



Perceptions of gender roles and freedom among Iranian international students in Hungary

Sara Hosseini-Nezhad^{a,*}, Saba Safdar^b, Lan Anh Nguyen Luu^c

^a Doctoral School of Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, Hungary

^b University of Guelph, 4017 Mackinnon Extension, 50 Stone Rd E, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1, Canada

^c Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), 1075 Budapest, Kazinczy Street 23–27, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated attitudes toward gender roles and perception of freedom among Iranian students ($n = 20$) in Hungary. Four topics were extracted from the abductive content analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts: (1) gender essentialism, (2) gender-role egalitarianism, (3) traditional gender stereotypes, and (4) gendered freedom. Results indicated that: many men adopted gender essentialism, although women did not; men held transitional gender-role attitudes, whereas women held egalitarian gender-role attitudes; men generally displayed greater gender stereotypes and sexism as compared to women; almost all students, regardless of gender, endorsed gender equality and freedom and reported feeling more freedom in Hungary than in Iran; although, women expressed greater outrage over gender inequality and put greater emphasis on gender role differences; some forms of freedom in Hungary seemed to be more of a privilege to one gender than the other (e.g., no veiling requirement for women and relaxed cross-gender relationship for men).

1. Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, attitudes toward gender roles have become more egalitarian among both men and women (Sweeting et al., 2014). However, a majority of studies on gender differences in relation to such attitudes have found that females generally hold more egalitarian gender-role attitudes than males, while males hold more traditional gender-role attitudes (Brewster & Padavic, 2000; Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Larsen & Long, 1988; Van De Vijver, 2007).

This study employed abductive content analysis (a combination of inductive and deductive approach) to qualitatively investigate gender-role attitudes among Iranian students in Hungary and provide further in-depth investigations of perception of freedom, and specifically what aspects of freedom in Hungary are perceived to privilege one gender over the other.

We believe investigating gender roles and freedom perceptions expand knowledge about Iranian students abroad due to various reasons. Generally, international students' mobility has been under-investigated in the global migration studies, and only in the last few years has the international student migration research has been rising increasingly (King & Sondhi, 2016). Second, there is a dearth of research examining gender-role attitudes of international students; only a few

empirical research found that has “specifically” investigated gender-role attitudes among foreign students, all of which are at least two decades old (e.g., Gibbons et al., 1989, 1991, 1997; Matsui, 1995). Additionally, in migration research, the emphasis on gender and gender role transformation has been traditionally overlooked (Farahani, 2018).

Furthermore, Iranians' attitudes about gender and freedom could be unique, complex, yet contradictory as Iran' history is marked with periodic and abrupt socioeconomic and political turmoil and upheaval (e.g., religion shift from Zoroastrianism to Islam after the Arab Muslim invasion of Persia in the 7th century, Shi'a Islam enforced as an official state religion in 15th century by Safavid Dynasty, Persian Constitutional Revolution 1905–1911, 1921 Persian coup, forced unveiling of women in 1934 ordered by Reza Khan, nationalization of oil movement in 1951–1953, 1953 Iranian coup, the revolution in 1979, Iran-Iraq war 1980–1988, the Green movement in 2009, etc.). It is reported that abrupt transition and shift in socioeconomic situations inevitably lead to the crisis in gender roles (e.g., uncertainty and confusion) (Aidala, 1985).

Gender roles were mainly controlled by the family before the Iranian revolution in 1979, with limited state-law involvement; nevertheless, after the revolution, state law has been governing gender roles and sexuality (Mahdavi, 2009). The revolution created a major transition in

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: sara_hosseininezhad@yahoo.com (S. Hosseini-Nezhad), ssafdar@uoguelph.ca (S. Safdar), lananh@ppk.elte.hu (L.A. Nguyen Luu).

gender roles, and the government pursued a plan that sought to overturn much of Iranian women's political and social advances over the past century (Afary, 1996). After the revolution, a contradiction has been put upon Iranian women (Malekan, 2015). A woman is not supposed to be treated the same way her foremothers were, nor is she expected to be a "Westernized" woman. She must be the pivotal member of the family, a decent wife, a devoted mother while adhering to cultural and religious norms. On the other hand, she is supposed to be a "modern" woman who is well-educated and involved in socio-political and cultural issues (Malekan, 2015).

Meanwhile, it is shown that for foreign sojourners, being exposed to a new culture is a transformative experience (Brown, 2009). This transformation could be more salient for the Iranian students in Hungary who have moved from a non-secular country governed by Islamic (Sharia) laws which is comparatively more traditional with less gender-egalitarian rules compared to Hungary, which is secular. According to the *World Economic Forum* (2020), Hungary ranks higher in indices of gender equality compared to Iran. Furthermore, in contrast to Hungary, Iran is more traditional and religious (*World Values Survey [WVS]*, 2020).

It is reported that people are prone to display more egalitarian gender attitudes while exposed to a gender-egalitarian setting outside their country (Pessin & Arpino, 2018). However, it is noteworthy mentioning that there is no country in the world that has completely fulfilled the pledge of gender equality (*Equal Measures 2030*, n.d.). Hungary is also not an exception; the Hungarian government has actively sought to exclude the terms "gender" and "gender equality" from EU records and have targeted women's and LGBTIQ's rights (Zalan, 2020). However, compared to Hungary, Iran has imposed more stringent and traditional gender roles, which will be discussed in greater depth later.

Overall, "international" and "cross-cultural" studies enhance knowledge regarding gender roles and gender-role attitudes and shed light on theoretical issues in research about gender roles (Gibbons et al., 1997).

2. Theoretical framework

Two different theories, namely evolutionary theory (Buss, 1997) and social structural theory (West & Zimmerman, 1987), address gender differences in human behaviour. Evolutionary theory claims gender differences in personality traits as psychological propensities that evolved through hereditarily-mediated adjustments to primitive contexts; meanwhile, social structural theory considers gender differences as a result of the gendered division of labor (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

The theories of gender essentialism and social constructionism each attempt to account for gender differences and correspond to variations of laypeople's speculations about certain social categories and distinctions (Klysing, 2020). Gender essentialists perceive gender as a biological category, as "natural, discrete, immutable, and historically persisting" (Klysing, 2020, p. 254). In contrast, social constructionist theories do not perceive gender as an innate category but rather as a social category which "performs a hierarchical, organizing function of individuals in society" (Klysing, 2020, p. 254).

The gender division of labor constructs psychological differences and similarities between the sexes—which in turn give rise to beliefs about gender roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012). It is argued that the gendered division of labor for women in the paid labor force has the implication that women are less likely to be regarded as career employees and more likely as "pin money" workers and that they are appropriate for certain part-time/low-wage jobs that are seen as relevant to women's caring and nurturing roles (e.g., office worker) (Rubin, 1997). On the contrary, males have been thought to be exempted from household roles, allowing them to have long-term full-time employment that involves occupations seen as requiring logic, authority, and executive abilities, which are significantly correlated with masculine and male traits (Rubin, 1997).

