

Female Empowerment in Iran: The Voice of Iranian University Students

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Abstract

In line with global trends, the rate of Iranian female students' enrolment in higher education has increased. However, some policy makers have been concerned about this and without considering the female voice, they have implemented strategies to balance the labour market, which has led to a decrease in female students in certain majors. The results of an empirical study showed that going to university is the primary route to empowerment for girls in Iran. The study into the meaning of empowerment adopted a qualitative approach using unstructured in-depth interviews with 80 Iranian female university students from seven provinces of Iran. The narrative responses were analysed using content analysis and grounded theory. The results of this study led to develop a new theory called 'Female Empowerment through Higher Education', which has several key constituents of female empowerment including: social presence, the power to make decision, autonomy, education and building up a new value framework.

There have been significant recent change in higher education and the gender profile of students is one of the most important (Leathwood, 2009). World statistics show that female students now outnumber male students, female students outperform male students academically and female students choose fields of study in which they were previously under-represented. While male students continue to make traditional choices, female students seem to take higher education more seriously than do men (Grebennikove and Skaines, 2009).

Reflecting international trends, the rate of Iranian female students' enrolment in higher education has increased. A comparative study of university enrolment showed that during the 1978–1979 academic year, and on the eve of the revolution, 31 per cent of those enrolled at universities were female. However, in the next decade (1988–1989), women were 46 per cent of all students (Mehran, 2009) and female students accounted for 63 per cent of university enrolments in 2011–2012 (Statistics Iran, 2012).

However, some decision makers and higher education developers in Iran have been concerned about the increasing rate of female enrolment. Hence, they have enacted policies to create a balance between male and female university entrance rate and prevent feminisation of the labour market. These policies include gender restrictions on studying some subjects and designating some universities as female or male.

There are many studies about female entrance to university in Iran, which have been focused on economic efficiency and women's position in the labour market (Chaboki, 2001; Hasanzadeh, 2006; BaratAli *et al.*, 2010). However, those studies have not paid attention to the real incentives of girls who have chosen, and tried to enter, university. So this important question has not been answered: what have female higher education students gained from university in Iran that encourages them to choose it?

Many policies have been made about female students without considering this question and so these kinds of policies have not succeeded. Hence, the researcher has undertaken a pilot study to find the answer to the question: what is the most important achievement for female university students from academic life?

Results of the pilot study showed that 'feeling empowered' is the primary achievement for female university students (Fereidooni, 2010). Females are making the most of the opportunity that university offers to be on an equal footing with men in Iranian society.

However, it is clear that 'feeling empowered' is an abstract concept that could have a wide range of meanings and be influenced by factors including cultural, social, political, economic and religious constituents. It can be different from one society to another and even from one individual to another. Therefore, it is important to understand the meaning of empowerment from the perspective of Iranian female university students. Hence, the researcher, by using a grounded theory approach, has tried to show the meaning of 'feeling empowered' through hearing the narrative of female university students about their academic experiences.

A brief review of empowerment

Talking about empowerment is not new and historically goes back to 1960s when Black Movements started in the United States of America (Mosedale, 2005) and Friere introduced his theory about development of critical conscience (Friere, 1970).

An early discussion of empowerment of women on the international stage was the book by Sen and Grown (1987) entitled *Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* prepared for the Nairobi Conference (in 1985) at the end of the United Nations Decade for Women. In this book, a section on 'Empowering Ourselves' clearly identifies the creation of women's organisations as central to the design and implementation of strategies for gender transformation (Stromquist, 1993). The history of the discussion of empowerment revolves around the key concepts of power, autonomy and education.

A lack of power among women and even among Black men, which led to them being disregarded by society (Yuval-Davis, 1994), was a key element in the empowerment debate. In addition, social norms and consequent discrimination prevented them from accessing resources (HyungHur, 2006). Therefore, the first social movements towards empowerment were about the power to access resources and the right to self-determination, as well as the ability to make life choices and finally become an influential power in the society (HyungHur, 2006, Yuval-Davis 1994). In fact, power should be considered as a basic concept in discussion of empowerment. Power especially political power, enables women to make decisions about their own lives and to benefit from equal opportunity. In addition, power allows women to define their life's boundaries, monitor their relationships, as well as enabling them not to be a second, and dependent, gender.

