

# From gender segregation to epistemic segregation: a case study of the school system in Iran

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I show that there is a bidirectional relationship between gender-based social norms and gender-segregated education policies that excludes girls from knowledge production within the Iranian school system. I argue that gender segregation in education reproduces hermeneutic inequality through the reinforcement of epistemic segregation as a form of epistemic injustice. In particular, I focus on gender-based instructional epistemic injustice, which refers to a set of epistemic practices that actively exclude a student or an education professional in their capacity as a knower from the process of knowledge production within an education system based on gender dynamics, roles, norms, or expectations. This, in addition, has an impact on schoolboys through the reproduction of active ignorance. I conclude that in societies such as Iran, where highly gendered norms play out in the school system and are further reinforced by that system, the result is not limited to gender segregation itself, but extends beyond it to a form of epistemic injustice that wrongs students by reproducing and reinforcing those highly gendered norms.

**KEYWORDS:** school system, Iran, gender segregation, epistemic segregation, epistemic injustice, textbook

*To all schoolgirls in Iran whose courage is exemplary and whose resistance is commendable.*

## INTRODUCTION

The literature on gender-segregated educational spaces and policies in Iran has broadly captured the complexity of the phenomenon and its consequences in Iranian society (Salehi Isfahani 2008; Elmi 2009; Hoodfar and Sadr 2010; Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011; Dokouhaki and Shahrokni 2012; Rezai-Rashti 2015; Shahrokni 2019; Kamal 2021). Yet since the vast majority of the contributions

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in the existing literature tend to focus on higher education, the effect of such gender-segregated policies in the primary and high school system has remained underexplored. This paper, therefore, is concerned with gender-based societal norms, such as valuing women only as wives and mothers, as they play out in the education policies of the gender-segregated Iranian school system and how these policies further reinforce those gender-based social norms. From physical exclusion to the content of school textbooks, the bidirectional relationship between gender-based societal norms and gender-segregated education policies results in a hostile attitude towards girls in the school system of the country. It is also worth noting that, at first glance, exploring the topic of gender segregation in the country's schooling system might seem disconnected from the literature focussing on gender segregation in the Iranian higher education system. However, I believe the central claim of this paper coheres well with the existing literature on higher education in Iran.

Additionally, in the literature on the presence of minorities in a school system, much has been said about a lack of representation or recognition (Lodge and Lynch 2004; Blanchett 2006; Giarrizzo 2012; Kohvakka 2022), misrepresentation or misrecognition (Fenning and Rose 2007; Smith 2019), and stereotyping (Chang and Demyan 2007; George 2015; Allen and Webber 2019); not much has been written, however, from an epistemic vantage point. In the field of the epistemology of education, there is a growing literature on epistemic injustice and epistemic harm in education, but this mostly concerns the epistemic credibility of minor students (Medina 2013, 2017; Kotzee 2017), the student teacher relationship (Medina 2013, 2017; Dotson 2011, 2014), and intellectual flourishing in democratic education (Walker 2019). Not much has yet been said about the epistemic situatedness of textbooks, and in particular on how textbooks can contribute to the hermeneutical marginalization of certain students in a way that prevents them from participating in practices of generating social meanings.

In this paper, I argue that gender segregation in the Iranian school system reproduces hermeneutic inequality through the reinforcement of a form of epistemic segregation that prevents schoolgirls from participating in practices of generating social meanings. In particular, I focus on gender-based instructional epistemic injustice, which refers to a set of epistemic practices that actively exclude a student or an education professional in their capacity as a knower from the process of knowledge production within an education system based on gender dynamics, roles, norms, or expectations. This, in addition, has an impact on schoolboys through the reproduction of active ignorance. I conclude that, in societies such as Iran, where highly gendered norms play out in the school system and are further reinforced by that system, the result is not limited to gender segregation itself but extends beyond it, to a form of epistemic injustice that wrongs students by reproducing and reinforcing those highly gendered norms.

## GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE IRANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

### Gender-based norms and schooling in Iran

Although in the pre-1979 era there was legal involvement at the state level in the enforcement of gender roles in Iran, it was after the 1979 Revolution that the state took control of the regulation of every major aspect of citizens' sexualities and actively engaged in the reinforcement and solidification of gender roles in society (Mahdavi 2009). In the post-1979 era, there was thus a significant shift to reverse the 20th-century sociopolitical progress for women in Iran through the ways in which the government creates and regulates gender roles (Afary 1996). One of the central themes of these regulated gender roles is to value women merely as wives and mothers. Based on such gender roles, the 'virtues' of motherhood and chastity are used as premises to justify 'the confinement of women within the home, the gendered splitting of the private and public, and the exclusion of women from the public sphere' (Sullivan 1998: 218). The societal treatment of women based on such highly gendered norms, roles, and expectations is manifested through a variety of practices, such as child marriage, which reflect how viewing women merely as wives and mothers can deprive them of opportunities deemed uncondusive to such virtues. When a young girl is viewed primarily and merely as a potential wife and mother, and this kind of gender role becomes the backbone of her reduced functionality in society, the societal treatment that she receives is also based on preparing her as early as possible to acquire the 'virtues' of motherhood and chastity even if it costs her education.

Although child marriage in Iran has a long history,<sup>1</sup> it was only after the Revolution that it reached a critical stage. Shortly after the Revolution, as an extension of the politics of backwardness in women's rights, the legal age of marriage for girls was reduced from eighteen to thirteen (Tohidi 1991); and with the consent of fathers, men guardians, or court permission, girls can be married off as early as nine.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, child marriage in Iran has reached a point of crisis. In 2019, 6 per cent of recorded marriages involved girls between the age of ten to fourteen, and 17 per cent of Iranian girls were married off before turning eighteen (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2022). Based on unofficial reports, between 2021 and 2022 child marriage rose by over 30 per cent (Iran International 2021a, 2021b). For instance, in 2021 in Ardabil, a province with a majority population of socio-economically vulnerable Azerbaijani Turks, more than half of all recorded marriages involved girls under the age of eighteen (Iran Wire 2022). The city of Sareyn in Ardabil province, in particular, has the highest records for child marriage under fifteen (17.95 per cent) and eighteen (55.13 per cent) (Iran Wire 2022). By 2022 child marriage in Iran had reached a stage whereby a fifth of all recorded marriages were child marriages (Iran Wire 2022), which directly reinforces valuing women merely as wives and mothers.

<sup>1</sup> Although in the pre-1979 era, there is no reported data on child marriage in Iran, the lived experiences of survivors can shed light on the matter. See more in Kangarlou (2021: 93–9).

<sup>2</sup> Note that many child marriages in rural areas are not even registered in the first place.

One of the ways in which highly gendered norms play out in society is through the school system (Touba 1987). As a case in point, Iran has one of the shortest compulsory education requirements in the world, with students allowed to drop out of school as early as twelve (Moinipour 2022). Although this legal precedent taken on its own may not seem highly gendered, coupling it with prevailing gender roles, it is easy to see how the policy specifically affects schoolgirls, who drop out of school to get married off as early as possible. For instance, Maral is an Azerbaijani Turk woman from the city of Ardabil, in Ardabil province, who was married off to her nineteen-year-old cousin when she was only nine: ‘I was not the only one. My cousin, niece, and sister all got married between the ages of nine and eleven. Some of us had reached puberty and were menstruating but some were not’, she says (Rezaei 2021). As she did not know what the meaning of a husband was, every time he approached her, she would scream so that he could not do anything to her. Their marriage was not at first officially registered, she explains, and eventually, her husband divorced her (Rezaei 2021). Although she wanted to go back to school after the divorce, her mother would not accept that studying would be good for her. Maral reports her mother as saying ‘even if I become a doctor, after all, I still had to wash baby’s diapers’ (Rezaei 2021). She was married for a second time at the age of fourteen and her husband died in a car accident when she was only thirty: ‘I was 30 years old when I was out of wedlock for the second time. This time my husband was dead and I had four children. The oldest was 15 years old and the youngest was two’ (Rezaei 2021). Now aged forty-five, she says that every time she reads the news on child marriage, it reminds her of her life: ‘But at least if I had studied and then married, I could have had the right job after the disaster’ (Rezaei 2021).

Maral’s case—which is only one among many others—demonstrates how viewing women merely as wives and mothers, coupled with educational policies that allow girls to leave school as early as twelve to marry, costs them education. When the potentiality of young girls is limited in this way, the effect of such gendered norms, roles, and expectations in education is simply to reinforce the view that education for girls is useless. In fact, viewing education as extraneous for girls is among the most important reasons for schoolgirls to drop out of school (Mehran 1997). Therefore, by reproducing gender norms through the school system, not only are schoolgirls allowed to drop out to get married off, but this process further reinforces the gender-based norms that do not value education for schoolgirls because their function in society is reduced to becoming future wives and mothers.