Researchers have suggested three different gender-role attitudes: Traditional, Egalitarian (non-traditional), and Transitional (Helgeson, 2012; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Traditional gender-role attitudes reflect the belief that women should perform the role of housekeeper or caregiver, and should be caring and nurturing, while men should assume the role of the primary financial provider (the "breadwinner") for the family and should be assertive and independent. On the other hand, belief in egalitarian gender roles entails believing in equal and shared roles between females and males (Blackstone, 2003; Helgeson, 2012). Finally, transitional gender-role attitudes are a combination of traditional and egalitarian gender-role attitudes (Helgeson, 2012; Hochschild & Machung, 1989).

Attitudes on gender roles are different between groups within a society (Walter, 2018). Kiani et al. (2009) assessed gender egalitarianism among Iranian students and employees in Iran. Women displayed more egalitarian attitudes when compared to males; the former also desired equal rights with the latter (Kiani et al., 2009). Similar results were found among students in Jordan (El Kharouf & Daoud, 2019) and China (Zuo et al., 2018).

Attitudes—including those on gender—could be stereotypical. Gender stereotypes are either descriptive or prescriptive: Descriptive stereotypes are based on beliefs on what females and males are typically like and how they behave, while prescriptive stereotypes are based on ideas about what females and males are expected to be like and how they should behave (Koenig, 2018; Safdar & Kosakowska-Berezecka, 2015).

Rafatjah (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 14 studies about gender stereotypes in Iran in both public (i.e., in the job market and higher education) and private (i.e., family) spheres. Although it was reported that gender stereotypes have been decreasing in both individual Iranians and the country's social institutions; it was also reported that gender stereotypes are still persistent in both public (e.g., a significant portion of the labor market remains masculine) and domestic spheres (e.g., household chores are considered feminine).

This study further illustrates the gendered perception of freedom among Iranian students in Hungary. Hungary, compared with Iran, ranks higher on a broad range of freedoms such as personal, political, and economic freedom (i.e., equality, political engagement, freedom of speech, personal autonomy, religion, safety, etc.) (Freedom House, 2020; United Nations Association Coventry Branch, 2019).

Following the Iranian revolution, significant transitions of gender relations took place (Paidar, 2001). Gender segregation outside the household was implemented, and women were forced to wear the veil (*hijab*). Women were forbidden from being judges or presidents; they could not travel, study and work without the permission of either their father or spouse (Paidar, 2001). Some of the other discriminatory laws imposed against Iranian women were in the areas of marriage (e.g., the legal age for marriage was initially 9, then changed to 13 in 2002; men are allowed to have four wives, and women only one husband); divorce (e.g., women cannot get divorced from their husbands unless they provide a proof to the court that their husbands are psychologically ill, abusive, or drug abuser); inheritance (e.g., a daughter receive half the share of the inheritance) (Hanna, 2020); and criminal law (e.g., in the court women's testimony worth half of men's) (Freedom House, 2017).

Furthermore, the law prohibits women from having pre-marital sex (Motamedi et al., 2016), as well as pre-marital relationship (AKA white marriage), which is becoming more and more widespread; however, the government has lately started to adopt a less strict approach toward young Iranians (Home Office, 2019). Iranian women are expected to be modest and control their sexuality; however, men are not expected to be like this to a similar degree (Nahidi et al., 2018). Although the restrictive laws were more imposed against women, men have also reportedly faced restrictions for their clothing styles and behaviours; they reported being harassed by the morality police because of their hairstyle, wearing jeans, and short-sleeved and logo T-shirts, and so on (Gerami, 1996).

Previous literature shows that Iranian students reported having more freedom and independence in Hungary than in Iran (Hosseini-Nezhad

et al., 2019). We further expand the previous literature and investigate Iranian students' gender-based perceptions and experiences of freedom in Hungary and assess what aspects of freedom female and male students embrace and how they benefit from the freedom available to them in Hungary.

3. Aim of the study

This study aims to investigate gender differences regarding gender-role attitudes and perception of freedom among Iranian students in Hungary. We explored how the students subjectively experienced freedom and what aspects of freedom in Hungary were perceived as advantageous for each gender.

The primary research questions are as follows:

- Q1: How Iranian men and women in Hungary perceive gender role differences?
- Q2: How Iranian men and women in Hungary perceive freedom?

4. Method

This cross-sectional qualitative study utilized an abductive approach (integration of inductive and deductive analysis) to content analysis (Nyquist et al., 2019), conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with Iranian undergraduate and graduate students in Budapest, Hungary, over the course of five months from October 2017 to February 2018. This research is part of a broader longitudinal study; however, only the results from the first round of interviews will be examined. This study received ethical permission from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at a university in Budapest, Hungary.

4.1. Participants

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Iranian graduate and undergraduate students (13 males and seven females). Participants were between the age of 18 and 36, and their mean age was 25.8 (SD = 5.59). Students were mainly recruited via Facebook groups and snowball sampling. A total of 25% of the students were graduates, and 75% were undergraduate students, and their language of study was English. The study fields of the participants were Medicine (n = 5), Psychology (n = 4), Dentistry (n = 4), Pharmacy (n = 3), Fine Arts (n = 1), Business Administration and Management (n = 1), International Relations (n = 1), and Architecture (n = 1). At the time of the interview, the average duration of students' stay in Hungary was 4.22 years (SD = 3.52). The minimum length of stay was six months, and the maximum period of stay was 14 years.

4.2. Procedures

Before each interview, the first author, who is fluent in Persian and English, explained the purpose of the study to the participants—each of whom gave their consent to participate in the study. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face and audiotaped with the permission of the participants and averaged approximately 1 to 2 h. Apart from the three interviews conducted in English, the remaining interviews were conducted in Persian. The interviews were transcribed and translated on *oTranscribe* software.

4.3. Materials

4.3.1. Semi-structured interview questions

At the beginning of the interview, questions eliciting demographic information from the participants were asked, including their age, gender, marital status, level of education, language competency level, financial status, etc. The semi-structured interview included a combination of closed and open-ended questions pertaining to various

topics—including perceptions of gender role differences, psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, and perceptions of freedom. Examples of interview questions include: “What do you think about the differences between men and women in society?,” “What about these differences in Hungary? and Iran?,” and “How does it feel to be outside of Iran?”

5. Data analysis

An abductive approach (Nyquist et al., 2019) to qualitative content analysis was used. Abduction is considered a sort of deduction and induction combination (Eriksson & Lindström, 1997).

The inductive content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) part guided us to analyze the data (e.g., the procedure entails open coding, and category, sub-category, and topic development). In the first phase of analysis, the first author familiarized herself with the data by listening to the data. In the second phase, the interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim in *oTranscribe* software. The whole interview was considered as the unit of analysis; each interview was then divided based on paragraphs or sentences (meaning units). Codes were created from the meaning units. The first and third authors performed the initial open coding on Atlas.ti line-by-line. All the authors reviewed the initial codes for similarity in content and thereafter consolidated the codes into code groups (or sub-categories) on Atlas.ti. In Code Manager, the authors classified 59 code groups for the interviews. Similar code groups were merged into categories on Atlas.ti and were then incorporated into potential topics. Topics identified with the initial research questions were created by combining similar categories. Below, we present examples of meaning units and codes (Table 1) and sub-categories, categories, and topics (Table 2) related to the research questions.