Autonomy is another element of empowerment. According to Stromquist (1993), a full definition of empowerment must include cognitive, psychological, political, and economic components. The economic component is the hardest part of empowerment process. Stromquist talked about the ability to exercise choice and that making this kind of choice, is related to agency that means the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and analysis. Choices such as when to get married and when to have children. However, Kabeer (1999, 2009, 2012) argued that women's economic empowerment relates to the enhancement of women's capacity for

strategic choice and agency in the economic sphere and to the possibilities this opens up for change in other spheres of their lives. According to Kabeer, women should achieve financial autonomy first and then other parts of empowerment process will occur.

Education is a significant part of empowerment process. Freire believed that education is inherently a political action because education liberates the mind and inspires. According to Freire, the oppressed or the disadvantaged can become empowered by learning about social inequality, encouraging others by making them feel confident about achieving social equality and finally liberating them. His theory has been utilised in women's studies. Arguably, the roots of feminist pedagogy lie in his work (HyungHur, 2006).

Freire described rote-learning education as banking education, as 'an act of depositing' where 'expert' teachers bestow deposits of knowledge onto their pupils who then 'patiently receive, memorize and repeat' the information. In this classroom setting, Freire argued that 'education becomes pure training, it becomes pure transfer of content, it is almost like the training of animals, it is a mere exercise in adaptation to the world'. Instead, Freire's educational philosophy aspires to liberate and empower its students by promoting critical consciousness of the world around them (Mooney, undated; Dale and Hyslop-Margison 2010).

Process of the research

A grounded theory approach was adopted with the aim of trying to understand the point of view of female students. Eighty Iranian female university students from seven provinces of Iran (Table 1) were interviewed. The interviews were unstructured, depth interviews and the respondents were encouraged to talk about their experiences at university and what it meant for them. The grounded theory approach underpinned the data collection and analysis, with the understanding emerging from the data: a process aided by a process of content analysis.

Following the interviews, coding was undertaken in three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Interviews took place in various locations within the universities, such as, yard, Mosque, library, café, as well as dormitories. The researcher tried to undertake the research in real and natural environments, observing the reality of the female students' academic lives.

In open coding, the first level of concepts, which are related to the study, were determined and allocated codes. These codes were selected on the basis of the interviews or they were the researcher's implicit codes.

TABLE 1
Demographic information

Province	Ages years	Major subjects	Degree	N
1 Tehran	18–30	Psychology of Education, IT, Economy, Educational Administration, Translation, Philosophy of Education	Bachelor, Master	15
2 Guilan	18–26	Consulting, Chemistry	Bachelor, Master	11
3 Khorasan-E Markazi	18–26	Architecture, Accounting, Law, Physics, Metallurgy, Theology, History	Bachelor, Master	12
4 Hormozgan	18–26	Translation, Electronics, Accounting	Diploma, Bachelor, Master	10
5 Khoozestan	18–26	Architecture, Elementary Education, Economic, Environment	Bachelor, Master	14
6 Kurdistan	18–26	Science, Physical Education, Law, Accounting, Nursing, Arabic Literature, Farsi Literature, Forestry	Diploma, Bachelor, Master	12
7 West-Azerbaijan	18–26	Missing data	Master	3

Next, in axial coding, all codes were compared together and codes with the same meaning were grouped together. Finally, in selective coding, according to Charmaz (2010), categories were developed. In this stage, similar categories were combined and abstract categories were explored. All of the categories have fluid boundaries, which require that the researcher constantly reassess the categorisation and take an holistic view. This involved a process of constant comparison of the researcher's emerging categorisation and the data in order to develop a fuller understanding of the subject's perceptions. Throughout this process of gathering and analysing the data the researcher recorded the process and the evolving understanding in the form of research memoranda (Charmaz, 2010).

Following the approach advocated by Charmaz (2010) it is important for the researcher to report the reality as perceived by the respondents. This constitutes the basic grounded data from which the theoretical analysis emerges.

