Gendered Experiences of Human Dignity within Canadian Universities: The Case of Iranian International Students

E. Razavipour [a]*

[a] McGill University, Canada

**Corresponding author: Email: erfaneh.razavipournaghani@mail.mcgill.ca

Institution: McGill University, Quebec, Canada

Abstract

This article explores Iranian international students' (IISs) experiences of human dignity (HD) within Canadian universities, compared to Iranian ones. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 24 current and former IISs (10 women and 10 men in Montreal and two women and two men who had left Canada), I created a conceptual HD framework to analyze the data. Three themes emerged as key to IISs' experiences of HD in the context of postsecondary education: 1) the relationship between students and university faculty/staff, 2) gender equality and freedom, and 3) having a minority or marginalized identity. I conclude with observations about how an awareness of students' HD experiences could strengthen the support offered to international students (ISs).

Introduction

Every year, a considerable number of exceptionally accomplished students migrate from Iran to study abroad (Iran Migration Observatory, 2021). Iranian International students are overrepresented among postgraduate international students in Canada, at 11 percent in 2019-2020 (Statistic Canada, 2021). Yet, scholars have rarely focused their work on IISs' experiences and challenges in Canada.

People are exercising their human dignity when they choose to migrate (Crépeau & Samaddar, 2009). In the case of ISs, as a category of voluntary migrants, they migrate to fulfill various personal, academic and career aspirations. Therefore, understanding ISs' expectations and experiences could help universities to improve their policies concerning student retention and integration in both home and host countries, while acknowledging and respecting their differences. Gender, as a social construct (Beauvoir & Thurman, 2011), has the potential to inform perceptions of lived experience, treatment, and behavioral expectations. Studies indicate that gender plays a role in shaping ISs' experiences in Canada (Fais, 2012). While some scholars have discussed the role of gender in shaping cross-cultural adaptation (Chirkov et al., 2008), others indicate various factors influencing women's academic and personal experiences in Canada (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018) and their decision to stay in Canada after graduation (Fais, 2012). These include Muslim women ISs' specific challenges regarding stereotypes, Islamophobia (Abukhattala, 2004; Hojati, 2011; Khosrojerdi, 2015; Mehrabi, 2019; Mostafa, 2006), discrimination and marginalization (Abukhattala, 2004; Ahmed, 2016; Gutmann, 2004; Hojati, 2011; Khosrojerdi, 2015; Mehrabi, 2019; Samuel, 2005).
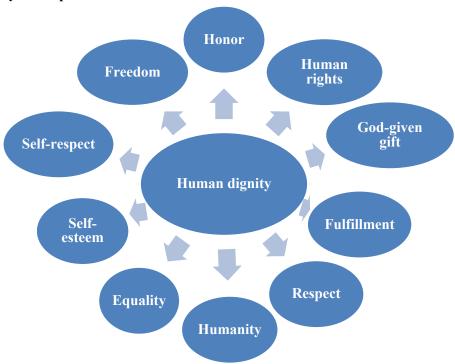
As settings dedicated to learning, universities can both affect dominant perspectives and reflect and reproduce new discourses. Within the existing literature on gender and ISs, only a few studies discuss IISs, with a focus on transition and acculturation issues (Didehvar, 2020; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015; Nahidi et al., 2018; Najmi, 2013). There is a dearth of research on students' understanding of HD (Kianpour, 2016; Oleinik, 2016), and the relationship between ISs' trajectories and gender remains understudied. Increasing awareness of how IISs experience HD will contribute to better support upon their arrival and throughout their integration in Canada. With this in mind, this study explores: 1) how IISs experience and perceive HD in their educational life in Montreal, Canada compared to Iran and 2) how gender affects their experiences of HD in this context.