After an inductive content analysis was completed, we utilized and operationalized deductive content analysis relying on prior knowledge and theories presented in the “theoretical framework” section, which proceeded our study from general observation to a specific conclusion (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

6. Results

The results are presented in the form of the following four categories: (1) gender essentialism, (2) gender-role egalitarianism, (3) traditional gender stereotypes, and (4) gendered freedom.

6.1. Gender essentialism

Many Iranian men attributed differences in gender roles to biological attributes, and they considered these differences natural. One student, when asked about his general ideas and feelings on gender role differences, reported:

“I see it [gender role difference] as something evolutionary ... it's a natural evolution” (P5, male, 18 years old, 2 years in Hungary).

This youngest male student perceived gender differences through the lens of evolution, in essence, believing that the differences between

Table 1
Meaning units condensation to formulate codes.

Meaning unit	Code
“Every gender has a unique physiology and is made for something. That's why it [difference] is normal.”	Physiological differences in gender.
	Gender-role differences as natural.
“In Iran, when you go to the library, you have to cover up and wear the hijab. Here you can go out with the opposite sex and study together.”	Compulsory <i>hijab</i> in Iran. Freedom to have opposite-sex friendships in Hungary.
	Opposing the degree of freedom.

Table 2
Emerg ed topics through analyses of the interview transcripts.

Topics	Categories	Code groups (sub-categories)
Gender essentialism	Evolution and gender differences	Evolutionary perspectives on gender role differences
	Physiology and gender differences	Physiological differences explains gender-role
	Support gender equality	Unfair social expectations from women
Gender-role egalitarianism	Against gender inequality in Iran	Against gender inequality in Iran
Traditional gender stereotypes	Gender stereotype and physical strength	Men are stronger than women
	Gender stereotype and personality	Women are more sensitive
	Gender stereotype and behaviour	Women seduce a lot
Gendered freedom	Freedom of clothing	No morality police in Hungary Hijab freedom in Hungary
	Freedom of relationship	Men free to have many relationships Women more conservative in relationships

females and males are best explained in terms of biological adaptations. He believed that these differences are not “bad” or “evil”; but rather “normal,” as they have existed in certain countries since “70 years ago” and continue to exist today. However, he acknowledged that gender role differences are changing in “today’s culture.” Perhaps he meant shifting away from essentialist or traditional ones and more toward egalitarian stance, adding that in the past, certain groups became “very irritated” over disparities, and as they eventually noticed that their attitudes and behaviours were “unacceptable,” thus, they “strive[d] for a change.”

Similarly, another male student explained the gender role gap in terms of biology, stating that females and males are inherently different because of their biological differences:

“I see gender roles in terms of their biological differences” (P12, male, 20 years old, 3 years in Hungary).

He emphasized that “it’s a reality that biological differences exist.” He justified his gender essentialism by arguing that even in the “Scandinavian nations” where both females and males have equal freedom to choose an occupation, the number of female nurses already exceeds the number of males. Consequently, he argued, “certain skills and tendencies in women lead them to seek occupations with more feminine characteristics.” He attributed a fixed gender role to women, assuming that men and women are innately distinct in their interests. His gender essentialist view has probably fostered and reinforced his gender-stereotyped beliefs.

Gender-essentialist attitudes of a few older men were entwined with anti-feminist or feminist stereotypical sentiments. One male student pointed out that men and women are physiologically different and gender role distinctions are “natural”:

“We are not equal at all, not psychologically nor physiologically ... I think it’s a beautiful feeling to see differences naturally within yourself and the opposite sex” (P17, male, 33 years old, 2 years in Hungary).

He further contended that particularly in “Western countries” owing to “equalization of men and women,” these “natural differences” between men and women are not adequately represented. This was his reason why he felt “uncomfortable” when he noticed women with “short and dyed hair” who looked like “feminists,” not that he “hates” them, he added; nevertheless, he thought that in fact, “men and women should not be physiologically and mentally equivalent” as this is what the “nature demands it.” He thought it would be “problematic” for him to connect with a “feminist” woman. Women with that particular look that he considered “no way attractive” was probably indicative of “feminists” losing their feminine nature since it was not “natural” for a woman to look like a

man.

Likewise, another graduate male student who was also very much against restrictions placed on the women in Iran, and criticized the Iranian government for it, used gender essentialism with resistance to feminists approaches regarding the natural differences:

I don't think that they [men and women] are equal in any way at all. It would be impractical to see it through a feminist lens. I often deal with reality. In fact, men and women vary greatly and are very distinct ... Men and women have the right to be equal, but having equal rights does not mean that men and women are equal. No, men and women are not equivalent at all. (P11, male, 28 years old, 7 years in Hungary)

The gender essentialist’s view would strongly suggest that some male students perceive and accept differences in gender roles as natural, inevitable, and unchangeable. Although several Iranian men have made statements supporting gender equality, it seems that they prefer retaining the status quo’s gender role inequalities.

In this study, no women held gender essentialist views, meaning that they did not connect gender role disparities to biological factors; instead, they only attributed them to social factors. This is apparent in the responses presented in the following section summarizing the gender-egalitarian views of some of the participants.

6.2. Gender-role egalitarianism

As highlighted above, although many Iranian male students attributed gender role differences to biological factors, others attributed these differences to social factors, manifesting itself in gender-egalitarian attitudes. In general, Iranian men were more likely to hold transitional gender-role attitudes compared to their female counterparts, who were more inclined to hold egalitarian gender-role attitudes.

Many Iranian male students endorsed the advancement of women and their equal rights in society, the family, and the law. Indeed, the oldest male student stated:

“In society, there shouldn't be a lot of differences [in terms of gender roles]; I mean regarding the laws ... The same laws that exist for men should also exist for women” (P8, male, 36 years old, 14 years in Hungary).

He perceived the laws in Iran as “more strict” than those in Hungary, providing an example of the laws enforced by academic institutions, including rigid laws for “dress code” enforced primarily on women, as well as men.

Another male student who previously held gender essentialism and shared his disagreement with the feminist point of view on explaining gender disparities in roles ironically expressed his opposition against gender-unequal laws in Iran and vocalized his frustration with unjust laws in Iran which are weighted in favour of men, and deemed women as inferior to men.

“I believe that men and women deserve equal opportunities. ... In Iran, the inheritance law ... is not logical ... A woman cannot serve as a judge in Iran ... These issues are entirely women's rights” (P11, male, 28 years old, 7 years in Hungary).

A younger male student similarly supported gender equality, asserting:

“Generally, it's not a good thing [gender role difference] ... Everything should be equal” (P9, male, 21 years old, 1 year in Hungary).

Generally speaking, Iranian women emphasized inequality in gender roles more than males. One female student noted the inequalities in gender-based wage and hiring discrimination, expressing her concern about the gender pay gap, as well as the fact that women continue to be hired less and earn less money than men.