### **Gender-based norms and gender-segregated education policies in Iran**

One of the ways that highly gendered norms play out through the Iranian school system is the policy that bans mixed schooling across the country. In recent years, schoolgirls in rural and nomadic areas of the country have been the target of a new gender-segregated policy in education. In contrast to fully gender-segregated school spaces in urban areas, more than 90 per cent of schools in rural and nomadic areas of the country are mixed (Irna 2019); this is due to a range of different factors, such as teacher shortages, financial hardship, lack of rural roads, and the movements of

nomads. For example, one of the smallest schools in the north of the country, located in Yaylaki Asb Saray village in Gilan province with a majority population of socioeconomically vulnerable Talishis, has only three schoolgirls with a man teacher who commutes eighteen miles in two hours on rough rural roads every day for the sake of his students (Talab, n.d.).<sup>3</sup>

Yet the Ministry of Education has recently enforced a gender segregation policy that puts an end to mixed schools in rural and nomadic areas, leading to the loss of an important connection between the students and their teachers, and the loss of opportunity to get an education. This gender-segregated education policy in particular impacts schoolgirls in rural and nomadic areas. For instance, a mixed school in Garmabsard village in Damavand city in Tehran province where the majority population is socioeconomically vulnerable, has twenty-four schoolboys and ten schoolgirls. Due to this gender-segregated education policy, the school did not register schoolgirls for the new academic year. The school, however, was eventually shut down because the schoolboys alone could not meet the necessary quorum to keep the school open (Khabar Online 2022). Parents of this village wrote an open letter to the Ministry of Education, Damavand Branch, and expressed their concerns for their daughters. They explained that, for their daughters to get an education, they would either have to move to a different city or send their young daughters to the closest available schools, requiring a commute of up to thirty-seven miles every day. If they stayed in the village, there would be no other option but for their daughters to drop out of school (Khabar Online 2022).

The complaint, however, was not well received by the Ministry, which stated that the gender segregation education policy was to be sustained at all costs and that it is far better for the villagers' daughters to drop out of school or get married off as early as possible than to get an education in a mixed school (Khabar Online 2022). Gender-segregated education policies, such as the ban on mixed schooling, thus take away educational opportunities from schoolgirls, especially, in rural and nomadic areas, and push them into child marriages. There are currently sixty-four socioeconomically vulnerable rural and nomadic areas across thirty-two provinces, where the ban on mixed schooling threatens to exclude girls from the school system, thereby further pushing them towards becoming mothers and wives as soon as possible (Imna 2021).

### Textbook designs: an extension of gender-segregated education policies in Iran

Gender-segregated education policies in the Iranian schooling system also reinforce and reproduce gender-based social norms through a variety of mechanisms, such as school textbooks. The historical centrality of motherhood and wifeness was a theme running through Iranian textbooks of the nineteenth and twenty centuries (Najmabadi 1993, 1998). In recent years, however, as an extension of

<sup>3</sup> See more of the school in Yaylaki Asb Saray village in Talab (n.d.) at <https://www.talab.org/fun/interesting/%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%AB%D8%B1-3-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2.html>.

gender-segregated policies in education, the Ministry of Education announced that segregated textbooks for schoolgirls and schoolboys would soon be published (Bezhan 2012). This policy has recently created a gender-segregated pedagogical sphere within the broader gender segregation policies in the school system of the country. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education took this policy a step further and removed the pictures of schoolgirls from the cover of the mathematics book for the third grade. Before 2020, the original design included both schoolgirls and schoolboys, whereas in 2020 the schoolgirls were removed from the cover. However, due to the immediate reaction of civil society, including parents and teachers, in 2021 the book cover was redesigned, and all students were removed.<sup>4</sup>

Even before this decision, the ratio of boys to girls depicted in a wide range of primary school textbooks was 3:1 (Ebadollahi Chanzanagh et al. 2011). Take the mathematics and science textbooks of the fifth grade. Although, at first glance, these topics seem to be agendered, the books' problems, as well as experiments, are visually and contextually gendered by, say, picturing girls in the private space of houses while boys are in the public space of mountains and jungles. The lower level of girls' visual presence in these textbooks is thus also accompanied by another factor, that girls are associated with more segregated gender roles such as housekeeping and traits such as serving others (Ebadollahi Chanzanagh et al. 2011).

