Female Gender and the Political Identity of Kurdish Youth in Eastern Kurdistan-Iran, with a Focus on University Students

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Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between the female gender and political identity. It first considers the determinants of individuals' political identity, including their political opinions, attitudes, and stances, in Kurdish society, one of which is gender. Then, quantitative and analytical methods are used to examine the role of the female gender and its share in shaping the political identity of Kurdish youth in Eastern Kurdistan (hereafter Rojhelat) in Iran and measure their correlation. The results show that there is a significant relationship between official hegemonic female gender and political identity. This, in turn, affects Kurdish women's political behaviors and activities, and their role in politics is dismissed. The socio-political situation in Iran, especially the existence of socio-religious stereotypes, a religious government, and consequently the limitation in the social visualization of the agency-based anti-hegemonic female gender in social action, precludes women from developing a political consciousness and a self-assertive political identity, as well as from gaining a higher social status and becoming more politically salient. The government uses its favored religious identity to prevent the effect of unapproved social factors on the political identity of Kurdish youth.

Key words

Kurdish women, femaleness, youth, political identity, Rojhelat

Introduction

Politics and social factors are mutually related and people possess a variety of multi-dimensional and multi-layered identities (Calhoun, 1997; Castells, 2005;

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Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow & McAdam, 2000). In Iran, as in Western societies, there is a search for identity and meaning in life, and even among the different peoples that exist within the country, sentiment regarding social identity and social affinity is more enduring. Social factors, including these various identities, affect the political identity of individuals, and this is related to their political opinions, attitudes, stances, behaviors, and activities. Moreover, the conditions of a society and the impact of the conditions of that society on the lives of the individuals who reside there is one of the most effective social factors and plays more of a role in a person's identity. In this context, Iran is a multi-religious and multi-national society, where the different and multi-layered identities of individuals and groups play a role in their socio-political activities.

The Rojhelat of Kurdistan, a region located in Iran, also has a different and special condition, since it is affected by Iranian society and politics on the one hand, and its own specific ethnic, religious, cultural, and political traditions on the other (Mofidi & Rahmani, 2019). While the Kurdish people have long dreamed of and striven for an independent Kurdistan, they are currently divided between four main regions, each within a sovereign state: southeastern Turkey (Northern Kurdistan or Bakur), northern Iraq (Southern Kurdistan or Başûr), northern Syria (Western Kurdistan or Rojava) and finally northwestern Iran (Eastern Kurdistan, also called Rojhelat). In each of the four countries, the Kurdish desire for independence and their own state has inevitably lead to tensions between them and the dominant regime in that country.

The Iranian regime has attempted to impose its religiopolitical ideology and a Shiite Perso-Iranian identity on those Kurds living in Rojhelat. Conversely, under the influence of Kurdish political organizations, which are often secular and opposed to the regime, and therefore illegal inside Iran, Kurdish people, many of whom are Sunni and Yarsan, non-Shiite religions, have resisted the imposition of this Perso-Shiite identity and tried to preserve their Kurdish culture and traditions (Mofidi, 2022; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020). Thus, the youth of Rojhelat negotiate and shape their own identities in relation to the multilayered social reality in which they live.

In the above context and that of the relationship between gender and politics, the effects of political Islam are considerable. With the emergence of the Islamic regime in Iran in 1979, Iran's political system became increasingly doctrinaire, provincial, parochial, restrictive, and inward-looking. This strongly affected women's socio-political situation. During the Shah's regime, a secular regime, women's

problems emanated from the traditional stereotypes of society. In such a patri-archal society, where men and women are treated unequally and the masculine mind is dominant, men have fewer social problems caused by their gender. This male dominance affects all social factors, with a particular impact on female gender.

After the revolution, the new political system was severely opposed to the idea of an open society,[1] and a much more closed political space was created (Mofidi, 2019; Sedghi, 2007). Gender relationships became more complicated. According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran enacted in 1979, only political parties that accept the regime's Islamic ideology are allowed to operate (Article 26). The constitution is explicitly and unreservedly male-centered; for example, it de-fines the presidency as only open to Shiite religious men (Article 115). It limits all people's rights (Article 20), and women's rights in particular (Article 21), to the re-quirements of Islamic standards and regulations, which have been regulated and interpreted in a patriarchal way. In this regard, the dominant Islamic Fuqaha (legal experts in Islamic law) in Iran believe in the guardianship of men over women. Generally, women's primary role is seen in terms of housekeeping, looking after children and the family.[2] By undermining women's agency, thus, an official hegem-onic type of female gender, has actually been strengthened.

The regime's Islamic ideology has reinforced male-dominant and anti-female stereotypes, affecting the ways in which citizens advance, benefit, gain, and prog-ress, as a result of that ideology's effect on their lives and their political per-spectives and attitudes, and their ability to identify themselves as possible political agents and actors. This closed society has marginalized women in the political and public arenas, affecting their self-perception and various aspects of their identity, especially in politics. However, the situation for women in Rojhelat is even worse. After the civil war, the exit of secular Kurdish forces, and the domination of the Islamic regime, the ethnic, religious, and political conflicts all affected the situation of women, who found themselves and their gender excluded from any role in poli-

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[1] For more on open and closed societies, see K. Popper, *The open society and its enemies* (Routledge, 2011).