"I think it's not equal [the gender role] ... Even in the U.S., men are more frequently hired and with a higher salary than women. I think it must be equal" (P2, female, 31 years old, 7 years in Hungary).

This female student proceeded to support women's right and was quite upset that "gender role inequality" has remained an "unresolved" issue in "21st century" and that women everywhere are "pushed" to believe in pursuing professions that are "easier" and "less demanding" merely because they would "have a family" in the future. However, she was delighted that women would not hold back when she claimed that women are more employed in male-dominated fields as "bankers," "doctors," "surgeons," and their numbers are higher than men at the university. She wished that "nothing stops a woman from achieving her dreams."

Similarly, other women expressed resentment toward and emotional protest against the differences in gender roles.

"It [gender role difference] upsets me. I believe that men and women should have equal rights" (P19, female, 33 years old, 5 months in Hungary).

This newcomer student said that she has not yet witnessed gender-role disparities in Hungary; nevertheless, she argued that Iran's gender-role inequality is "deeply disappointing." What made her "really upset" was hearing men say such "things" were "masculine" or that they are "ghairati."¹

In contrast, another female student who also "dislike[d]" gender-role difference and was "highly defensive" about it stated that, contrary to her expectations, gender role disparities in Hungarians' "mentality" are the same as those in Iranians', as she said, her Hungarian boyfriend's gender stereotypical opinions proved to her that Hungarians are not "familiar" with the concept of "gender equality."

"Anytime I try to go up the ladder, my boyfriend tells me no, no, no, this is not your job" (P15, female, 30 years old, 3 years in Hungary)

Another female student noted:

"It [gender role difference] doesn't sit well with me, because I think there shouldn't be any differences between men and women" (P16, female, 24 years old, 1.5 years in Hungary).

She emphasized that gender role differences were more evident among Iranians in Hungary who came directly from Iran. She believed Iranian women feel expected to behave according to the demands of their respective gender roles based on Iranian social and cultural norms.

"I think here [in Hungary] you feel it [gender role difference] more, especially among Iranians, because they have come from Iran and have Iranian culture ... Girls feel they should behave in a specific way."

One student expressed her feelings regarding gender inequality, noting that she felt as if she were not equal to her brother and was treated differently as such:

"I compare myself to my brother ... I wish I were in the place of my brother ... There is no justice, at least not for Iranians" (P3, female, 22 years old, 2 years in Hungary).

Although her family was secular and non-religious, she still appeared to believe that her parents had more control over her than her brother.

¹ "Ghairat is an important phenomenon in Iranian culture ... It is a distinctive set of thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with violations of namoos*, a set of people and entities one feels protective toward. People who are prone to ghairat are described as ghairati" (Srivastava, 2020, para. 6). * "Namoos represents people (e.g., one's partner and family members) and entities (e.g., one's country, religion, gender category, sports team) toward which a person feels a strong connection and a tendency to protect" (Razavi et al., 2020, p.3).

She expressed that she was "upset" that she did not feel as much "freedom" as her brother, she could not "easily travel," spend time with her friends "after midnight," and "sleepover" at their place as much as his brother could.

6.3. Traditional gender stereotypes

Iranian males supported gender equality and egalitarian gender roles; however, many of them still held traditional attitudes and stereotypes regarding gender. Generally, Iranian men held more rigid gender stereotypes than women who adopted much fewer gender stereotypes than males.

Students held stereotypes around such issues as occupational roles, relationships, behaviours, personality traits, and so forth. Many students believed that certain traits and abilities of each gender predispose members of the gender in question to different types of behaviours and activities.

One male pharmacy graduate student displayed evidence of gender stereotyping when discussing women's intimate relationships. He believed that women start relationships to fulfill their emotional or financial needs:

"I feel that if a woman wants to get to know a guy, it's more due to emotional reasons ... or it's only for financial matters. These things are becoming less frequent" (P8, male, 36 years old, 14 years in Hungary).

Meanwhile, he was delighted that women have become more "up-to-date" and "independent" in general and that they are no longer "dependent" in their interpersonal relationships.

A stereotypical conception concerning aging and marriage was retained by a male Ph.D. student who had a generalized view regarding men's and women's thoughts on marriage.

One of the challenges that women face and men don't is marriage. Because women are more concerned that by getting older, their physical appeal will diminish, they might have less opportunity to get married ... This is the opposite for men; the older a guy gets, the more mature he becomes, and the greater his opportunity for marriage. Women prefer to marry a mature man. Guys prefer to marry a young woman with a more attractive face than marrying an older woman. (P6, male, 33 years old, 6 years in Hungary)

This student's gender stereotype is reflected in the notion of "double standard of aging,"² in which society puts a stricter standard for beauty and age on women than men.

Another male student (P17, male, 33 years old, 2 years in Hungary) who formerly displayed feminist stereotypes also upheld traditional prescriptive gender stereotypes. He reported that he had seen a woman coming from a "bar," "urinating" in the street late at night, which he found "unexpected" and "cheap" for a "very stylish" woman doing such "behaviour" that did not "match" her "dress style." However, he said that seeing such behaviour now is "normal" unless seeing it "during the day," even in the "empty street." Paradoxically, in another part of the interview, he opposed the "restrictions" enforced by the Iranian regime on both men and women and was grateful that at least Iranian men and women feel more "mentally relaxed" in Hungary, where the government does not "guide" them on "how they should dress."

Some Iranian male participants furthermore expressed occupational gender-role stereotypes. For example, one student considered surgery as a masculine occupation:

² The double standard of aging coined by Susan Sontag "shows up most brutally in the conventions of sexual feeling, which presuppose a disparity between men and women that operates permanently to women's disadvantage" (Sontag, 1997, p.286). "Women are at a disadvantage because their sexual candidacy depends on meeting certain much stricter 'conditions' related to looks and age" (Sontag, 1997, p.287).

When I used to go to the hospitals, the only difference that I felt was that surgery for a woman is much more difficult ... Once a female doctor couldn't continue with the operation because orthopedic surgery is much more difficult for a woman. (P9, male, 21 years old, 1 year in Hungary)

However, in another part of the interview, he noted that gender role differences are “wrong” and that both genders should have “equal conditions.”

Other male students believed that some jobs were more appropriate for one gender than the other because they felt that different genders are more competent in some specific fields than others. One participant elaborated that men are more capable of doing jobs requiring strength, while women were better in occupations requiring more focus.

In the field of studies such as orthopedics, I am not saying women can't do it ... A man is physically stronger compared to a woman. Men have more power and can perform mechanical work better ... In some jobs that require more concentration ... women might be able to do it better compared to men. (P6, male, 33 years old, 6 years in Hungary)

One male student held stereotyped beliefs regarding different personality traits between genders:

“I think that psychologically, women are a little bit different from men ... Some men are psychologically stronger; women are a little bit weaker” (P8, male, 36 years old, 14 years in Hungary).

