and does not satisfy the man's needs [I agree with polygamy] . . . I think a man who keeps his first wife is better than a man who leaves her and goes after another woman.

Referring to beauty as a tool to compete with other women was not general among our interviewees. One Mazandarani respondent, two Kurdish interviewees and three Azeri interviewees mentioned competition or conflict among women as an inseparable aspect of women's life experience. 'Men are naturally unfaithful', stated Fateme, a Mazandarani respondent, to explain why it was necessary for women to do the effort to always look the best they could to stay competitive.

It has been claimed that women recede from all competitive activities in patriarchal societies (Müller and Schwieren 2011) except sexual competition. Other forms of competition, in such societies, have been claimed to be of a masculine nature. Some studies on women's relations show that women evaluate other women in regard with their beauty and attraction, and in cases where they evaluate others superior to themselves, they adopt negative attitudes and mentality towards them (Joseph 1985). This kind of competition, if existent, could be the result of monopolizing the ability of choosing one's partner and other social resources by men in traditional patriarchal societies. This kind of analysis interprets women's activities, such as beauty practices, as being conducted solely for getting attention from men, while studies show otherwise. In Iran, beauty practices are used not only to appeal to the opposite sex, but also for entertainment, for performative and creative means of expression that use 'body as a canvas' (Jafari and Maclaran 2014).

5. Discussion

Femininities in Iranian Ethnic Groups

Of the broad range of topics and concepts discussed by the respondents of this study, sixteen female university students from three Iranian ethnic groups, were reduced and classified in to significant patterns. Common classes were identified from the components of femininity addressed by the sample population of young female university students.

The extracted typologies of femininity were extracted as follows:

Passive femininity was classified as a perception of femininity that included all traditionally constructed components. In this view, femininity was defined by caregiving roles and activities in the private sphere; personality traits within this classification included obedience and emotionality; this class was also perceived to be connected to the idea of beauty as an intrinsically feminine attribute in its behavioral aspects.

Traditional femininity was classified as a perception of femininity that included patriarchal traditional rules predicted for women such as engaging in care giving roles and activities, and working in the private sphere, as well as personality traits such as emotionality. This perception however, did not include the idea of beauty-delicacy as an intrinsic natural feminine characteristic. Driven by traditional and religious standpoints, this class rejected pursuing 'artificial' beauty ideals and emphasized femininity as a personality trait and a socio-cultural role.

Independent femininity was identified by the positive value given to women's economic independence. Despite accepting that women were the main caregivers of the family and accepting the stereotypes of good motherhood, this perception depicted femininity not merely in terms of its dependence to domestic roles. This view however, did not question other traditional ideas such as femininity as a natural trait and beauty as a merely feminine attribute.

Active femininity questioned the dominant ideologies about femininity and masculinity in an active way and adopted a new approach towards the concept of gender. In this class, there were not prominent differences seen in role-taking among men and women. Existing differences were thus considered a result of socio-historical factors, rather than natural and essential differences between men and women.

Among our interviewees, the most prevalent type of femininity was *passive femininity*, characterized by accepting the dominant patriarchal ideologies about women's roles, attitudes and social responsibility. Active femininity was rarely detected. Only one interview in the Mazandarani group belonged to this class.

Gender *essentialism* that has been a prevalent idea in a large part of human history, was observed as powerfully guiding the opinions of our respondents. This ideology has asserted that men and women have essentially different creations and therefore are two essentially different beings. This idea had several branches; such as the *metaphysical essentialism* that believed in distinction of sexes based on non-material differences, and *physical essentialism* which claimed that biology played the prominent role in the separation of the two sexes (Witt 1995), and its social consequences. Despite losing its dominant position in the academic knowledge at least in the physical-biological sense, the essentialist ideology is still influential. In our interviews, in a literal analysis, multiple usages and repetitions of Farsi terms that were synonyms of the English word ‘essence’, and other similar words such as ‘nature’ and ‘creation’ that implied an essential understanding by the respondents of this study, were evidence to essentialist perception of gender. Analysing interviews showed that respondents used ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ ($n = 5$ in all interviews), ‘created’ and ‘creation’ ($n = 5$ in all interviews), and ‘essence’ and ‘essentially’ ($n = 5$ in all interviews) while referring to male and female characteristics. Both metaphysical and physical essentialism were observed in our interviews. Some respondents believed that genetics, bodily-genitalia functions, and physical differences played the most important part in explaining different attitudes and behaviors of men and women; while others referred to the metaphysical, psychological aspects and sometimes used religious connotations for different essences of creation.