[2] In this regard, see for example: M. H. Tabatabai, *Tafsir al-Mizan*, translated into Persian by S. M. B. Mousavi Hamedani (Qom; Islamic Publication Office, 2007); S. M. H. Hosseini Tehrani, *The guardianship of the Islamic jurist in the government of Islam* (Allameh Tabatabai Publication, 2010); N. Makarem Shirazi, *Tafsir Nemooneh* (Qom: Dar al-Kotob Islamiyah, 1992); M. Motahari, *The system of women's rights in Islam* (Tehran: Sadra Publishing, 1991).

tics or in the political perspectives and attitudes of Kurdish people, especially regarding women themselves.

Considering the context described above, while women face a range of socio-cultural problems as a result of their gender and gender equality is an important aspect of democracy and human rights, this article specifically focuses on the role of gender and how it affects the political identity of Rojhelat youth. Similar to Iranian society and its effects, the Kurdish society of Rojhelat is also patriarchal, under men's power and control, but Kurdish men also have little access to politics, excluded from the Iranian political arena because of their ethno-religious political situation and seen by the Iranian government as not having a political status equal to that of other Perso-Iranian citizens. However, their situation is not as a result of their gender, whereas the situation Kurdish women find themselves in is. Therefore, the main question is: What is the role and effect of female gender in shaping political identity in Rojhelat? Based on previous research (as described below), it can be assumed that the female gender, as psychological and sociocultural aspects of femaleness, like other social factors, affects the political identity and behavior of men and women in society. However, the existence of a non-democratic authoritarian and religious government, the lack of political liberty, and the repression of the Kurds are more important. In addition to other relevant factors in traditional society, these political circumstances prevent the manifestation of undesirable factors and identities from the viewpoint of government in the political arena. In addition, Kurdish women, in comparison with Kurdish men, have been doubly excluded from the political arena because of their gender. In fact, it is very difficult to clarify the role and real effects of various social identities and factors and their effect on an individual's political identity in such conditions.

Therefore, considering the closed nature of the political space in the Iranian state, the hypothesis is that there is relationship between female gender and political identity, and the official female gender has become hegemonic in Rojhelat. In such a situation, women have no agency. The agency-based female gender has been limited in shaping and determining the political identity of not only Kurdish men but also most Kurdish women themselves. As a result, women are under the influence of traditional socio-religious stereotypes, and they often do not perceive themselves as political agents. Consequently, they are less independent when thinking, choosing, and acting. In addition, the way men think about women is also important. In traditional societies, men often have a negative view of women's political role. The masculine space of society has narrowed the space for women's intellectual and practical political activity. In a closed society, it is difficult for

women to create change and help men change their minds and think about women's rights. Since all these issues prevent the agency-based female gender from being visualized socially in society, the role of the female gender is more limited than other social factors, including the role of the male gender, in influencing the political identity of both men and women in society.

To examine the hypothesis and the effect of the female gender on the political identity of individuals, this article presents and analyzes new empirical data. Thus, based on the analysis of the quantitative data gathered through questionnaires among 232 young people from the city of Sine (Sanandaj), this study examines the opinions of young people to assess the role of the female gender in shaping political identity and shows how female youth identify less with being political agents and (potential) political actors compared with their male counterparts. In what follows, this paper first offers the theoretical foundations of this study, including Jenkins's social identity theory and relevant theoretical insights on political identity, and second, a brief description of the determinants of the Kurdish people's political identity. Additionally, it examines the role of gender and the political situation of women in Rojhelat. Third, it explains the methodology and findings and includes an analysis of the data. Finally, based on the theoretical discussions about social and political identities, it concludes with a discussion of the findings.

Theoretical Foundations

In closed societies such as Iran, not only is there no equal possibility for all citizens with different identities to express themselves in the political arena, but the study of political issues and the real political identity of individuals is also very difficult. Thus, there are few relevant studies on different identities, which partly indicates the political problems related to identities. In this regard, in Rojhelat and some other parts of Iran, some of the socio-political problems related to the female gender, and to ethnic, national, and religious identities are simultaneous, and the intersectionality that is seen is shown in the research studies that follow.

Rezaiy, Riyahi, and Sekhavatifar (2007) measured the ethnic identity of five Turkmen cities based on their cultural heritage, language, religion, and history, showing that the tendency toward ethnic identity among Iranian Turkmens is high. In her study of the attitudes of Kurdish elites living in Iran with regard to collective (national/ethnic) identity, Rahmani (2007) showed that language is one of the most important bases of ethnic identity, which has led to many critiques of political power. This implies that the regime does not allow Kurds to receive an educa-

tion in their own language for political purposes, even though this contravenes their human rights. The Iranian regime and Persian-Iranian politicians see language freedom as a threat to the dominance of Persian ethnicity and the country's territorial integrity. Language is the most obvious factor for recognizing collective identity and separating "self" from "other." Her research shows that the Kurdish elites' sense of ethnic identity is stronger than their Iranian identity. The "other" for them is the rulers (Rahmani, 2007, pp. 163-4, 195‒198).