There were also statements exemplary of ambivalent sexism (e.g., hostile and benevolent sexism³) among Iranian male students in Hungary. One student stated, most women like to be “tidy” (P13, male, 20 years old, 5 years in Hungary). Another student believed women “seduce a lot” and passing exams at university is “easier” for them (P1, male, 32 years old, 8 years in Hungary). Another participant stated, “Professors are more easy going with girls during exams” (P18, male, 19 years old, 3.4 years in Hungary). Likewise, another student (p6, male, 33 years old, 6 years in Hungary) displayed hostile sexism with an anti-feminist discourse, stating that at university, he had seen male professors grading and treating females better, and vice versa or he had seen one of his female professors was “treating girls better,” since she was a “feminist.” On the one hand, he made gender stereotypes and sexist remarks; on the other hand, he disliked that in Iran, there is a traditional gender role belief that women should work “within the house” and men “outside the house”; and that women are “objectified.” Ironically, he condemned “sexism” that he considered being “extremely widespread” in Iran because of “gender segregation” that begins from “elementary schools” until “university,” unlike Hungary, where he believed there is no “sexist mindset” among the people since there is no “gender segregation” from childhood. Sexist attitudes were not only evident among male participants; only one female student displayed benevolent sexist values in her belief that women are more “sensitive” and “vulnerable” (P3, female, 22 years old, 2 years in Hungary).

6.4. Gendered freedom

We used the term “gendered freedom,” conceptualized as the processes by which freedom is experienced, perceived, and evaluated according to gender.

Iranian students generally reported feeling more freedom in Hungary than in Iran. Freedom or its relative lack were mentioned in various domains; the most frequently discussed topics concerning freedom included: freedom of speech, clothing, hairstyle, choosing relationships,

³ “Benevolent sexism encompasses subjectively positive (for the sexist) attitudes toward women in traditional roles: protective paternalism, idealization of women, and desire for intimate relations. Hostile sexism encompasses the negative equivalents on each dimension: dominative paternalism, derogatory beliefs, and heterosexual hostility” (Glick & Fiske, 1997, p. 119).

and sexual behaviour. It should be noted that a majority of Iranian participants belong to the upper-middle-class group. We observe that for the majority of them, freedom is defined by more “superficial” concerns (e.g., clothing or relationship freedom) rather than more fundamental questions of social justice (e.g., healthcare, employment, housing equality). Nonetheless, several participants have emphasized economic inequalities.

Some participants opposed the existence of morality police at universities who control students' appearance and clothing. They were dissatisfied with the existence of morality police at Iran's universities. They may have experienced anxiety any time they went to university in Iran, resulting in fear of being punished for their clothes or hairstyle. As one participant said:

At the university [in Hungary], it is easier for girls; in Iran, they have to wear the hijab ... However, here [Hungary], there is no restriction ... Guys always had to wear long pants [at the university in Iran]. Here [in Hungary] we can wear shorts and go to the university ... You can have any haircut and hairstyle you want. (P6, male, 33 years old, 6 years in Hungary)

Similarly, the oldest male student stated:

“When you go to university in Iran, they [the morality police] questions you: ‘Why did you wear a short-sleeved T-shirt?’ or question women why they have nail polish. Here the entrance guard doesn't exist ... Imagine you are heading off to university with a positive attitude in the hope of having a pleasant day, and then all of a sudden, you run into the university guard ... These things make you upset” (P8, male, 36 years old, 14 years in Hungary).

This participant appreciated the absence of morality police at Hungarian universities. As he continued:

What I have always liked about Hungary was that when we used to go to the university...we felt comfortable ... nobody was there to question our appearance, like ‘why did you dress like that?’ or ‘why your hair is like this?’ This was great that none of these mattered here [in Hungary].

He condemned the “strict” dress code “rules” in the Iranian “academic settings,” claiming they were “obstacles” and an “off-topic” issues and thus did not belong in such settings where students are meant to have a “free mind,” feel “motivated,” and “concentrated” on their studies. He felt that pushing rigid dress code law in an academic environment “decreases” students' “interests” in learning.

Iran's moral police are not confined to university environments. There are morality police in public areas that spot and arrest people who break the Islamic dress code, especially women with improper hijab. One participant criticized the Iranian government for interfering with people's private lives while also criticizing the country's obligatory veil for women.

In Iran ... you go out with the hijab ...From the perspective of the hijab, from controlling relationships, family pressure, morality police pressure ... Here, suddenly, all of these are being eliminated.

(P3, female, 22 years old, 2 years in Hungary)

She valued personal freedom; therefore, she preferred her social life in Hungary to that in Iran. As she further reported:

I enjoy my social life here more because of freedom, freedom in behaviour, freedom to do anything I want. Nobody picks on what you are wearing, on the music you're listening to. You are in your car, listening to loud music; nobody would interrupt you and question why your music is loud. You are trying to party, not stressed to drink alcohol, you go to a grocery shop nearby and buy it ... You can party with friends, and they[police] won't raid parties.

One male student spoke with deep dismay and anger about the Iranian regime's crackdown on "Girls of Revolution Street" —a women's peaceful protest against wearing compulsory headscarves.

"When you see Girls of Revolution Street being pushed off [the platform], it is hard to see these things ... It is hard when you see gender differences" (P20, male, 25 years old, 6.5 years in Hungary).

Excerpts from Iranian men suggest that they are well conscious that, relative to men, women in Iran do not have "many rights," "much freedom," and were "restricted" and "oppressed." They clarified that in Hungary, Iranian women encountered much more "freedom," "security," "safety," and felt greater "relaxation," and "less pressure" compared to Iran; or for them, Hungary is a "new world," or probably "hejab freedom attracts their attention faster." Consequently, some students felt that the degree of freedom enjoyed by Iranian women in Hungary was much greater than that enjoyed by Iranian men. "Possibly" because "men can achieve their goals in Iran; whereas, women can't since they have fewer opportunities available to them" (P8, male, 36 years old, 14 years in Hungary), or it is because Iranian men in Iran have more "freedom" and were "more social" than Iranian women (P7, male, 21 years old, 4.5 years in Hungary).

One female medical student addressed the feeling of freedom gained by being far-removed from the restrictions of the compulsory hijab, but also for other less tangible reasons:

"Many women don't want to wear it [the hijab] ... Besides the superficial things, here [Hungary] I think it's safer for a woman ... We are respected equally alongside men" (P2, female, 31 years old, 7 years in Hungary).

According to many students, the extent of freedom within relationships between men and women in Hungary is particularly striking. Many Iranian female students believed that Iranian men in Hungary have as much freedom as they had in Iran in terms of relationships. They also felt that Iranian men enjoy the freedom in Hungary more than Iranian women.

One female student said:

"Iranian guys have more freedom here [Hungary]. They go out, party, and they experience Hungarian and international girlfriends" (P4, female, 25 years old, 13 years in Hungary).