Conceptual Framework

Human dignity (HD), as a subjective concept, refers to an inner feeling of worth which depends on one's perceptions and life experiences (Fox-Decent et al., 2009). Most people seek to live in conditions that respect their HD as part of the inherent right to equal worth detached from societal signifiers such as race, gender, wealth, etc. (Teji et al., 2020). HD has recently been highlighted in studies related to the motivation to migrate as well as the experience of settlement in a new country (Crépeau & Samaddar, 2009). Studies have explored how individuals' motivations to migrate (lack of opportunity, recognition, respect, freedom, equality, etc.) represent claims for preserving and exercising human dignity (Crépeau & Samaddar, 2009; Kazemi et al., 2018; Preston, 2014; Tsapenko, 2015; Van Hear et al., 2012). While seeking dignity is an important factor in human migration, human rights tend to be focused on the legal relationship between the State and its citizens, and immigrants are often excluded. Therefore, a human dignity discourse can provide a context in which im/migrants, including international students, can resist rights violations. The concept of human dignity reinforces "the idea that underlies human rights, notably that human beings ought to be treated as an end rather than as a means" (Crépeau & Samaddar, 2009, p. 9). The literature in relation to student migration, however, is sparse, and the role of HD in this context would benefit from further exploration (Crépeau & Samaddar, 2009; Dhungana, 2020; Monteiro, 2009).

In light of the lack of consensus on a theoretical definition of HD, this study relied on an HD framework based on empirical research with students in Canada and Iran (Kianpour, 2016; Oleinik, 2016). The key HD concepts that emerged from the interviews were freedom, honor, equality, self-esteem, self-respect, respect, fulfillment, humanity, "God-given gift," and human rights have formed my HD framework (Figure 1). Each individual placed emphasis on different aspects of HD.

Figure 1: Human Dignity Conceptual Framework

Research Method

    Data from semi-structured interviews with 24 (12 men, 12 women) Iranian international graduate students informed this qualitative case study. As most research conducted about IISs in Canada has focused on women (Hojati, 2011; Khosrojerdi, 2015; Sadeghi, 2008), in this study I chose to recruit a gender-balanced sample. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and I undertook the thematic analysis strategies recommended by Mile and Huberman (1994): 1) broad coding, 2) pattern coding and memoing, 3) distilling and ordering, and testing executive summary statements, and 4) developing propositions (Houghton et al., 2015). The quoted passages used in this summary were translated from Farsi to English by the author. Debriefing, self-reflexivity, peer review, and triangulation with other data sources, such as Statistics Canada and the Statistical Center of Iran, ensured rigor and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). As an Iranian international woman student living in Canada more than 8 years, having an insider identity has been helpful to my research within Muslim communities, as I am able to establish trust and build rapport with participants relatively easily due to a shared cultural background and language (Giwa, 2015; Rezai-Rashti, 2013), which was particularly helpful in the context of qualitative interviews that involved a significant degree of self-disclosure.

Results

    In comparing IISs' perception of HD in Canadian higher education institutions with their perception of HD in Iran, this study contributes to knowledge about the experiences, needs, and challenges of the IIS minority population and ISs in general. Most of the IISs interviewed identified educational methods and access to resources as the most significant differences between the Canadian and Iranian educational systems (Abukhattala, 2004). In addition to having more access to resources and being able to pursue a higher level of research in Canada, students spoke favorably about teamwork, contractual course outlines, clear expectations for assignments, and student evaluation of courses and of professors. Most students found a sense of fulfillment in the Canadian educational system's provision of adequate educational resources and support for students, which may be considered an aspect of HD.

Students described disparities between the type/quality of the relationship between students and university faculty/staff in Canada and Iran, and the fact that evaluation was based on achievable criteria and individual efforts in Canada. The level of personal connection, support, respect, humanity, and comparative rank and status led to students' sense of their HD being respected. This critical role of supervisors in ISs' academic experiences corresponds to the experiences of ISs in other countries like the US (Tang & Flint, 2022), as well as a short-term exchange student program in Canada (Kang & Metcalfe, 2021).

In contrast to their experience at Iranian universities (Soltani et al., 2020), women students said that their Canadian supervisors provided emotional support still respecting their privacy and autonomy, giving them a sense of equal status with their professors, respecting their HD. Additionally, women students perceived their HD to be recognized by their Canadian supervisors because of their efforts, personality, and competence rather than their religious beliefs or their family's socioeconomic status. In contrast, students believed religious beliefs and family status were important factors in some Iranian professors' evaluation of their merit, representing a violation of the notion of honor as a component of HD. For example, Neda (W) shared:

> In Canada, while you are very close with your teacher, you go out or go to a cottage with him/her, when doing work or a project or an exam, it [the relationship] is very formal and serious. The supervisor never asks me about my family, my religion. But if I am upset, he [supervisor] asks me why, and: Can I help you? However, in Iran, they ask about your families, ask who your father is, who your mother is, what they do, where they live. In Iran, people's privacy is invaded. If you are religious or if you do some specific practices or behaviors [related to Islamic religion], your position is better. That is, your position is measured by your opinion. But here [in Canada], what you do and present [in your work] determines your position.