The coding process

For open coding, the researcher studied all the transcripts and labelled words and phrases in the transcript. Open coding is the process to label any important information in the interviews. The name of the labels can be decided by the researcher or can be taken from the content too.

To avoid cluttering the codes and to inform other stages of the coding process four main questions informed the categorisation.

1. What are the informant's real incentives to go to university?
2. What are reasons that parents encourage girls to go to university?
3. What do the informant regard as features of an empowered woman?
4. What do informant's think is higher education's role in the empowerment of female university students.

Following the open coding, axial coding was undertaken in the four categories. Axial codes combined initial open, as explained in the following section.

First axial code: informer incentives for going to university

The most important incentive for female students has been seen in a short sentence that had been repeated over and over: 'university is the girls' only choice'. In fact, when girls faced with this question 'why do you go to university?' or talked about their other choices, they mentioned that sentence more and more. One of the respondents said, 'Do you think there are any other options for girls?' Another one said, 'If we don't study, and don't go to university, what else can we do?' or most of them mentioned, 'university was the only choice for me'. The primary reason for university study is that Iranian girls see little alternative choice. Therefore, university has been changed to a new concept in Iranian society. In this new interpretation, university is the opportunity for girls to be able to look for new chances and, as a university student, pursue avenues that they did not have access to before. Girls who, in the past, did not have the right to go out of their homes alone, even to buy a small item, find that as soon as they are admitted to a university they have a special right to live by themselves in other cities and far from home. Hence, for these girls university is not understood in its traditional meaning, with goals focused on education, research and service, but university has been defined as a means to leave their home city and try a life in an open and new environment.

In addition to an independent lifestyle, other reasons that encourage girls to go to university have been categorised into five axial codes, outlined below.

1. University as a new society

University is not so much an educational facility as a new society for the girls. It is a setting in which girls experience a new environment for social presence and emergence. In this process, female students have created a new identity for themselves. One of them said, 'I entered society through it [university]'. University seems a social benefit that girls think that, after entering, not only increases their standing in the society but can also give them access to new opportunities as a university student, by which they gain standing in society, as well as giving them freedom that was previously unavailable to girls. One informant said, 'Social status and prestige that I want ... [I've got through university]'. Another one said, '... going to university has caused changes in other people's behaviour [in the family and society] and they have heard us'.

In addition, this new social status provides the means for one of the most important desires of these girls, which is to communicate in new and different ways, especially with opposite sex; hitherto a taboo area. University is an accepted social environment that gives girls the right to experience communication with the opposite sex. This is a major incentive to go to university: one of the girls said, 'my first incentive [to go to university] honestly and without lying was seeing boys and how girls and boys communicate together and somethings like that ... but after attending university I realize that what is said about boys is not always true.

2. Autonomy

Data showed that girls in most of the families are dependent and do not have the power to make decisions. The family and the education environment have led them to depend on other men who are their fathers or, in future, husbands. For example, one informant said; 'university has helped me to become independent'. Another one believed that 'university made my father accept my attitude and allow me to make decisions in some areas that are related to me, on my own'. Therefore, they have emphasised that their incentive to go to university is obtaining individual autonomy, self-reliance and intellectual independence so that they do not need others and could be equal with men in the society.

3. *Environmental pressure*

Girls go to university because there is a lot of pressure from the family and from social peers to aspire to going to university. One of the girls said, 'All [students] go to university so I should go'. Another one said, 'It is a social process, just like going to school. People after elementary school follow on guidance school and after that high school, and then all of them should go to university'. Or 'my family put a lot of pressure on me to go to university.' There are many of these kinds of examples among the interviewees.

Iranian families have a value system in which university is the only way to progress for their children. There is considerable family pressure in the form of encouragement and strong support for the idea of going to university. The girls want to obtain their parents' approval and maintain their position within the family and thus accept this intrinsic value. So they do not think about anything except going to university. In this way the educational environment, an exaggerated view of society about university, avoidance of staying at home for girls, as well as, in small and restricted cities, early marriage of girls, lead to environmental pressures to go to university for the girls.