She explained that experiencing relationships for Iranian women also depends on their "personality type" and the "family culture" under which they have been raised; nevertheless, in any case, she thought that Iranian men had more "freedom" to explore "various international relationships." She put the blame on the fact that she had been "raised" in Iranian society, where "men and women are defined by separate roles." Therefore, she thought it is impossible to "persuade" herself that men and women are equal, as she was "born" and "grew up" in Iran; "in the end [she] is Iranian, [she] cannot copy foreigners." Additionally, She believed that gender inequality in the freedom to experience many relationships did not pertain to other international students, reasoning that men and women have equal relationship freedom in all those societies.

Similarly, other Iranian women perceived that Iranian men are more open to relationships and enjoy the freedom associated with forming different relationships to a greater extent than Iranian women. One female bachelor's student perceived such a big difference between boys' and girls' freedom—as well as the existence of a robust double standard. She expressed her feelings as follows:

I have always wished to be a boy, so I could be more free ... No problem happens if guys have many relationships; however, for a girl, even if she were only with one guy, people would talk behind her back. Then it would be harder for her to get married ... Guys who have had many girlfriends will choose a girl who hasn't had any relationship with anyone. (P3, female, 22 years old, 2 years in Hungary)

Another female student said:

Being a man and woman here [in Hungary] is not that different. However, perhaps this will affect your personality ... It might affect you later on. It will create a past. When you will go back to Iran, people will ask, what were you doing there? (P10, female, 19 years old, 3 months in Hungary)

This newcomer student, who came from a "religious" family, declared that both men and women had the same degree of relationship freedom in Hungary, as opposed to Iran, where girls have to "hide" their relationships, and boys are "free." She also believed that it also depends on how much parents had given their children freedom in Iran. She explained that she and one of her girlfriends struggled with "cultural confusion" when attended "mixed-gender parties" in Hungary; however, her other girlfriend did not have to endure the same "challenge" and "cultural confusion" since her friend's parents offered her a lot of "freedom" when she was in Iran. She believed that many Iranians, especially men, when they come abroad, they feel very "confident" and "empowered," and they go too far to the point that they think everyone should "change" and live "absolutely like Europeans." According to her, Iranian women are like this as well; however, she thought it is more "prevalent" among Iranian men, as she believed some Iranian women still are willing to "keep their Iranian culture." She claimed that many Iranians go to "extreme" and "over the limit" because of "too much freedom" that they have in Hungary, ranging from "little" things such as "drinking" and "smoking" to "relationship freedom."

Similarly, another female student stated:

I think Iranian girls compared to Iranian boys behave more conservatively ... Some people think they [girls] should not have a boyfriend. For boys, everything is more straightforward, especially in society, in their relationships, in everything. (P16, female, 24 years old, 1.5 years in Hungary)

One male student (P17, male, 33 years old, 2 years in Hungary) also reported that, relative to Iran, Iranian men and women feel greater freedom in Hungary in all aspects, including the freedom to form a relationship.

Some Iranian female students were not open to new relationships or having sexual relationships. This does not appear to primarily be the result of a lack of openness, however; rather, it seems to be the result of pre-emptive self-restraint to guard against possible future consequences and out of fear of social judgment, or it may even be the result of perceiving "virginity" as a "value." As one student (P3, female, 22 years old, 2 years in Hungary) explained, she had stayed a "virgin" because this is a "value" in Iran, and she wished to retain this value for the sake of her "parents." This participant believed that when Iranians go abroad, they get "confused," their "ideologies" change, they become more "open-minded," to the point that they equate virginity with possessing "leprosy." Although she valued virginity, she considered it very "unfair" that men were free to engage in many sexual relationships while women are expected to be virgins and "control" their sexuality. As she was outraged over her therapist, who told her that "Persian men" never marry their girlfriends with whom they already had sex; to which she replied:

You mean Persian guys should be with all women? and [women] should stay virgin, so they will be chosen for marriage? What kind of life is this? what kind of justice is this. (P3, female, 22 years old, 2 years in Hungary)

One Iranian female Ph.D. student was particularly outraged by the restrictions on women, especially in terms of sexual relationships:

Anytime here [in Hungary] that I see a young girl with the freedom to spend time outside with anyone, until any time at night, and can have sexual relationships easily—without any pressure on her—I become upset. Iran is very restricted. (P19, female, 33 years old, 5 months in Hungary)

Other types of freedom, such as economic and political freedom, were emphasized by some participants. One female medical graduate student reflected:

Now, if they tell me I am free, and I can go to the street [in Iran] without a hijab, I will definitely not take off my hijab because people will start staring at me so much that I will get annoyed ... Iran is now facing many problems concerning economic issues, employment, culture ... In Iran, there is injustice ... a general lack of freedom and a lack of freedom of speech. When these things are present ... You feel that you are in prison, and this makes me depressed. (P4, female, 25 years old, 13 years in Hungary)

From the above excerpts, it is clear that the participant's main concern was not freedom from the veil. She seemed to prioritize other rights, such as economic security and political and cultural freedom. Similarly, a male bachelor student reported:

Now, it [freedom] has become essential for me because I have seen and tasted it. When I was in Iran, I had no idea. I mean, what is the definition of freedom—that you don't wear a hijab? But it [freedom] is more than that ... There are some freedoms here that are low-level freedoms, but which you don't have in Iran. (P12, male, 20 years old, 3 years in Hungary)

He experienced some basic freedoms that he appreciated; however, he perceived these to be “low-level” freedoms that allowed him to distance himself from more significant barriers and to avoid preoccupation with basic concerns such as clothing:

Some freedom of actions exists [in Hungary] that allow me to have fun to compensate for my bad days—for example, wearing shorts when the weather is hot ... If I take off my shoes and walk barefoot, nobody cares ... These are very important ... At least you don't have to be preoccupied with these things.

7. Discussion

This study investigated gender differences in terms of attitudes toward gender roles and perceptions of freedom among Iranian students in Hungary. The abductive content analysis extracted four themes: (1) gender essentialism, (2) gender-role egalitarianism, (3) traditional gender stereotypes, and (4) gendered freedom. The term “gendered freedom” has been used in the literature; however, in a different context (e.g., the emancipation of enslaved women in the French Caribbean revolution (Dubois, 2010) and African-Americans in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta (Bercaw, 2003)), or “gendering freedom” (Kern, 2010) highlighting the gendered imagery of neoliberal urban revitalization in Toronto condo ads; creating “feminine” and “erotic” views of revitalization centering on “freedom” and “fear” that shapes “neoliberalism” (e.g., patriarchal predominance). In our study, gendered freedom is conceptualized as subjective experiences and perception of freedom that is gender-based.

Our findings revealed that only male students held gender essentialism, and they were more prone than females to hold transitional gender-role attitudes (a combination of traditional and egalitarian gender-role attitudes), gender stereotypes, and sexism. At the same time, females were more likely to hold egalitarian gender-role attitudes and fewer gender stereotypes and sexism. Furthermore, a majority of students—regardless of their gender—strived for greater freedom. However, female students emphasized gender inequality more than their male counterparts. Almost all students reported having more freedom in Hungary than in Iran; however, it was perceived that men benefited most from the freedom to take part in relationships and women from the freedom of not having to wear the veil.