Hajiyani (2009) studied the relationship between ethnic identity and national identity. According to him, the variables of Iranian national identity include national culture, the national community, national politics, and civil identity. To measure ethnic identity, he uses ethnic culture, community, and political ethnicity, showing that the index of the first two variables is strong and that of the third weak. There is an inverse relationship between the tendency toward the political aspects of ethnic identity and the tendency toward national culture. Similar to language freedom, the politicization of ethnic identity is seen as a threat. Non-Persian ethnic identities are not allowed to find political dimensions to champion or uphold, or to campaign for their internal political unity. According to Hajiyani (2009), in relation to Iranian identity, the life satisfaction index among respondents was low. This implies that they have social problems and limitations due to their different ethnic identities. As citizens in Iran, they are not satisfied with their welfare, happiness, and socio-political liberty. Moreover, his research shows a positive relationship between ethnic identity and religious identity, though the relationship between political ethnicity and religion is less significant.

In their article, Mofidi and Rahmani (2019) examined the relationship between religion and political identity in Rojhelat. Through surveys and analytical methods, their findings showed that religion and religious identity are important determinants of political identity in Kurdistan. Due to the influence of religion in this traditional society and the existence of a religious government in Iran, the political identity of Kurdish youth is further affected by the government's politics and its policy of imposing a specifically Iranian and officially sanctioned religious identity, thereby preventing the manifestation of other ethnic and religious identities, as well as the agency-based female gender, in the political arena. However, this article mainly examines the effects of religion and excludes other factors, and does not present any details about the role of the female gender in shaping an individual's political identity.

The above-mentioned studies suggest that apart from male-centered Shiite and Fars-Iranian identities, there is no political space for other identities in Iran.

Women's gender has often not been considered an issue in politics. This shows an intersectional issue among male-centered religious, ethnic, and national identities. The political issues of these identities have led to the disregarding, overlooking, ignoring, and dismissal of women in politics. Politics in Iranian society in general and Rojhelat in particular are further diverted to socio-political issues other than the problem of the female gender. This has led to less political research on the topic, though some relevant research has been conducted.

Rajablou, Sinki, and Azadeh (2011) examined the effects of identifying resources on gender identity. According to them, religious adherence and ethnic gender stereotypes explain the change in gender identity in Iran more than other factors. Karimi (2015) examined the relationship between cyberspace and Iranian women's identity, showing that, despite the opposition of official and non-official institutions, social media has affected the gender identity of individuals in Iran. In recent years, these media have paved the way for women to shape their identity outside the pressure of male domination in Iranian society. Despite government suppression of and control over the internet, they have been involved in political activities, thereby helping redefine and develop women's identities. This has led to a partial change in women's political status compared with that in the past. Accordingly, here, we can say that it has also led to changing the role of female gender in terms of individual political identities, for both women and men.

In this regard, Nazari, Alihosseini, Emamjomezadeh, and Pourranjbar (2014) examined the relationship between socialization and women's political participation. While referring to women's low political participation in the Islamic Republic of Iran's power structure, they show that apart from the effect of the political system and its ideology as barriers, socialization by social institutions and gender stereotypes that have emanated from a culture and society that considers politics as a masculine field have significant effects. Therefore, even though all aspects of women's lives are severely influenced by politics, they do not tend to become involved in politics because of the staunchly religious and masculine political climate. To continue the line of previous research, the present article, based on Jenkins's theory, will examine the relationship between female gender and political identity.

Jenkins's Social Identity Theory

Jenkins's theory is considered the theoretical basis for our discussion of social identity. His definition of social identity is based on two concepts: similarities and differences. For Jenkins, identification is a necessary precondition for having a so-

cial life, and vice versa, individual identity is not meaningful without the social world of other people. In his opinion, the most distinct difference between individual identity and collective identity is the emphasis on differences in the former type and on similarities in the latter. However, individual selfhood and identity is also generally created in society, and social identity is visualized within the framework of social action. In fact, it is the fusion of individual and collective aspects that shapes social identity. Social identification is not imagined without visualization and embodiment; gender and race are cases in point (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 5, 19, 40, 51, 103). According to Jenkins, time, situation, and place play an important role in determining identity.

In relation to the role of situation and context, some contemporary theories emphasize that power plays an important role in the processes of social acceptance and resistance. In this regard, in considering the role of power in the internal-external dialectic of group identification, Jenkins distinguishes between the processes of determining "group identification and categorization" in relation to the external or categorical aspects of identity. Emphasizing "the group–category distinction," he highlights "the centrality of power" in "identity maintenance and change" through the processes of social categorization (Jenkins, 2004, p. 21). Thus, politics plays an important role in defining external identification and in the processes of social change and stability. In a political context, collective identities are sometimes emphasized, advocated, imposed, or resisted. Indeed, "asserting, defending, imposing, or resisting collective identification are all definitively political" (ibid.). Furthermore, Jenkins's distinction between nominal and virtual social identities is related to "the name and the experience of an identity." The same nominal identity for individuals may differ in practice or have different consequences in their everyday lives, and vice versa. Here, again, the role of politics is unavoidable. The political mobilization process leads to the transformation of a category into a group. Both identities may be subject to change and may be resisted by state agencies (ibid., p. 22).