All of above-mentioned are seen in the girls' interviews including:

'In Konkur [Iranian University Entrance Examination] year my mum sat down beside me and said; just study and my dad would provide everything for me'. Another one said, 'My dad said how is it possible for a girl to stay at home'. Or 'You have to get married or go to university', or 'My mum said; admitted to university and you could just go out of this city'.

4. *The place of knowledge and the value of learning*

Knowledge and learning has always had an important place in Iranian society and this culture is transferred to Iranian girls. So many of the girls like learning and perceive university as an environment for learning and training through which they will be able to serve the community. They said; 'learning [inherently] is the value' or 'in university I am able to be trained for a job that I like and serve people' or 'I go to university to learn things that are useful in my region. I'm going to help them [my people]'.

Furthermore, girls are not just thinking about basic-level higher education qualifications. In some cases they consider that the value of academic qualifications is reducing and therefore aspire for high-level qualification as a means to survive and progress in society. So they said; 'I cannot do anything with a diploma', or 'now I cannot find work even with a bachelor degree, let alone with a diploma', or 'if I got my Ph.D.

other people would treat me as a Doctor and that would change my position’.

5. *Personal motivation*

The interviewees expressed strong personal motivations behind their desire to go to university. These included: freedom from traditions that tied girls to home and reduced them to a second gender; an enhanced consciousness and reflective ability that university education engenders; increased self-esteem; improved cultural awareness; and a broader life opportunity.

Second axial code: reasons for parents’ encouragement

The data shows that parents are the most important people who offer encouragement and support for girls to go to university, this applies to all geographic regions and ethnicities. They do their best to give official and intellectual support to girls and make a suitable environment for them to study and be admitted to university. One informant said; ‘my parents do any work so that I study and enter university’, or ‘my dad said; I have some land kept for me to be sold so that I could continue my education’. Of the 80 interviews, in just one of them the parent disagreed with their daughter going to university. In that case her mother preferred that she would get married and after that continue her studying. Some of the reasons that led to parents offering strong encouragement for their daughters to go to university are categorised as follows.

1. *Parents subjective perception about university*

Parents’ subjective perception of higher education is the most important reason why they encourage their daughters to go to university. Parents know university is an accepted social environment that provides girls with the opportunity to experience ‘better’ social relationships. They believe that university leads to entering society and an improved social situation for the girls, access to proper jobs and financial autonomy, enables girls to develop their capabilities, as well as the only way to gain a good and bright future for their girls.

Interviewees said their parents believed that ‘going to university is for better social situation. In the society according to how educated you are, you can find better social situation’. In addition, the concept of ‘good and bright future’ was seen in most interviews and is one of the parents’ reasons that they focused on their girls’ higher education. They said; ‘[my parent said] you should study because of your future’, or ‘my mum said; now you are studying and get your degree that will influence your

jobs. In the future, people's view will change about you. Change your marriage opportunity.' The interviews showed a perception that through university girls would be able to access high-level social status, they will have intellectual and financial autonomy, as well as achieving a high level of higher education, which is possible only through university.

2. Girls training in university

Acquisition of skills is an important element. These skills were categorised in three levels including personal, family and social skills. Some skills, such as increased consciousness, building up 'proper thinking', developing insight, confronting problems, the ability for decision making and having control over their lives are personal skills that parents think girls could obtain on entering university. Making good relationships in the family, better choices for marriage, proper interaction with spouse, as well as parenting are family skills. Job finding, experience of healthy social relationships, interaction in multicultural environment, are components of social skills that, according to parents' points of view, are all important. One informant said; 'my parents said if you continue [your study] you are able to find a job easily', or another one said; '[my parents] believe that if I study [in higher education] I will live better. [They believe that] when I study I could make better relationships in the society and after marriage with my husband and children'.