The problem of reinforcing highly gendered roles and traits is not limited to one specific grade in primary school. In fact, such reinforcement increases across primary school and high school textbooks (Foroutan 2012). In Persian language textbooks, for instance, the portrayal of girls drops from 12 per cent in primary school to 1 per cent in high school (Foroutan 2012) and even such limited portrayal specifically regards women as being occupied with indoor activities and possessing passive character traits (Karami 2020). The issue, however, is not limited to Persian textbooks. Besides mathematics and science, multiple analyses of Arabic and English textbooks also indicate the same points (Amini and Birjandi 2012; Mardani et al. 2012; Hall 2014; Baghdadi and Rezaei 2015; Lee and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei 2020). Generally speaking, then, although the reinforcement of such gender-segregated roles and norms begins in elementary school textbooks, as students go to a higher education level there is an even more man-dominant tone to the textbooks (Foroutan 2012).

Moreover, gender-segregated textbook policies are not limited to textbook visuals. In fact, the textbooks' covers reflect the textbooks' contents. Indeed, the contents' discriminatory attitudes and negative undertones concerning schoolgirls in Iran are not accidental (Paivandi 2008): rather, the textbooks are an extension of the gender roles imposed on schoolgirls (Moinipour 2022). As part of the gender-segregated textbook policies, for example, the recent additions of the *reflection and lifestyle* textbook for the seventh grade and the *family management and lifestyle* textbook for the twelfth grade, in particular, downplay the harm of child marriage. In the

<sup>4</sup> See more of the three textbooks' covers in Radio Farda (2020), at <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-removes-girls-image-from-math-textbooks/30833684.html> and in Hajian et al. (2021), at <http://chap.sch.ir/books/10016>.

*family management and lifestyle* textbook there are passages that contribute to the promotion and encouragement of child marriage, such as ‘marriage has no age limit, it just has conditions’ (Moinipour 2022). From exclusion in the physical form to the content of school textbooks, the hostile attitude towards girls in the Iranian school system is the result of the bidirectional relationship between gender-based societal norms and gender-segregated education policies.

### Gender-segregated policies in Iran: from schooling to higher education

In response to the analysis above, it might be objected that there is an increasing number of women students in higher education in Iran. In the literature, it is accepted that the increasing number of women students in the country is an achievement of the Islamic Republic regime and a sign of progress in women’s rights, specifically, accessibility to higher education in Iran (Hoodfar and Sadr 2010; Winn 2016). By highlighting an increase in the literacy rate and the rate of attaining higher education degrees (Elmi 2009), some scholars go as far as to suggest that women in Iran are overeducated (Salehi Isfahani 2008). As a consequence, one might read the twin facts of the increasing number of child marriages and the increasing number of women students in higher education as being in tension: while the latter is considered a sign of making education more accessible to women students, the former is an indicator of the opposite. However, I argue that the two are compatible with one another and indeed fortify the central argument of this paper, this having long been a subject for discussion in the literature (Moghadam 2003; Mehran 2009; Rezai-Rashti 2011).

First, it should be noted that gender-segregated policies in universities and workplaces are extensions of gender-segregated policies in the schooling system. While the number of women students with undergraduate degrees is high in number across the Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) region, including Iran, their participation in the workplace, especially in upper management positions, is significantly low (Ripley 2017). In other words, it is true that nowadays, women students in Iranian universities and colleges ‘made up 60 per cent of all students passing university exams, and women have done well in traditionally male-dominated disciplines like engineering’ (Singer 2012). However, there is no equal opportunity in terms of employment as only 19 per cent of the paid workforce, after 7 per cent growth during the past thirty years, comprises women, which makes the country rank 140 out of 144 for gender parity (World Economic Forum 2018). As a case in point, in an extensive report in 2017, Tara Sepehri Far demonstrates the severity of the discriminatory working conditions for women in Iran. She argues that the root of all forms of discriminatory laws against women in the workplace originates in viewing women merely as wives and mothers (Sepehri Far 2017), which is an extension of the bidirectional relationship between gender-based social norms and gender-segregated education policies that, as argued above, push women students to get married off as early as possible.