When initially asked our participants to give their general opinions regarding differences in gender roles, many males—without being

prompted to cite biological and social factors—viewed differences in gender roles as something natural and/or evolutionary, and in terms of biological factors. Conversely, when posed the same questions, females explained these differences largely in terms of social factors. Thus, some male participants showed to hold an essentialist view about gender role differences—a finding compatible with the results of previous research (Parker et al., 2017; Smiler & Gelman, 2008) in which higher essentialist tendencies were observed in males than females.

Regarding traditional-egalitarian attitudes, our results are consistent with those of Serajzadeh and Javaheri (2006), who found that a significant number of Iranian female and male students in Iran held egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles, and females generally displayed more egalitarian attitudes than their male counterparts.

Our results are also similar to the study by Sharepour (2005), in which Iranian females and male students held gender stereotypes; however, males possessed stronger gender stereotypes, viewing some jobs (e.g., lawyer or engineer) as better performed by males. Additionally, in our study, Iranian men displayed greater sexist attitudes, mainly hostile sexism, than women, with women showing no hostile sexism, and only one female held benevolent sexism. Our result is in line with the result of a study (Glick et al., 2000) conducted among 15,000 individuals across 19 nations, in which men significantly showed greater hostile sexism than women. Although women are less likely than men to hold hostile sexism, they frequently display examples of benevolent sexism, like men. Indeed, women may uphold benevolent sexism in order to prevent becoming the victim of hostile sexism, considering that complying with traditional gender roles serves as a “buffer” against hostile sexism (Grubbs, 2017). Our findings did not show a clear distinction between participants' exhibition of gender stereotypes and sexism, which is consistent with the argument that “sexism is [already] expressed through gender stereotypes” (Brown & Stone, 2016, p. 106), and both benevolent and hostile sexism suggest a stereotypical view of women (Etchezahar & Ungaretti, 2014).

In this study, we witness pervasive patterns of contradictory and transitional gender-role attitudes among Iranian men as opposed to Iranian women, who were mostly consistent in their gender-role attitudes. A majority of Iranian men in Hungary supported women's equality and rights, accused the Iranian government of imposing limitations on women in Iran, promoted mutual freedom for all genders, disapproved of sexism while simultaneously upheld traditional gender-role attitudes, gender stereotypes, and sexism. Similar contradictory and ambivalent gender-role attitudes were reported among young and middle-aged Iranian urban middle-class men in Iran, who at one hand supported gender role equality, and on the other hand, held gender essentialism and stereotypes (Ghaffari, 2020).

It is important to note that all of the studies mentioned above were conducted among locals; our participants were international students who are a unique group as their gender-role attitudes may be influenced by the origin and the host society. However, based on the results of the studies presented above, it appears that gender-role attitudes of Iranians in Hungary were not significantly different from those of Iranians in Iran, as will be discussed later in this article.

Previous studies reported that migrants from a less secular country — after being exposed to a secular society — exhibit more egalitarian attitudes over time (Van Klingeren & Spierings, 2020). At the same time, research reported that gender-role attitudes are developed during early stages in life; additionally, being exposed to more traditional values in the home country impacts gender attitudes (Röder, 2014). It is also stated that gender-role attitudes are quite changeable during adolescence and somewhat consistent during adulthood (Roder & Muhlau, 2014, referring to Alwin et al., 1992). Conversely, another research indicated that gender-role attitudes undergo both substantial change and consistency at transitions across adolescence into adulthood (Fan & Marini, 2000). Reportedly, there is a propensity for gender-role attitudes to remain consistent because changing involves the previously-held gender-role attitudes to be transformed, and people are inclined to

search out new knowledge in line with their previously acquired beliefs. However, changes could arise when people are subjected to new social stimuli (Fan & Marini, 2000).

We cannot precisely determine which factors influenced the gender-role perceptions of Iranian men and women; possibly various factors on macro-level (e.g., societal and cultural level) and micro-level (e.g., age and gender) may have influenced their gender-role attitudes. It is reported that both gender-related structural characteristics of a society (e.g., gender equality policies) and socio-cultural factors (e.g., social norms and values) influence gender-role attitudes (Boehnke, 2011).

Based on the above, we can assume that on a macro level, the gender-role attitudes of Iranians in Hungary are primarily a representation of the social, religious, and cultural characteristics of Iranian society, as well as a reflection of Hungarian society. Moreover, micro-level/individual factors, such as gender and age, seemed to have more effects on the general attitude of Iranian students in Hungary. As such, females compared to males exhibited greater gender egalitarianism and fewer gender stereotypes and sexism; additionally, younger male participants seemed to hold less traditional gender-role attitudes and gender stereotypes compared to the older Iranian men. Other micro-level factors such as length of residency in Hungary (e.g., no differences were found in gender-role attitudes of an Iranian man who lived in Hungary for a longer period of time than a man who lived in Hungary for a shorter period), family background (e.g., conservative/religious families), study major, level of education, etc. did not seem to play roles in students' gender-role attitudes. However, among all the micro-level factors mentioned, gender seemed to be the most powerful predictor of gender-role attitudes.

Another aspect of this study's findings is related to the freedom of dress choice. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women were obliged to wear the *hijab* (Mahmoudi, 2019), which has become "a symbol of oppression" for a lot of Iranian women (Lindsey, 2015). In our study, besides the freedom of clothing choice in Hungary—referred to by some as a "superficial" or "low-level freedom"—students did consider freedom to entail privileges beyond merely the question of the *hijab*. These greater freedoms included freedom of speech, freedom to form different and multiple relationships, and sexual freedom. However, based on our interview data, freedom from the veil seemed to be the most common privilege experienced by Iranian women in Hungary, while "relationship freedom" was perceived as generally more commonly advantageous to Iranian men.

Our findings are also consistent with the study by Ghayournejadian (2012), in which Iranian-American women—similar to our participants in Hungary—appreciated the freedom of dress and reported that unlike in Iran, they did not always have to worry about what to wear. Furthermore, Iranian-American women's perception of freedom in the study by Ziabakhsh (2000) was similar to that of Iranian students in Hungary, with both reporting they had more freedom of choice, freedom of speech, and individual freedom abroad.

In this study, some Iranian women seemed to limit themselves from experiencing relationships with the opposite sex. They believed that Iranian men have relationships, including sexual relationships, more easily with other women in Hungary—compared to Iranian women, who tend to appear more conservative.

These findings are comparable with the result of Hanassab's (1998) study, in which Iranian males showed more open attitudes about partner selection, sexuality, and dating compared to Iranian females, who were more serious about their relationships. Furthermore, in Hanassab's (1998) study, males were revealed to hold double-standards toward females, both in their belief that it is men's right to have many relationships (while being critical of women for doing the same) as well as in their preference to marry virgins. In our study, we witness similar patterns of belief among females. For instance, one female participant in Hungary reported, nothing happens to a man if he enjoys many relationships, but if a girl does likewise, it will likely prove problematic for her in the future. This participant further added that men enter many

relationships but eventually prefer a virgin when marrying. Contrary to the above, in one research (Ghaffari, 2020), Iranian men in Iran showed inconsistent gender-role expectations, endorsing women to discard traditional values (e.g., virginity) on one side and condemning them for being Westernized.