3. Learn a lesson

Based on the interviews, Iranian parents think that not being educated and not going to university is the most important reason for their failures in life. For example, girls reported their parents as saying 'we didn't go to university and have to suffer many difficulties, but you study'. Or they said; 'get lesson from my life, if I studied I would have a better life now'. Hence, they do not want their children to suffer these kinds of problems and they want them to have a life that is more comfortable, so encourage them to go to university. Also some other parents try to gain their non-achieved dreams through their children, wanting the girls to do what they were unable to achieve. So they impose their tendency on their girls with some reasons like: 'I don't want that you suffer from the same problems like me', or 'my mum didn't let me study, but I do any work that you do not live like me'.

4. Social pressure

There is strong social pressure for parents that resulted from a variety of factors including:

- going to university as a common and normal progression;
- valuing education according to level of degree;
- restricted choice opportunity and progress for girls;
- social status of parents, which is strongly related to their children's education;
- family values;
- devaluation of university degrees in today's job market;
- as well as, parents trying to withdraw girls from a small town context to access better facilities and situation.

These factors have made parents force girls to go to university. Parents who perceive university as a unique way to keep their girls away from 'false traditions' of small communities, such as, early marriage, as well as a way to find a job and individual and financial autonomy. An interviewee said that their parents believe that 'Being accepted at university so you could go out from this small town', or 'if you are not accepted you could not stay at home and you have to get married'.

5. Parents' educational level

It seems that level of parents' desire for girls' higher education is directly related to parents' education level. The more parents have a higher level of education or work in educational systems (school or university), the more they consider university important. There is a perceived social expectation that the children of parents with a higher education will also go to university; a social pressure that the parents acknowledge and accept. They said; 'I'm working in an educational system, so how can my girl not go to university. People will laugh at me ...'

Hence, the result is psychological pressure on girls and all of it is seen in interviews. One of the girls said; 'OK, if my dad studied in higher education, why all people think I must study too', another one said; 'when my parents studied in higher education, I don't have any other choices. All of us think that children who have parents who are doctors or engineers, so they must be doctors or engineers'.

Third axial code: empowered woman

Being and feeling empowered is the most important thing that girls gain from academic life (Fereidooni, 2010) and sometimes, they are proud of it. They believe that there is no environment or situation that has a similar effect on them (Fereidooni, 2010). The meaning of 'feeling empowered' resulted from a larger concept that is 'empowered woman'. Therefore, the interviewees were asked for their point of view about 'who is an empowered woman?'

Empowerment is a sociological concept, the definition of which could vary from society to society. The basic goal of the present study is to define empowerment according to Iranian female students of higher education, so before commencing this axial coding, it is important to consider some definitions of empowered women seen in the interviews.

'I think [empowered woman] at first should present herself over the society and have good life. In our society, most women do not consider their health, let alone psychological health or other things. Women who consider all aspects of life are empowered according to my attitude'.

'[Woman who] could overcome needs herself. Who does not need her family or spouse and can overcome her financial needs. Who is able to do her social work on her own and be successful in her life.

'[A woman]who achieves a goal that she really wants it. Who believes that, according to human nature, women can do whatever they want, and if you want anything, you can gain it and there is no barrier for her'.

'A woman, who stands on her feet, is independent, does not need anybody and is able to defend her right'

'I'm talking about tolerance, being patient'

'A woman who can defend and fight for her right'

'[A woman] who can succeed in every work, like studying or life. It is not good that she considers her studying but forgets her family. She should have everything together'.

'[A woman] who can defend her right. We know some things are our rights but we cannot say. We think maybe it is bad for us, maybe they fire us, and so we are silent. [A woman] Who really defends her right and takes it'.

'Woman who a man cannot interfere in her affairs [keep her respect]'

'Empowered woman who appears like a man and there is no difference between them. She does anything that man does without any difference. That, there are no limitations for woman and not say you are woman, so you cannot do some work. She is very important in herself and the society [is important too]. I believe that the proper atmosphere should be provided in the society and she thinks that she is able to do works on her own'.

These quotes are some of the definitions that informants presented. The interviewees' quotes about 'empowered women' are summarised in the following axial codes:

1. Social factors

The quotes showed that expression of idea, remarking, trying to make changes in society, building up society, trying to access varied opportunities and refusing to be discriminated against, and finally being

represented in each part of their society, are factors mentioned by the informants. Empowered women should be able to gain proper social status, people go to them to get help, and through this situation an empowered woman could have a strong influence on her society. Control, access to resources, decision making are other factors referred to.