Additionally, the number of women students in higher education has been disproportionately increasing across different majors. As an extension of

gender-segregated education policies, in the Iranian higher education system, women's accessibility to some majors is limited or banned because those majors are viewed as 'masculine'. Consequently, there are fewer opportunities for women in related fields in the workplace as well. Yet despite limited access to some 'masculine' majors, women students still take higher positions in their classes. For instance, in the so-called 'masculine' major of mining engineering, 'four of the top six graduates in the University of Tehran's class of 2012 were women' (Dokouhaki and Shahrokni 2012). Notwithstanding this, during the past few years, women students have been banned from getting a degree in some 'masculine' majors, including mining engineering. To address this situation, Mahnaz Mirzaei, the first mining engineer woman working in an upper management position at a mine, explains in an interview that despite familial and societal condemnation, she chose this major because she loves it (Khabar Online 2014). She also points out that banning women from getting an education in this major has resulted in extending gender-segregated education policies into higher education, which negatively impacts both women and the field of mining engineering itself (Khabar Online 2014). It is only, however, in the so-called 'feminine' majors with very limited working opportunities, such as Persian literature, that women get an equal opportunity to obtain an undergraduate degree. In 2012, for instance, 'the philosophy department at the University of Tehran admitted 25 students—13 men and 12 women' and Shahid Beheshti University 'has accepted 110 law students—60 women and 50 men' (Dokouhaki and Shahrokni 2012). However, even in 'feminine' majors, equal opportunities for women and men students are limited to undergraduate degrees, and the same standard does not stand for graduate degrees. For example, in 2014, the numbers of women and men students obtaining undergraduate degrees were roughly similar, while in graduate degrees the number of men students was roughly double (Radio Farda 2016).

Moreover, the number of women students has been disproportionately increasing in different provinces. While more women are getting an education in Persian-dominated cities, such as Tehran or Isfahan, in the vast majority of provinces, particularly among socioeconomically vulnerable rural and nomadic areas and among marginalized ethnic minorities, such as Sistan and Balochistan, West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Zanjan provinces, the number of women students, even in high schools, has drastically decreased (Radio Farda 2017). As for the increasing rate of literacy among women, 85 per cent of women in Tehran province are literate, whereas this number does not exceed 50 per cent in Sistan and Balochistan province (Isna 2002). In fact, even twenty years ago, when gender-segregated education policies on college majors did not exist to the extent they do nowadays, in Tehran province, 54 per cent of college admissions were received by women, while Kohkiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province, with a majority population of socioeconomically vulnerable Lurs, had the lowest rate of 27 per cent (Isna 2002).

Consequently, and contrary to the claim in the objection, the increasing number of women students in higher education basically means devoting more than 50 per



cent of educational spaces in undergraduate degrees in ‘feminine’ majors with minimal working opportunities to women students, which are mostly limited to Persian-dominated urban areas. In other parts of the country, as women are dropping out of primary and high schools in large numbers, the country faces a crisis in child marriage. Accordingly, there is no tension between the increasing number of child marriages and the increasing number of women students in higher education since there is a slight overlap between the two demographics impacted by these rates. Indeed, putting these twin facts together fits well with the overarching argument of this paper as it demonstrates how the bidirectional relationship between gender-based social norms and gender-segregated education policies disproportionately affects women students in rural, nomadic, ethnic, and socioeconomically vulnerable areas of the country.

It remains unanswered, however, why women students in large Persian-dominated urban areas seek undergraduate degrees despite limited access to all majors, advanced degrees, and working opportunities. I argue that by seeking undergraduate degrees under the conditions explained above, this particular group of women students in large Persian-dominated urban areas is able to do what other women usually cannot, to negotiate the terms of their marriage. In recent years, both the marriage rate (Al-Monitor 2015; Radio Farda 2019) and the birth rate (Iran International 2021a, 2021b; The Jerusalem Post 2022), particularly in large urban areas of the country, have drastically declined. While many factors, such as political instability and poor economic conditions, contribute to this situation, I argue that the resistance of women students through the institutions of higher education is also a factor that should not be overlooked. Women students in large Persian-dominated urban areas use higher education to negotiate the terms of their marriage. However, since this response is a stop-gap measure, there is again no tension between the increasing rates of child marriages and the increasing rates of women students in higher education. In fact, both are the results of gender-based norms and gender-segregated education policies that further reinforce those norms at different levels.