Most of the men interviewed focused on the cultural and policy differences between Canada and Iran. For example, they discussed how teachers are honored in Iranian culture, placing them at a higher status than their students (Eghtesadi Roudi, 2021). According to some students, both professors' lack of honored status and undergraduate students' market/client relationship to the university in Canada undermine the HD of all concerned. Further, men felt that, as most graduate students are funded by Canadian universities or their supervisors, ISs were more vulnerable due to their being funded at higher rates than domestic students. Soheil (M) mentioned:

> In Canada a university is considered an economic enterprise. That is, the teacher considers himself very weak in front of the student, which of course is a problem. This issue has two sides to the coin, one side is that it gives the student self-confidence to speak and the other side is that they have no respect for the teacher… That is, the relationship between professors and students is a money-making system because of the system of capitalism. In this system, universities force the professor to respect the student. Especially at the undergraduate level. Whatever is considered respect for a professor in Iranian culture does not exist in Canada and this is a flaw. However, I believe this type of relationship doesn't exist at the post graduate levels since for those levels, it is mostly the university that funds students.

The second theme, gender equality and freedom, was addressed by both genders, but in different ways. While gender pay inequity and workplace discrimination exist in Canada (Schirle & Sogaolu, 2020), IISs referred positively to their Canadian experiences in terms of quality of work and salary range, unbiased gender attitudes, freedom of expression, and freedom from any type of abuse. These observations reflect positive support for HD. However, women students admired the prevalence of women's empowerment and gender equality at Canadian universities. They felt their HD to be

respected when they were taken seriously and given autonomy. Men students raised the presence of meritocracy as a strong point while discussing HD. Both genders criticized Iranian universities for limiting students' freedom to speak out or air disagreements, and perceived this situation to be against their HD.

The third theme focused on IISs' experiences of marginalization in the Canadian educational system, in part due to having been misled about the possibility of studying in English at certain Quebec universities, and discrimination based on their nationality, race, and religion. Such discrimination undermines HD and should be considered a violation of human rights on prohibited grounds. Experiences of marginalization contradicted IISs' expectations of Canadian society as multicultural and bilingual (Hojati, 2011).

Students further expanded the issue of marginalization to include conditions that Western countries have created or supported by imposing sanctions against nations like Iran. Sanctions have caused many challenges, including limiting students' access to research resources and materials. In the view of participants, sanctions limit ordinary people's ability to meet their needs and flourish, hence putting people's HD at risk and creating motivation to migrate to study in Western countries. For example, Sina (M) explained:

> In … fields of study that need different laboratories and materials, it is more advanced here [Canada]. But in Iran because of the sanctions, they [Western companies] do not sell the equipment to Iran…. In fact, we [Iranian students], when participating in software competitions in writing codes, are very successful. So it shows that we, Iranians, are very smart. But when there is a need for money, a need for facilities and equipment, Canadian students are better. [So it can be] best [for us] here in Canada. It means that if Iranians come to work here, they will be very successful.

Discussion & Conclusion

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study comparing higher education between Iran and Canada using the concept of HD to explore IISs' experiences. The interviews revealed students' contradictory experiences. While students disclosed experiences of vulnerability and racism in Canada, they also mentioned positive experiences in terms of Canada being a place to reach their goals, explore, and find more opportunity for progress, freedom, peacefulness, and equal gender rights. They appreciated Canadian codes of conduct with regard to being responsible, honest, accountable, and respectful, the level of acceptance of immigrants, and the respect they observed in Canada for character, feelings, intellect, honesty, and humanity. In contrast, IISs also disclosed challenges in Canada concerning language barriers, relationship difficulties, cultural gaps, settlement struggles, loneliness, and financial insecurity. IISs also mentioned that while the university community tended to treat foreign students appropriately, the general public was more likely to exhibit racist attitudes.

IISs' experiences of HD within the Canadian educational system provide empirical evidence for the concepts within my adopted HD framework - including respect, freedom, equality, fulfillment, human rights, and humanity - highlighting the importance of the relational versus the individual quality of human dignity within the postsecondary education system. While students perceived that their HD was respected in many ways, gendered controversy arose concerning the issues of marginalization, course quality, and supervisors' authority over international graduate students in Canadian universities.