2. *Personal characteristics*

Being positive, having a strong personality and spirit, trying to show the capabilities, having proper scientific knowledge and conscience, considering body health, as well as defining privacy, are personal characteristics of empowered woman expressed in the quotes.

3. *Healthy family*

According to the interviews, building up the good family beside other factors mentioned above, is a significant factor for an empowered woman. Based on their attitude trying to have a scientific life should be added to other properties of a successful family. These factors are valuable in Iranian society where most higher education planners believe that increasing a girl's tendency to go to university has led to girls becoming reluctant to get married. However, results of the present study are completely different from this attitude. Girls become educated, and according to their points of view, enter the society and view new opportunities but perceive marriage, having healthy family and parenting children, as achievements of 'empowered woman'.

On the basis of the views expressed by interviewees, a composite notion of an empowered woman would be:

Empowered woman uses the available facilities and resources, who builds up strong and influential characteristics that is acceptable for others, and defines her boundaries for others. She recognises her goals and does her best to fulfil them. She is a woman who is sensible about changing process in her society and through presence, interaction and good social relationships, as well as trying to influence the social processes, provide climate for accelerating the change process. Finally, an empowered woman, with these kinds of abilities, tries to consider all aspects of life and has a satisfying and peaceful life.

Fourth axial code: university role to empower girls

This role of empowerment for universities emerged from the interviews and raises four interesting and varied issues regarding the new feature and function of university in Iranian society.

1. University as social experience

The interviewees pointed out that the university provides the first environment in which girls can engage in social communication. If it does not, then girls do not have anywhere to experience social relations. This environment has high level of acceptance for the family and the society. Unlike expectations in the home context, the expectation of the university setting is that girls will communicate. It means that girls are seen and heard and it raises their social status. In this environment, girls learn to regulate their relations and make relationships with the opposite sex. While relationship with the opposite sex is taboo in Iranian society especially in traditional settings and small towns where girls are not allowed to have relationships with boys. One of informants said:

If we are out with a boy or talk with them, even about our study, other people who see us, do not say that they talked about studying ... when society believe that girls and boys are allowed to collaborate at university and when we talk there, other people think we talk about studying or something related to it, because we are at university. Because we are at university and maybe we are studying in the same field. But if we are out of university the society thinks badly about us. University climate allow us to experience these kinds of relationships.

This social acceptance is based on social attitudes about university and students. According to this, university students are conscious, knowing their boundaries and being able to manage them. Girls have to make relationships with the opposite sex because of the circumstances of university. Hence, in this context, girls experience relationship with boys and discover new knowledge about them. This increased knowledge is not only useful for controlling the social relations for girls but also influences the girls' marriage. One girl said; 'In anywhere except university I could not know boys. This is very important for me, because I learn how I should behave towards men after my marriage', or another one said; 'I don't think that boys are like this and they are open minded' and in a contrary view another girl said; 'At university I understand that boys have false and incorrect attitudes towards girls. The boys don't like girls' expression. They refuse it.'

It appears that university is a safe environment for healthy social relationships and through these communications, girls understand the reality and variety of the world. They learn to respect differential, hear the objections and interact with different people in an accepted social group.

2. *Experience of independence*

University, because of social acceptability and special meaning for Iranian parents, allow girls to be independent, make decisions and be free. This experience is heightened for girls who leave their cities to go to university in another city. Girls entering university build up a new identity for themselves within their family and in the society. During this process of re-identification, they are allowed to think for themselves, live alone and make decisions. One informant said;

Since I have been going to university I could express my views in my family. They said I'm a university student and so they hear me'. University provides an opportunity for girls who can leave their city and experience the bigger, open and newer world without being controlled by their family. Another respondent said; 'Since I could leave my cities and live separate from my family, this is a unique experience for me. It's difficult but it led to learning for me to stand on my feet and doing my work ... because of any reason except university I could not get out my town alone.

Therefore, in this new experience, they re-find their independent personality and find power for decision-making.