Along with the effects of power and politics on identity, the institutionalization of identity is also important. In Jenkins's theory, institutions or the institutionalized models of practice have force as the way of performing actions or "the way things are done." As one of the social institutions, "organization" is important for the processes of social categorization, making categories, their distribution, and the institutionalized methods of recruitment. According to him, there is no single model of institutionalization because it depends on the power source and the degree to which the other aspects of an individual's identity are integrated. Politics and institutions

play an important role in this regard. For example, the constitution and distribution of positions and the procedures for recruiting individuals within organizations is the outcome of political relationships and struggles, and the classification of individuals is vital for a modern government's bureaucratic rational strategies (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 23, 176).

Jenkins holds that the collective and individual aspects of social identity are two parts of the internal-external dialectic process of identification, which stand in close relationship and are constantly produced and reproduced. Moreover, although individuals incorporate social identities, the process of creating an identity is considered within power relations in which "identities exist and are acquired, claimed, and allocated" (ibid., p. 23). Power plays a major role in creating identity processes and institutionalizing identities, particularly in formal and informal organizations, in the processes of social categorization, and then in the process of generating social identities. Each field is related to the "field of power," especially politics and the political arena. Consequently, as political institutions derive power from various sources, they have more power than other institutions to create, preserve, or change the social categorizations that exist in society. In his opinion, government and political power represent important types of applied and effective powers. Many other social institutions are in the hands of those in positions of power associated with government departments or are influenced by government policies. Their power is not comparable to that of the government. Thus, the government and its implemented policies are the most important exogenous factors affecting identity, especially political identity. Indeed, identity can be viewed as both a tool and an aim in politics.

Political Identity

As outlined in the previous section, especially in relation to similarities and differences, identity is often regarded as the expression of an individual's social affinity and belief system. Various factors, including gender, race, and ethnicity, can create an identity (Ramon, 2017). In this regard, political identity is related to politics and it is "a social identity with political relevance" (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 4). Indeed, political identities are forms of social identity in a political context. They are "social categories, attributes, or components of the self-concept that are shared with others and therefore define individuals as being similar to others," resulting from the "interplay between cognitive processes and social or cultural influences" (Monroe, Hankin, & Vechten, 2000, p. 421). In other

words, political identities are forms of individual schemas that organize information about our political situation, status, and social relationships, and make some aspects of our collective life world more politically applicable than others, such as the nation-state, nationality, race, culture, language, religion, gender, and class (Nisbet & Myers, 2010).

Group affiliation is the central point of the classical definitions of political identity, which describes how a person might represent particular political opinions, attitudes, and activities because of being a member of a specific group (Ramon, 2017). According to Campbell et al. (1960), it normally "entails an identity as part of a group with norms concerning shared political beliefs, and the *correct* group position on a political candidate, political party, policy issue, or course of political action" (p. 4). Nevertheless, contemporary politics and socio-political changes show that a person's political identity can be shaped based on either a collective social identity or on self-interest without a group affiliation, even though group-based definitions of political identity are important and more practicable.

It should also be noted that some identities are naturally political, such as those based on a political party, ideology, or issue, while others arise from social identities that have acquired political content. Thus, a political identity is a social identity based on a common political view, or one that has clearly become political through the norms of a political group that governs the views and actions of its members. Accordingly, it paves the way for expanding group-based political solidarity and cohesion (Huddy, 2013). Thus, one's political identity is associated with directional and oriented politics, with a specific political party affiliation or partisan identity that is shaped by factors such as race, colonialism, and different economic classes (Ramon, 2017).

In politics, identity is a part of the political perspective outlined in response to the question, "Who am I?" The other related parts are "demands" of "people like me" and our "expectations," that are "our chances to get what we want, provided we are who we are." In this regard, issues such as culture, religion, ideas, language, history, and territory may all serve as factors that create notions of political identity (Bryder, 2005). Of course, individuals have multiple identities but, based on their situation and their society, one or more of their identities may be more important and a top priority for them in creating the foundations of their political identities, leading them to develop a political perspective from that point of view. In this regard, although in societies such as Kurdistan the ethno-national issue was already an important part of people's socio-political lives, issues of political identity have become the major characteristics of social life worldwide since the late 1960s. The

political perspective profoundly changed by transforming such issues as race, class, and gender into daily political life. This has led to dramatic changes in the world of thought and knowledge.

Apart from the above-mentioned socio-political factors, other factors also affect the shaping and orientation of political identity. These include the type of political system, related educational system, public media, freedom of speech, and non-governmental media, as well as the level of political awareness in a society. In relation to such factors, the development of political commitment is a key aspect of identity formation in adolescence. Youth reflect on the values, traditions, and ideologies of their communities and the possible roles they will assume in adulthood (Erikson, 1968). There is an interconnection between identity formation and the level of political development. Participation in social services and activities affects the formation of the political identity of the youth and their political role in society. In addition, social integration and a heightened sense of self-understanding and political awareness in adulthood help form political identity. Therefore, political and socio-historical contexts, including socio-political relationships and actions, play an important role in shaping political identity and socialization (Yates & Youniss, 1998).

Governments have also attempted to define their favorite political identity through the education system and media or by using force. In some states, where people with political identities different from the political identities favored by political regimes are perceived as danger and threat, then torture and coercion are used as a tool to change their political identities, either constructively or destructively (Parry, 2010, pp. 207–214). They have, for instance, been used by all governments to assimilate and change the political identity of the Kurdish people in Kurdistan, although such tactics have often had unfavorable outcomes. In the following sections, the political identity of the Kurdish people and the effect of gender on their identity are examined.