Evidently, the continued influence of traditional values and norms, as well as social and family expectations, has led some Iranian females in Hungary to limit their experiences of relationships, especially sexual ones. Some women were worried about being judged for having many relationships or for losing their virginity, which they feared may jeopardize their chances of getting married in the future. Similarly, some Iranian women in Sweden (Farahani, 2018) spoke about their past experiences about expectations that they should remain virgins — which affected their sexual behaviours — as well as the strong tie between family honour (*namoos*) and females sexuality in Iran.

Generally, both men and women worldwide are embracing more gender egalitarianism (Pessin & Arpino, 2018). In the case of Iranians, who come from a country with a "contradictory" history (Farahani, 2018), their mentality surrounding issues such as gender and freedom might be more complicated and at times inconsistent, probably because of the prompt shifts in the content of various concepts in Iran, which is undergoing a high degree of socio-political mobility and transition (Farahani, 2018). One example of such contradictions can be observed in the imposed unveiling of the Iranian women in 1935 and re-veiling in 1983 that have had an outstandingly complex impact on Iranian men and women (Farahani, 2018).

Although combinations of various factors impact the gender-role attitudes of Iranian students in Hungary, including exposure to a secular Hungarian society — considering that they came from a non-secular country with fewer egalitarian gender norms — as well as exposure to diverse cultures of their international peers at university. However, these factors' impact may not be as robust as the drastic socio-political shifts within the Iranian historical context. Since, over the past century, Iran has continuously undergone a greater unexpected political shift (e.g., significant changes in the role and status of women) compared to any other country during this era (Keddie, 2000).

It is reported that the gender role attitudes of women in today's Iran have dramatically changed as a result of globalization, environmental stresses, and most significantly, "mass media" (e.g., internet) (Karimi, 2015). Moreover, it was stated that in modern Iran, socio-political and economic changes had impacted men and women at varying rates and degrees (Ghaffari, 2020). As such, the narratives of men in Iran indicated that the weakening of traditional gender roles, along with women's growing autonomy, correspond to undermining Iran's patriarchy and men's power simultaneously (Ghaffari, 2020).

Iranian women are increasingly progressing, from being largely restricted to the private realms of their households as "mothers" and "housewives" to being prominent actors in public life (Karimi, 2015). Women in Iran are "active" and not "passive" in society; they dynamically engage in the political movement for reform, resist oppression, and question gender inequalities and patriarchy (Sedghi, n.d.). Despite encountering constant barriers, they fight hard to obtain freedom and gender equality (Haghighat, 2014). The findings of a qualitative study (Salehi et al., 2020) among educated young women in Iran indicated that despite the limitations reported by these women (e.g., hijab, social media filtering, limitations in social networks, leisure activities, social and sexual relationships), they perceived themselves as "agents of social change," capable of overcoming the socio-cultural constraints of the patriarchal Iranian society. As such, these women used tactics to impact social change and strengthen their status by creating "digital freedom" (e.g., using anti-filtering programs to access the internet to communicate with the rest of the world and share their true identity, which remained concealed in their ordinary lives owing to sociocultural barriers); new dressing style (e.g., wearing hijab in a trendy style such that it accentuates their beauty for self-expression), leisure opportunities (e.g., secret house parties for breaking the dancing/drinking taboos); and fighting

for sexual and social relationship freedom (e.g., insisting on their rights for having sexual and social relationship freedom by practicing them, so it will eventually become a norm) (Salehi et al., 2020).

The foregoing studies show that comparable results will most likely be obtained if we were to investigate gender roles and freedom perceptions among Iranians in the middle or upper classes within Iran. However, probably different results may be obtained for lower-class groups since they may place a higher value on deeper issues of freedom (e.g., social justice) and may have more traditional opinions on gender roles.

7.1. Limitations and implications

This study has several limitations. First, most of our participants came from the upper-middle class; their opinions on gender roles and freedom could be only comparable to those of other upper-middle class Iranians in Iran or international students, most of whom are affluent. Consequently, the perceptions of our participants may differ from those of lower socioeconomic status Iranians. Second, a majority of the participants were females, and as such, patterns of students' responses were likely skewed. We argue that quantitative research on a large sample of Iranian international students abroad would be valuable to study the topics that emerged from data analysis and examine gender attitudes and gendered freedom among Iranian expats.

Our findings have substantial implications for the educational system. The education sectors in Hungary could play an essential role in decreasing gender stereotypes and gender inequality by promoting gender equality within the education system (e.g., by revising curricula, offering courses, training teachers, and so on). Universities across Hungary are encouraged to develop gender awareness programs in order to educate students about gender issues.

8. Conclusion

This study explored attitudes on gender roles and perceptions of freedom among Iranian students in Hungary. The findings revealed that Iranian females held more egalitarian attitudes and fewer gender stereotypes and sexism compared to their male counterparts, who displayed transitional gender-role attitudes with greater gender stereotypes and sexism. The traditional gender-role attitudes of male in this study could be the reflection of the Iranian society, which for a long time, has been a male-dominant society (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003) that imposes more restrictions on women and grants greater privileges to men in various areas, such as freedom of dress, inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody, access to certain professions, etc. (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Kian, 1995). It is believed that on a macro-level, social policy reflects gender-role attitudes, which influence and sustain an individual's gender-role ideology (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016, p. 2). For instance, individuals who live in more traditional society are more likely to present with traditional attitudes on gender roles (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016). Additionally, the gender roles that society prescribes to people are prone to be internalized and self-imposed (Eisenchlas, 2013). Perhaps these are why Iranian males who spent most of their life in Iran held less egalitarian attitudes and displayed more gender stereotypes compared to females. The former most likely have been influenced by the patriarchal norms in Iran.

On the other hand, living in Hungary—which boasts relatively higher levels of gender equality when compared to Iran—could have influenced students' egalitarian attitudes on gender roles. Furthermore, one study reported a significant and positive relationship between living in a more gender-egalitarian society and holding gender-egalitarian attitudes in that society (Pessin & Arpino, 2018).

While both Iranian female and male students in Hungary held different attitudes toward gender roles, both emphasized gender equality and the fact that they enjoyed freedom in Hungary more than in Iran. However, some forms of freedom—namely, freedom of clothing in

women and freedom of relationship choice in men—in Hungary nonetheless seemed to remain privileges specific to each respective gender.

There is no question that exposure to the host culture and international interactions affected Iranian students' views on gender roles. However, the tremendous changes in gender and sexuality between the beginning of the 19th century and the early 20th century that already took place in Iran (Najmabadi, 2005), the progressive weakening of “Islamic hegemony” over the past two decades (Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021); the traditional gender roles that are challenged and redefined by Iranian women in today's Iran (Karimi, 2015); as well as the dual-gender roles (e.g., traditional and modern) assigned to women in Iran (Mehran, 2003), should not be underestimated, as such phenomena could be even more strong predictors of the Iranian students' gender-role attitudes than merely being exposed to the host society.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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