3. *Academic environment as a place for improving the personal skills*

University not only provides knowledge and training it also develops skills, not least through a process of the girls' maturation. In this growing-up process, according to their interviews, girls who 'find more self-esteem', 'regard themselves as empowered *vis a vis* their behaviour, attitude and thinking'. They learn 'not blindly to imitate others', 'have defensible logic' 'face problems consciously and solve them'. 'Patience, hardworking, being targeted, responsibility and power to choose, are other attributes that girls improve in university. Finally, university enables girls to enjoy their 'self' and have a satisfying life. Hence, one respondent said; 'I myself am in university. I live however I want and I have my own relations'. Another informant said, 'I enjoy being myself. I like who I am'.

4. *University as a way to fulfil goals*

Most of the informants consider fulfilling goals as one of the significant factors in empowerment. In addition, they admire university because it provides the way to education, learning, finding jobs and reaching financial autonomy, as mentioned in some quotes above. They believe that they could meet some special people in university such as their professors, who influence their lives, who face problems with a higher

level of consciousness and understanding; they provide a useful context for girls to be understood. All of the respondents find university as a way to fulfil goals. The informants said: 'When I've met my professors, I like to become like them', or 'I like to study and it is possible in university', or 'university makes it possible to reach my goals'.

Selective coding

In this third level of coding the researcher tries to strengthen the coding process and focuses on parts that are important for developing the final theory (Mansourian, 2006). Selective codes were derived from four axial codes including:

- female students and their parents' perceptions of university and its role;
- social pressure on female students and their parents;
- university as a unique social experience;
- The role of university to build up a new value framework.

Writing the theory

The grounded theory approach moves from coding to developing a theory, derived from the mass of data that explores the reality of the research subjects' lives.

The researcher acts as an observer narrator not a judge of the respondents' perceptions. The recounting and analysis of the Iranian female students' narrations is aimed at understanding the reality of their lives in higher education. The research uses the details from the girls' accounts, coded to aid analysis, to inductively derive a theoretical understanding. What emerged is a theory entitled 'Iranian female students' empowerment through higher education'.

The Iranian girls in the study exhibited a positive attitude towards university. A key element was that it provided them with a unique opportunity to develop and progress, that would otherwise be denied them if they remained at home. Equally, parents have a positive view of university and strongly encourage their daughters to attend university for a variety of reasons. Foremost is that parents see higher education as the only way for their daughters to have a future career; and for many parents this means that their daughters do not repeat the mistakes of their parents' lives. Apart from the qualifications achieved through university, which are necessary for developing a career, going to university is the only socially acceptable way for the parents that their daughters can establish any independence and have a career. In

addition, parents get kudos from their daughter's higher education qualifications. Hence, apart from a desire for independence, parents are the main factor that makes girls choose university.

For the female students, feeling empowered is their primary achievement from higher education; a view expressed in the composite view of an empowered woman that emerged from the students' statements, outlined above.

University, thus, provides a unique social experience, with no alternative, for most girls, in which they can learn about social interactions and understand differences in society. University, and the resulting experience of a different social environment, offers a new vision for female students who develop new value frameworks through which they learn to look at the world and events in a new way. They evaluate themselves and during this self-awareness process, they define a new identity for themselves, which strongly influences the rest of their lives. University gives them experience of independence and becomes an open window towards freedom, future independence and the way to reach their goals. Hence, university defines a unique role for itself in Iranian society as one of empowering girls and, on the other hand, girls give this role to university.

The activities to develop the theory are presented schematically (Figure 1).

A theory, arguably, should have the following properties: it should address a concrete situation; be able to conceptualise it and determine the relation between concepts; allow others to make predictions from the theory, specifically provide a hypothesis that is testable (Charmaz, 2010). The proposed theory addresses the issue of female empowerment in higher education, explains relationship among the concepts, such as parents' role, the influence of university structure, girls' attitude towards university; provides deep descriptions of the concepts and permits the testing new hypotheses. For example, a study might ask 'if female students are empowered through other means apart from going to university, is their tendency to enter university decreased?'