Determinants of the Kurdish People's Political Identity

As much as politics affects social issues, the latter affects the former. In this regard, the effects of social factors on politics tend to shape political identity. The political thought and actions of individuals, especially political activists and politicians, directly and indirectly depend on the effects of aspects of their social identity. As mentioned, in both group-based and individualized politics, factors such as nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and personal interest can play a

role in determining a person's political identity. Whether a person is associated with a political group or not, his/her political view, stance, and behavior can be related to one of the above factors; however, s/he may be more highly influenced by political action, organizational identity, and group-based political identity.

Concerning Kurdish society, the Kurdish individual's political identity in Rojhelat is further affected by the following factors: Kurdish identity, Iranian politics and its relevant government and organizations, religion and Islamic ideology, social class and Leftist ideology, gender, and also the politics of Kurdish political parties, considered adversaries of the Iranian government, and their media (Mofidi & Rahmani, 2019). From the above factors, only the effect of the female gender in shaping the political identity of Kurdish youths and the extent of that effect is considered. Indeed, because of the influence of religion in this traditional society and the existence of a non-democratic religious government, the regime's favorable social factors have a greater impact on a person's political identity, even though some of other factors are important and powerful in society.

Gender and the Political Situation of Women in Rojhelat

In relation to the psychological and sociocultural aspects of maleness and femaleness, gender refers to "how people see themselves, the way they behave, and how they view others" (Wharton, 2005, p. 9). According to Michael Kimmel, it is "everybody's perception about the meaning of masculinity and femininity and the duties and powers and the characteristics which are attributed to man and woman" (quoted in Tavakoli, 2003, p. 36). In this relation, female gender refers to feminine perception and those duties, powers and characteristics attributed to women. Gender is an acquired issue that emanates from the culture of societies and leads to differences in roles and expectations as well as sexual inequality. Accordingly, in relation to gender, a variety of power relationships exist around the world. In the Middle East, governments have often appropriated certain agendas to "prove" they have taken the modern values associated with gender relations and women's rights into consideration, even though they have not in any real way allowed independent women's movements to intervene in "gendered power relations," which have mostly been biased toward men (Erel & Acik, 2020).

In Iran, not only is the religious government openly opposed to the modern values of gender relations, its national culture is traditional and strongly masculine (Saroukhani & Rafatjah, 2004). For example, in Iranian society, interest in political action is mostly considered a male feature, and women are often prevented from

engaging in political activities since the political arena is seen as violent. In addition, the predominant type of Islamic culture in Iran acts as a barrier to women's socio-political participation. Although there has been some cultural change and the traditional view is not accepted by a considerable proportion of the people, especially today's youth, the existence of a religious government and a traditional society means that equality between the sexes has not been allowed and so it has not developed. Nevertheless, because of the growth of education among women and the effects of different media, the activities of some feminist movements and women's rights activists can be seen in Iran, especially in the Kurdish community, even if only to a limited extent.

Kurdish women in Rojhelat have been at least somewhat politically active in recent decades, and a significant proportion participated in politics during the 1979 Revolution and in its immediate aftermath, when Kurdish political parties had an open presence in the region. However, once the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran had established effective control of Rojhelat, this saw the end of almost all their public political activity. Political pressure forced many Kurdish women activists within Kurdish political parties to leave Iran. The remainder remained passive in the new political situation and could not actively participate in the political arena. This closed space strongly affected their political identity, as they no longer had a politically relevant social identity. Indeed, not only were they unable to be political actors, they were also unable to think, choose, and act as independent political agents.

However, the sentiment of discrimination against women in society and the relevant awareness of it have influenced the political views, stances, and actions of some people, meaning that their political identity is related to the issue of gender inequality. Thus, the female gender is one of the factors that has affected political identity and has become a determinant for the political identity of a part of the Kurdish people. This effect is better illustrated by our findings.

Methodology and Data

We employed quantitative and analytical methods to collect and analyze the data and to measure the effect and influence of the female gender in shaping the political identity of Kurdish youth. In this regard, data related to the research variables and common subjects were collected. For this purpose, and to examine the research questions and hypotheses, a questionnaire related to common concepts and issues was designed. The first part of the questionnaire dealt with the individual

characteristics of the respondents, including age, sex, marital status, religion, degree and level of education, and field of study. The next sections were devoted to the definition of concepts, including female gender and political identity. To measure the perception of the female gender situation, we asked three questions about the respondent's view on the existence of gender discrimination, female gender as a barrier to their progress, and attempts to eliminate this discrimination in society. The questions about political identity as a dependent variable were asked in two parts: first, the political perspective, including the respondent's view about civil liberties and interest in the organized activity, and second, political actions and behaviors.

The statistical population was young Kurds. Since the sample population had to understand the concepts of the research and questionnaire, we preferred to select the respondents from among the Kurdish students in a Kurdish city, Sine (Sanandaj), using a random sampling method. The students were from various universities and departments. In the next stages, a number of university students completed the questionnaire in the academic year 2017/18. These were then analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics to determine the correlation between the variables and to explain the effect of the independent variable. The analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from the study population was carried out using descriptive and inferential (analytical) statistics. From the questionnaires, the data for each variable were described in terms of statistical-numerical indices, so sufficient knowledge was gathered about the dispersion, demographic features, and a description of the respondents in various parts of the research. Thereafter, the relationships between the variables were examined, and the research hypotheses were tested through appropriate statistical patterns. Appropriate statistical analysis methods were employed in the above-mentioned stages. There was confidence in the research process and the accuracy and precision of the inferences and findings. Finally, the findings were analyzed and discussed to arrive at our conclusions.