ISs play a significant role in universities' financial goals, research contributions, and international rankings (Cao, 2019). This study gives voice to ISs' experiences of HD at Canadian universities and explores situations that put students' HD at risk in order to inform Canadian university policy reform with respect to hiring university staff with cultural awareness regarding international students, as well as providing expert supervision to support the quality of course content and ensure that faculties provide appropriate guidance and services for ISs. In parallel, if university policymakers in Iran

aim to retain their most talented students, limiting brain drain (Azadi et al., 2020), it is critical to address students' disappointing experiences of HD within the Iranian academy and change the situation according to students' interpretation of HD rather than the one the government prescribes (Kianpour, 2016).

The issue of students' experiences of marginalization in the Canadian educational system necessitates further study. The question of whether students decide to stay in Canada after their graduation, and if so, what factors contributed to their decision, merits further exploration. More research is also required to better understand IISs' misperceptions regarding gender inequality in Canada. Finally, I recommend that research be conducted regarding professors' experiences of HD in the Canadian educational system in order to better inform future policy.

References

Abukhattala, I. (2004). *Educational and cultural adjustment of ten Arab Muslim students in Canadian university classrooms.* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. McGill University.

Ahmed, N. A. (2016). *Saudi women's experiences studying at Canadian universities through the King Abdullah scholarship program* (Publication No. 4049) [Master's thesis, The University of Western Ontario]. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/4049

Alqudayri, B., & Gounko, T. (2018). Studying in Canada: Experiences of female graduate students from Saudi Arabia. *Journal of International Students 8*(4), 1736–1747. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i4.228

Azadi, P., Mirramezani, M., & Mesgaran, M. B. (2020). Migration and brain drain from Iran. (Working Paper No. 9). Stanford Iran 2040 Project, Stanford University.

Beauvoir, S. de, & Thurman, J. (2011). *The second sex.* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage.

Cao, Y. (2019). Working toward successful retention strategies with an influx of international students: What, why, and how. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education 4*(Spring), 6–8. https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jcihe/article/view/822

Chirkov, V. I., Safdar, S., de Guzman, D. J., & Playford, K. (2008). Further examining the role motivation to study abroad plays in the adaptation of international students in Canada. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations 32*(5), 427–440. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2007.12.001

Crépeau, F., & Samaddar, R. (2009). Recognizing the dignity of migrants. In F. Mégret & F. Hoffmann (Eds.), *Dignity: A special focus on vulnerable groups*. *Protecting Dignity: An Agenda for Human Rights, 2009* (pp. 28–35). Swiss Initiative to Commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the UDHR.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Dhungana, N. (2020). Human dignity and cross-border migrants in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. *World Development 136*, 105174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105174

Didehvar, M. (2020). *Uncanny phenomenon: Existential experiences among Iranian international* students [Master's thesis, University of Calgary]. The Vault: Electronic Theses and Dissertations. http://hdl.handle.net/1880/112548

Eghtesadi Roudi, A. (2021). Why to become a teacher in Iran: A FIT-choice study. *Teaching Education 11*(4), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2021.1960963

Fais, M. R. (2012). *Gender influences of women international students who pursue employment and permanent immigration to Canada* [Master's thesis, University of Calgary]. Library and Archives Canada.

Fox-Decent, E., Mégret, F. Hoffman, F., Blackett, A., Crépeau, F., Klein, A., & Provost, R. (2009). Introduction. In F. Mégret & F. Hoffmann (Eds.), *Dignity: A special focus on vulnerable groups*. *Protecting Dignity: An Agenda for Human Rights, 2009* (pp. 28–35). Swiss Initiative to Commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the UDHR.

Giwa, A. (2015). Insider/outsider issues for development researchers from the Global South. *Geography Compass, 9*(6), 316–326. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12219

Gutmann, A. (2004). Unity and diversity in democratic multicultural education: Creative and destructive tensions. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Diversity and citizenship education: Global perspectives* (pp. 71–96). Jossey-Bass.

