

The Sense of Recognition of Muslim Women in Western Academia

Authors : Naima Mohammadi

Abstract : The present paper critically reports on the emergency of Iranian international students in a large public university in Italy. Although the most sizeable diaspora of Iranians dates back to the 1979 revolution, a huge wave of Iranian female students travelled abroad after the Iranian Green Movement (2009) due to the intensification of gender discrimination and Islamization. To explore the experience of Iranian female students at an Italian public university, two complementary methods were adopted: a focus group and individual interviews. Focus groups yield detailed collective conversations and provide researchers with an opportunity to observe the interaction between participants, rather than between participant and researcher, which generates data. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their stories in their own words and speak about personal experiences and opinions. Research participants were invited to participate through a public call in a Telegram group of Iranian students. Theoretical and purposive sampling was applied to select participants. All participants were assured that full anonymity would be ensured and they consented to take part in the research. A two-hour focus group was held in English with participants in the presence and some online. They were asked to share their motivations for studying in Italy and talk about their experiences both within and outside the university context. Each of these interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and was mostly carried out online and in Farsi. The focus group consisted of 8 Iranian female post-graduate students. In analyzing the data a blended approach was adopted, with a combination of deductive and inductive coding. According to research findings, although 9/11 was the beginning of the West's challenges against Muslims, the nuclear threats of Islamic regimes promoted the toughest international sanctions against Iranians as a nation across the world. Accordingly, carrying an Iranian identity contributes to social, political, and economic exclusion. Research findings show that geopolitical factors such as international sanctions and Islamophobia, and a lack of reciprocity in terms of recognition, have created a sense of stigmatization for veiled and unveiled Iranian female students who are the largest groups of 'non-European Muslim international students' enrolled in Italian universities. Participants addressed how their nationality has devalued their public image and negatively impacted their self-confidence and self-realization in academia. They highlighted the experience of an unwelcoming atmosphere by different groups of people and institutes, such as receiving marked students' badges, rejected bank account requests, failed visa processes, secondary security screening selection, and hyper-visibility of veiled students. This study corroborates the need for institutions to pay attention to geopolitical factors and religious diversity in student recruitment and provide support mechanisms and access to basic rights. Accordingly, it is suggested that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a social and moral responsibility towards the discrimination and both social and academic exclusion of Iranian students.

Keywords : Iranian diaspora, female students, recognition theory, inclusive university

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