Data Analysis and Findings

As mentioned above, the research population is Kurdish student youth in Sine, which is the largest and most populous city and the capital of the Kurdistan province of Rojhelat, the Kurdish region in western Iran. The indigenous people of the city are mostly Shafi'i Sunni Kurds, but also include non-Kurdish and non-Sunni immigrants. Based on a review of the demographic features of the sample of 232 young people, their answers to questions about female gender and political identi-

ties and the analysis of the hypotheses are as follows.

Respondents' demographic features

Age.
Of the sample population, 9.6% were in the age group 15–20, 62.2% 21–30, and 28.3% 31–40. Two participants did not answer this question. The age group 21–30 thus represents the clear majority of respondents.

Sex.
Among the sample population, 133 (57.8%) were male and 97 (42.2%) female. This omits two participants who did not answer this question.

Marital status.
Among the sample population, 80 (34.5%) were married, and 150 (64.7%) were unmarried, the latter therefore representing the clear majority of the respondents. Again, two participants did not answer this question.

Level of education.
The responses showed that 15.1% of the sample population were associate students, 78% bachelor's students, and 6.9% masters' and PhD students.

Field of study.
A total of 172 respondents (74.1%) were studying humanities and 60 (25.9%) other areas of study.

Religion.
The findings indicate that of the sample population, 207 participants (89.2%) were Sunni Muslims and 25 (10.8%) Shiite Muslims. As mentioned above, the Kurdish people of Sine are generally Sunni; however, there are Shiite immigrants from other Kurdish cities in Rojhelat, such as Qurwe, Bijar, Kirmashan, and Ilam, which are mainly Shiite.

Responses to the Questions

In this section, we provide an overview of the answers to the questions posed on female gender and political identity. In terms of the existence of gender discrimination, a majority of the sample population, 147 respondents (63.3%), believed there was much or very much discrimination, 44 (19%) had no idea, and 38 (16.4%) believed there was little or no discrimination; 3 people (1.3%) did not answer. Here, the reason for the high number of people who have no idea is that they have no awareness and do not think about such a problem. However, this is

not important for them.

About their opinion on the sentence "femaleness is one of the obstacles to their progress," 135 respondents (58.2%) agreed strongly or very strongly with the sentence, 37 (15.9%) had no idea, 55 (23.7%) disagreed strongly or very strongly, and 5 (2.2%) did not answer. On the sentence "to make an attempt to eliminate gender discrimination is a part of my main life plans," 130 respondents (56.1%) agreed strongly or very strongly, 82 (35.3%) had no idea, 14 (6%) disagreed strongly or very strongly, and 6 (2.6%) did not answer. It is therefore clear that the majority of respondents think there is gender discrimination in society (see Figure 1).

Concerning political identity, as previously mentioned, we asked questions in two parts: personal perspective and political action. In relation to the first, 114 persons (49.1%) agreed with the sentence "I am often in touch with those who politically think like me," 76 (32.8%) had no opinion, 34 (14.7%) disagreed, and 8 (3.4%) did not answer the question. Here, one reason for the high number of people who had no opinion may be that they preferred not to answer.

In terms of defining themselves, 40 respondents (17.2%) saw themselves as Iranian, 109 (47%) and a clear majority as Kurdish, 19 (8.2%) as religious, 4 (1.7%) as rich, 45 (19.4%) using other labels, and 15 (6.5%) did not answer. In terms of study and reading for pleasure, 33 (14.2%) noted that they read religious studies, 8 (3.4%) mentioned Leftist (socialist-Marxist) studies, 37 (15.9%) that they like to read material related to Kurdish nationalism, and 26 (11.2%) women's studies, while 110 persons (47.4%) mentioned other subjects or they had no such area of interest, and 18 (7.8%) did not answer. In relation to the high number of participants who mentioned not having any such interest, it should be noted that the rate of per capita book reading in Iran is generally very low.[3]

In terms of political thought, 20 (8.6%) sympathized intellectually with the Iranian principlist religious faction,[4] 77 (33.2%) with the Iranian reformist reli-

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[3] See the following websites, accessible as of 10/7/2020:
https://en.irna.ir/news/2733964/More-libraries-for-schools
https://www.radiofarda.com/a/per-capita-study-of-iranians/29968466.html
https://donya-e-eqtesad.com; https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/08/23/2140656/
https://www.statista.com/statistics/696925/book-reading-frequency-countries-worldwide/
https://www.indy100.com/article/the-countries-that-read-the-most-books-7348401

[4] In Iran there are in fact no real political parties. Because of the lack of party freedom, all parties are Shiite-Islamic and affiliated to the regime. Within the regime, all groups are divided into two factions: principlist/fundamentalist and reformist. Therefore, within formal politics people relate politically to one of these factions.

gious faction, 41 (17.7%) with Kurdish nationalists, 11 (4.7%) with socialists, 34 (14.7%) with Sunni Islamists (Maktab Quran, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists), and 49 (21.1%) did not answer the question.