Hojati, Z. (2011*). Ironic acceptance - present in academia discarded as oriental: The case of Iranian female graduate students in Canadian academia* (Publication No. 920155231) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. http://search.proquest.com/docview/920155231?accountid=15115

Houghton, C., Murphy, K., Shaw, D., & Casey, D. (2015). Qualitative case study data analysis: An example from practice. *Nurse Researcher, 22*(5), 8–12. doi: https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.22.5.8.e1307

Iran Migration Observatory. (2021). The status of key indicators of migration among different social strata. https://imobs.ir/report-detail/show/20

Kang, J. J., & Metcalfe, A. S. (2019). Living and learning between Canada and Korea: The academic experiences and cultural challenges of undergraduate international exchange students. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education 11*(Fall), 28–36. https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v11iFall.1074

Kazemi, A., Baghbanian, A., Maymand, M. M., & Rahmani, H. (2018). Contributing factors to migration growth among Iranian students: Drivers of migration to Malaysia. *Journal of International Migration and Integration 19*(3), 757–770. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-018-0567-z

Khosrojerdi, F. (2015). *Muslim female students and their experiences of higher education in Canada* (Publication No. 2896) [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Western Ontario]. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/2896

Kianpour, M. (2016). From heaven to earth: Interpretations and conceptualizations of human dignity in Iran. *Comparative Sociology 15*(6), 699–723. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341407

Mehrabi, Sh. (2019). *Middle eastern international students' identity in Canada* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta]. Education & Research Archive. https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-pq05-r776

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Monteiro, J. (2009). *Labour migration: a pure economic good? Mainstreaming human dignity to state* policies [Doctoral dissertation, University of Maastricht]. Global Campus Open Knowledge Repository. http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11825/1251

Mostafa, G. (2006). Learning and cultural experiences of Arab Muslim graduate students in a Canadian university. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education 1*(1), 36–53. https://doi.org/10.20355/C5MW2M

Nahidi, S., Blignault, I., Hayen, A., & Razee, H. (2018). Psychological distress in Iranian international students at an Australian university. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health 20*(3), 651–657. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-017-0590-8

Najmi, S. (2013). *A qualitative exploration of international students' experience of counselling services at university* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Ottawa]. Library and Archives Canada.

Oleinik, A. (2016). Introduction: Between universal and culture-specific interpretations of human dignity. *Comparative Sociology 15*(6), 625–638. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341404

Preston, I. (2014). The effect of immigration on public finances. *The Economic Journal 124*(580), F569–F592. https://doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12180

Rezai-Rashti, G. M. (2013). Conducting field research on gender relations in a gender repressive state: A case study of gender research in Iran. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 26*(4), 489–502. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.765615

Sabouripour, F., & Roslan, S. B. (2015). Resilience, optimism and social support among international students. *Asian Social Science 11*(15), 159–170. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n15p159

Sadeghi, S. (2008). Gender, culture and learning: Iranian immigrant women in Canadian higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education 27*, 217–234. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02601370801936382

Samuel, E. (2005). *Integrative antiracism, South Asians in Canadian academe.* University of Toronto Press.

Schirle, T., & Sogaolu, M. (2020). *A work in progress: Measuring wage gaps for women and minorities in the Canadian labour market* (Commentary No. 561). CD Howe Institute. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3517443

Soltani, A., Boostani, D., & Golestani, S. (2020). Exploring the strategies of faculty-student interactions: A grounded theory study in Iranian academic context. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction 26*, 100408. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2020.100408

Statistics Canada. (2021). *Postsecondary enrolments, by status of student in Canada, country of citizenship and gender.* Retrieved May 22, 2022 from https://doi.org/10.25318/3710008601-eng

Tang, Y., & Flint, M. (2022). Buffering or perpetuating?—Exploring the role of academic institutions in Chinese international doctoral students' double pandemic experience in the United States. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education 14*(3a). https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v14i3a.4244

Teji, G., May, J., & Daly, E. (2020). Migration with dignity [Draft report]. Dignity Rights International.
https://ssrn.com/abstract=3665316

Tsapenko, I. P. (2015). Social effects of immigration. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences 85*(5), 443–452.
https://doi.org/10.1134/S101933161505010X

Van Hear, N., Bakewell, O., & Long, K. (2012). *Drivers of migration* [Working Paper No. 1]. Migrating out of Poverty Research
Programme Consortium, University of Sussex.
https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14821/wp1-drivers-of-migration.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

---

ERFANEH RAZAVIPOUR, PhD Candidate, McGill University, School of Social Work, Canada. My area of research is migration, gender, human dignity, human rights and policy. Email: erfaneh.razavipournaghani@mail.mcgill.ca