It is also important to note the centrality of ‘motherhood’ as a defining factor in determining what femininity was. The participants made references to motherhood; they pointed out the importance of motherhood, the relationship between the mother and children, and the mothers’ care for their children, when responding to questions about femininity. Femininity was thus seen as a strong correlation with motherhood and caregiving. This was observed by other studies that suggested the relation was so strong that most people could not imagine a possible form of femininity without motherhood (DiQuinzio 1999, p. 55). Analysing interviews showed that respondents used the words ‘mother’ and ‘motherhood’ ($n = 20$ in all interviews), ‘child’ and ‘children’, ‘kids’, ‘child rearing’, ‘baby’ and ‘babies’ ($n = 24$ in all interviews). Value of motherhood and a female tendency to becoming and being a good mother was perceived to be an inseparable part of femininity. The emphasis on women’s child rearing role was high and most respondents believed that men could not substitute women in taking care of children.

6. Concluding Remarks

This research tried to explore the understanding of female university students from three different Iranian ethnic groups, and investigate the significance of ethnic group affiliation in their common beliefs about the concept of femininity. The concept of femininity was explored in three Iranian ethnic groups—Azeri, Mazandarani and Kurdish—and main components were extracted. The five extracted components were quite similar in the three ethnic groups included in this study and included ‘emotionality’, ‘feminine beauty and sexual competence’, and ‘domestic and caregiving roles in the private spaces’. The findings of this research on general components of femininity were compatible with other studies’ findings in the Iranian context. For example, Khamse (2004) review on gender-related personality traits suggested that emotionality and dependency were general traits, which usually were attributed to femininity. Other studies found a relation between domestic and caregiving roles in the private sphere and common perception of femininity; they also found a relation between beauty and popular perceptions of femininity (for the former, refer to Rendell et al. 2000; Massey 2001; and for the latter, refer to Rani Jha 2016; Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003). The idea that sexual competition is an essential part of femininity was not a very common understanding of gender social relations but it has had some academic advocates. Baumeister and Twenge (2002) have questioned theories suggesting a historical male hegemony and have suggested that women’s sexual and social competition is the underlying factor shaping their current social status.

After narrowing down the meaning of the concepts according to the perception of the respondents, existing types of femininity were investigated based on the extracted components. The resulted typology of femininity included four types of perceived categories: (i) 'passive', (ii) 'traditional', (iii) 'independent' and (iv) 'active' femininity. While passive and traditional femininity were characterized by widely accepting the traditionally defined gendered social norms and values, and women's roles, positions and attitudes, independent and active femininity were specified by individual agency and questioning gendered clichés. The passive, traditional and independent types existed among all groups of university students from all ethnic groups, while the active type existed only in Mazandarani students. This could indicate that among young women in this ethnic group the concept of femininity might have been reconceptualized. The typology suggested by this research is compatible with Zokaei et al. (2001) exploratory study on masculinity in Iranian ethnic groups (Kurdish, Azeri, Gilak and Talesh ethnic groups) in which they also found differences in the perceptions of masculinity based on ethnic group identification. Taleb and Goudarzi (2004) have also reported differences in perceptions of femininity based on ethnic group in Baluchistan Province of Iran. Similar results have been reported by Khamse (2007).

There was a general tendency among our respondents to generalize the attitudes they had witnessed and relate them to their ethnic group affiliation; they used terms such as 'we' and 'us' to speak in general terms about the ethnic group they identified with and its gendered attitudes. It is possible that these kinds of generalizations were made based on some collectively imagined perceptions within the ethnic group's collective memory, rather than conclusions based on objective comparative differences.

This study had its limitations that derive partially from its methodology. While we looked into micro-level perceptions and understandings of women, it is noteworthy that ethnic relations and ethnic tensions play a role in the identity politics and can affect different ways of understanding, and making sense of social realities. In Iran, ethnic minorities' rights to practice their language, or appear in ethnic clothing in public, official, or work spaces including educational facilities have been limited due to several political and social policies, as well as the public attitudes. Language diversity has been considered a threat to national integrity (Tohidi 2006). Political tensions between ethnic minorities and the state, and between different ethnic minorities have long existed and have stayed unresolved (Bradley 2006). These ethnic tensions are higher among specific groups depending on regions; and they sometimes reflect religious factors (such as the tensions between Sunni and Shiite identities), as religious and ethnic minority identifications are likely to overlap. Geographical positions of Azeri and Kurdish regions of Iran (along the land borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Azerbaijan) have affected the geopolitics of the regions, while Mazandaran province has land borders with Turkmenistan. The formation of newly independent republics of Azerbaijan, and the de facto independent Kurdistan of Iraq have affected identity politics (Tohidi 2006), and the governmental approach to cultural resistance in Kurdish and Azeri regions in Iran, as well as the groups' internal dynamics. Besides ethnic identity politics and policies, Iran's gender politics have also been criticized for being male-centric and patriarchal. It is thus important to further position personal perceptions within the larger context and look into the effects of these macro-level politics on women's understanding of their intersectional ethnic, religious and gender identities. While this discussion falls beyond the scope and capacity of this paper, it is crucial to include it in the broader analysis to provide a better understanding of the political making of gender as well as ethnic identity.

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