In the second part of the questionnaire, relating to the criteria by which they would decide which candidate to support in parliamentary elections, 14 (6%) mentioned the candidate's being religious, 44 (19%) their being Kurdish, 3 (1.3%) their being female, 130 (56.1%) their having a high level of education, background, and good management, 11 (4.7%) the candidate's political faction and party, and 30 (12.9%) did not answer the question. Here, based on the fact that 42.2% of respondents in the study were female, the lack of interest in selecting female candidates showed that women themselves do not believe in their political ability.

Concerning affiliation to and practical support of political trends, 10 respondents (4.3%) showed a preference for the Iranian principlist faction, 43 (18.5%) the Iranian reformist faction, 37 (15.9%) the Kurdish nationalists, 9 (3.9%) the socialists, and 20 (8.6%) the Sunni Islamists, while 113 (48.7%) did not answer the question.

Analysis of Hypotheses

In this section, the role of the female gender in shaping political identity and the extent of that effect is clarified by examining the research hypotheses and the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. According to the normal distribution test of the data, the obtained significance level for female gender
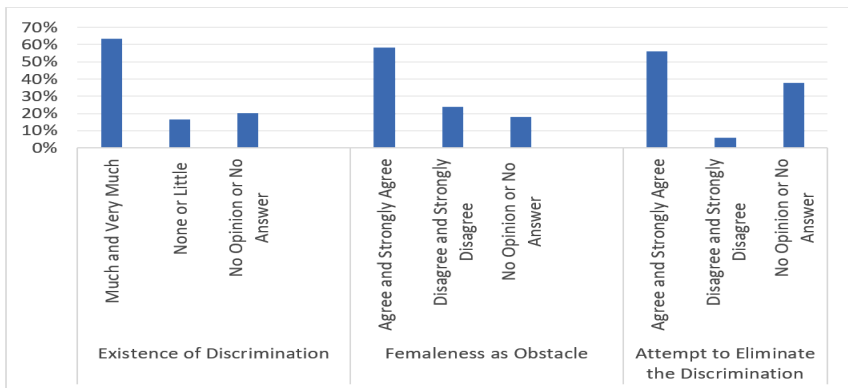

Figure 1. Measuring the perception of the female gender situation.

Table 1

The Relationship between Female Gender and Political Identity

Variable	Political Identity			
Female Gender	Number	Correlation coefficient	Significance level	Coefficient of determination
	232	0.217**	0.001	4.708%
** $p < 0.001$				

was less than 0.05. Thus, with a confidence interval (CI) of 0.95, it can be said that the distribution of data related to the variable is non-normal. In terms of political identity, the significance level was above 0.05. So, with a 0.95 CI, it can be said that the distribution of data related to the variable is normal.

Although "gender dynamics do not operate alone but intersect in many ways with social, historical, and political dynamics" (Orhan, 2019), referring to the hypothesis, the analysis indicates that there is a meaningful correlation between the two variables of female gender and political identity.

The Spearman test result shows that the obtained significance level is less than 0.05, so the zero hypothesis is rejected, and the opposite hypothesis is accepted. In other words, with a CI of 0.95, it can be said that there is a significant correlation between female gender and political identity.

The results indicate a positive and direct significant correlation between the two variables (r=0.217). In addition, the coefficient of determination shows that female gender explains 4.708% of the political identity of Kurdish youth and the residual is attributable to the other factors. Hence, the research hypothesis is supported.

According to the above-mentioned findings, most of the respondents reported that there is gender discrimination in relation to women and the femininity and sexuality of women, which is a barrier to their progression. Nevertheless, a significant percentage of the respondents had no idea or opinion about the elimination of this discrimination, and it was not a part of their life plans. Even the women themselves did not care about women and their gender identity as a criterion for selecting candidates in the elections in order to make at least a little change in the situation, although the political system does not allow such changes. While the respondents acknowledged the presence of various political problems, gender inequality included, they were afraid to participate in gatherings aimed at achieving their rights. This is a result of the lack of an open political space on the one hand, and the lack of studying, the existence of socio-religious stereotypes, the weak political culture, and the political incuriosity and inactivity of individuals in society on

the other. Such a situation has not favored the cause of women.

As the demographic features show, we examined the role and effect of the female gender by asking both males and females the questions. The viewpoint of men, who were more than women in this research, shows their perception of the situation of the female gender and the context in which women live. Iran's socio-political situation has strengthened a certain type of female gender in favor of masculinity. Not only men but also women see politics as a masculine male-centered arena. Based on the results, the male gender plays the major role in politics in Rojhelat. Indeed, the masculine space does not allow the anti-hegemonic female gender to play a significant role in politics at all. In Iran, politics is still considered a masculine domain. The dominant political culture is based on the traditional male-centered view, in which there is limited opportunities for women's political participation. It has affected the role of the female gender in political identity, so that it does not emerge and is not visible in the political arena. The Islamic regime's political policy, as previously mentioned, has reinforced such a masculine political space. It has made the political space inaccessible to any unapproved actors. On the one hand, secular parties and women's rights advocates have no freedom. On the other hand, women are restricted by Islamic laws, which are regulated in a patriarchal context. The regime has totalitarian control over women and there is no freedom for them to be involved in political activities. While patriarchy is also prevalent in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, and Islamic law reigns supreme in their courts, the existence of a totalitarian Islamic system distinguishes Iran from these countries, meaning that the position and role of women in politics in other parts of Kurdistan are somewhat better than Rojhelat (Erel & Acik, 2020).