Conclusion

The study highlights the issues of power, autonomy and education in the case of the striving for empowerment of Iranian girls. In addition to social presence, the power to make decisions was a key element in the interviews and the informants' definition of empowerment. However, contrary to Stromquist (1993) and Kabeer (1999, 2009, 2012), the informants do not focus so much on financial power. However, training,

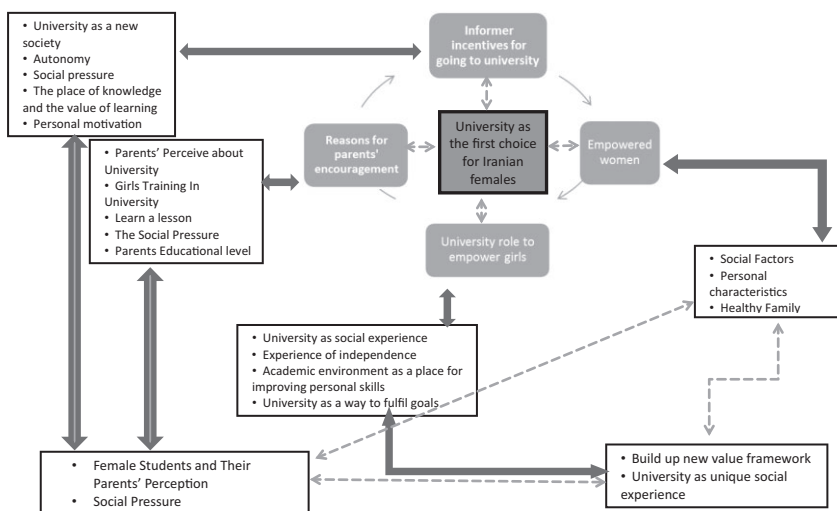


Figure 1 Develop the theory

finding a job, having the will to build a life, taking control and ultimately having independent lives, are factors that were mentioned by the respondents and are seen in the theory. The girls believed that university, because it provides possibilities to gain these qualities, is the way to become empowered.

The desire for independence could be considered as the most important request of the girls in the interviews. The girls like university because it gives them experience of independence and provides an environment in which they enjoy who they are and what they like. Autonomy is repeatedly raised in interviews and is related to all aspects of the present study. It is considered the most important aspect of feeling empowered and is made possible by university and academic life. The broad definitions of autonomy ranging from intellectual to financial independence are not mirrored in the study as the girls focused on intellectual independence and seldom mentioned financial autonomy, nor its necessity in achieving autonomy.

The respondents in the study frequently mentioned how university enabled them to control their own lives and put effort into achieving their goal. As such, university provides the status for girls as it is a sphere in which the person is able to decide, understand the meaning of their actions and accept the results of their decision. What the girls reacted

negatively to was any suggestion that they should work while at university. They could not understand the necessity for financial autonomy mentioned by Kabeer. Most of the girls, because of family financial support, did not try to find any jobs and they talked proudly about it. If a student has to find a job it implies she does not get enough financial support from her family. So it can be a kind of insult to the family. This does raise issues about the ultimate autonomy and independence of the girls.

Education is a significant part of the empowerment process and clearly university provides the possibilities for girls to build up the new value framework that led to them becoming liberated. Like Freire, Iranian female students believe that through higher education they have been learning about social inequality, increasing their self-esteem and encouraging others to continue this way. The girls emphasised the same components that were mentioned in Freire's theory, which considered empowerment as education. Iranian female university students understand empowerment as Freire described it, as liberation of mind and then liberation of the oppressed or disadvantaged.

Stromquist's (1993) definition of empowerment included cognitive, psychological, political, and economic components. This is reflected in the study. Iranian female students increase their cognitive level through higher education and are sensitive about social issues and norms, gender stereotypes and their social and political right and put their efforts into achieving equality. The girls, according to Stromquist's cognitive components, considered that empowerment required facing problems, understanding gender sociability self-esteem and self-confidence. The girls not only see empowerment as increasing understanding, cognition and conscience but also as dependent on understanding social demands and belonging to the wider group of women in the given society to achieve the important goals.

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