As Orhan (2019, p. 273) mentions, "Kurdish women experience the historical and political conflict in the same way as Kurdish men when it is perceived purely in ethnic terms." However, the role of Kurdish women in Rojhelat's general political arena is much less. Some Kurdish men legally participate in Iranian politics by silencing their ethnic and secular or non-Shiite religious identities and refraining from outlining any significant demands in this regard; however, such a possibility is very limited for Kurdish women because of their gender. In addition, while Kurdish men are active in non-legal ethno-political activity, this is less possible for Kurdish women because of the challenging consequences. Thus, non-legal political spaces have often become a masculine domain. Moreover, they are also dominated to a certain extent by the traditional stereotypes of Kurdish society, which often views politics as a masculine arena. So, there is a significant or meaningful correlation between female gender and political identity. However, given re-

spondents' responses and the context in which masculine domination and religion reinforce each other, here it is mostly the official hegemonic female gender that is a social determinant of political identity, not an agency-based anti-hegemonic female gender. Females have a lower chance of perceiving themselves as socio-political agents and actors than their male counterparts. "Being locked indoors reduces a woman's social, cultural, and economic capital, and thus separates her from the power structures. As a result, [⋯] her agency is more restricted than that of a man" (Orhan, 2019, p. 275). It leads to women's agency-based gender having a reduced role in shaping and determining the political identity of individuals in society and a low level of political participation.

It should be noted that the political consciousness of Kurdish women differs by generation, and their political identity varies across historical generations in response to prevailing socio-political conditions. Unlike the generation of the 1979 Revolution and its immediate aftermath, when Kurdish women became more aware of their rights under the influence of Kurdish secular political parties, the next Kurdish female generation was less political because of Iran's closed political conditions. Nevertheless, awareness has grown among the current generation under the influence of social media, which has also created opportunities for intergenerational relations. In this new condition, the more political generation of revolutionary and post-revolutionary women in the Kurdish movement, which was also involved in political violence, tries to transmit its experience to the new generation. Political consciousness formed in different circumstances and developed over time, as well as "historical dispositions formed under repressive and violent conditions" (ibid., 280), are passed down from the earlier to the later generation. Although generations have different experiences, such relationships affect the political awareness of the part of the new generation who are in connection with the old, which can result in an increase in the extent to which the anti-hegemonic female gender shapes the political identity of Kurdish youth.

Conclusions

The present study shows that Kurdish individual identity is a multi-dimensional identity. Gender, identifying as Kurdish or Iranian, religion, class, and other social factors, each represents one dimension of this identity. The different identity aspects affect the individual and the collective political identity of the Kurdish people, and depending on a society's current socio-political situation, one or more of these aspects can be more important. Thus, according to Jenkins's theory, we can

say that both female gender and political identity, as with other social identities, are revealed in socio-political practices and processes. If there is no open political space for individual activities in relation to most of the above-mentioned identity dimensions, the role of these aspects in shaping and determining the political identity of individuals, and consequently their effects on politics, are not as great, despite their general influence and social importance among the people. This is the situation in Iran because of the existence of a non-democratic government and in Rojhelat due to its specific political situation.

The impact of political power on the manifestation and visualization of social factors in the public and political arena, as Jenkins and other scholars have mentioned, is clearly seen in Iran. The Iranian government has used both legal and institutional means to ensure that few identity groups, such as gender and ethnic groups, have been allowed to emerge and become active in the political arena. The Perso-Shiite government has developed institutional categories of political participation that exclude some groups and impedes their efforts to shape a political identity. It has supported and imposed male-centered Fars-Iranian and religious identities, and has resisted efforts to promote agency-based anti-hegemonic female gender and non-Fars ethnic identities. Thus, it has attempted to change or diminish unapproved social identities. This has also had a significant effect on the political identities of different groups of people. If organizations related to a specific identity are excluded from the political space and prevented from engaging in activities, that identity becomes politically weak. However, different factors affect women's participation in politics, the role of their gender in shaping the political identity of individuals, and the extent to which they identify themselves as political agents and maybe actors. The influence of a traditional culture with socio-cultural stereotypes and the existence of a non-democratic religious government, have strengthened an official hegemonic female gender. In this context, women's agency has weakened. The situation has favored men and has provided a platform for them to overwhelm the political arena.

In Rojhelat, taking the general Iranian context into consideration as well, equal opportunities for an individual's identity aspects and various social factors to manifest themselves and take an active part in politics do not exist, and this is especially the case for the agency-based anti-hegemonic female gender. On the contrary, the government has engaged in special efforts to expand its favorite religious institutions, which hardly assists individuals in shaping their identities. Hence, in the current situation, there is a significant relationship between official hegemonic female gender and political identity, means the role and influence of female agency

has generally been limited in influencing the youth political identity in Rojhelat and is less effective in politics. Granting all this, if the situation were to change and a secular democratic space appear, it would probably become a more determinant factor of political identity, and women as political agents could therefore become more active in the political arena.

Acknowledgement

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