For instance, *mahriyeh* is one of the conditions of the Islamic marriage contract in which an amount of money, or its equivalent in gold, land, etc., agreed upon by both sides is paid to the wife at any time she requests by the husband. As Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam argue, however, *mahriyeh* negotiation ‘is a strategy to counter the legal discrimination and risk of divorce that women face under the provisions of the Islamic family law’ (2011: 435). As they point out, there is a meaningful relationship between the negotiation of an increasing amount of *mahriyeh*, the discriminatory post-Revolution family laws that do not guarantee the right to divorce for women, the obtaining of a higher education degree by women students, and the increasing rate of divorce, particularly in large urban areas of the country (Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011). As one woman explains, in her marriage process, even her brother was asking for a higher *mahriyeh* for her because she had a PhD (Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011). ‘His argument was that his own wife who is a high school graduate was given 714 gold coins, while his sister (me)

with a doctorate should ask for at least 2,000 gold coins’, she recalls ([Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011](#): 436). Or in another case, a woman explains that *mahriyeh* should not be viewed in a traditional sense in Iran anymore; it is rather a means for women to negotiate the terms of marriage and divorce:

In this country, women cannot negotiate their civil and legal rights through legal means. I was married for five years and found out that I could not live with my husband any longer. We discussed divorce but he said no. My *mahriyeh* was 1,370 gold coins. I threatened that I would litigate for my *mahriyeh*. This was the only way that I could secure my divorce. I am absolutely sure that because of this high *mahriyeh* he agreed to divorce. ([Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011](#): 436)

Since obtaining a higher education degree is related to asking for a higher amount of *mahriyeh* and that helps women to negotiate the terms of the marriage process or get a divorce, the increasing number of women students in higher education even with undergraduate degrees mostly in ‘feminine’ majors with minimal working opportunities in large Persian-dominated urban areas, therefore entails that it is more likely that they challenge the status quo regarding the societal treatment of women based on highly gendered norms, roles, and expectations, such as the case of *mahriyeh*.

## EPISTEMIC SEGREGATION IN THE IRANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

### Epistemic segregation: a form of epistemic injustice

Understanding the real-world impacts of gender-segregated education policies on women students, particularly in socioeconomically vulnerable rural, ethnic, and nomadic areas, is a matter for empirical research. However, the normative dimensions of gender-segregated education policies are a different matter. Although gender segregation in the Iranian school system reinforces epistemic segregation, eliminating it will not automatically lead to eliminating epistemic segregation as a form of epistemic injustice. *Epistemic injustice* broadly refers to ‘forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices’, including ‘a wide range of topics concerning the wrongful treatment and unjust structures in meaning-making and knowledge producing practices’, such as ‘exclusion and silencing’ or ‘having one’s meanings or contributions systematically distorted, misheard, or misrepresented’ ([Kidd et al. 2017](#): 1). Epistemic injustice can encompass a wide range of epistemic practices that wrong a knower in their capacity as a knower.

I define *epistemic segregation* as a form of epistemic injustice that refers to a set of epistemic practices that actively exclude a knower in their capacity as a knower from the process of knowledge production in a given topic. The act of epistemic exclusion can also be due to different factors, from the physical exclusion of someone from a social context to misrepresenting them within a given social context. For instance, historically in the USA, in comparison with all other races, Black students are at higher risk of being disproportionately assigned with disabilities and put in special education programmes ([Harry and Klinger 2014](#)). Due to racial biases in classrooms and in the referral processes, as well as the negative stereotypes, the high

overrepresentation of Black students with disabilities is a form of misrepresentation (Harry and Klinger 2014). This type of misrepresentation, however, is manifested through epistemic practices, particularly epistemic segregation. Accordingly, Black students are disproportionately excluded from the schooling system through wrongful treatment that misrepresents their contribution to schools and limits their practices in meaning-making in society as a whole.

Epistemic segregation is closely related to another form of epistemic injustice, *hermeneutical injustice*, which refers to ‘a gap in collective hermeneutical resources—a gap, that is, in our shared tools of social interpretation—where it is no accident that the cognitive disadvantage created by this gap impinges unequally on different social groups’ (Fricker 2007: 6). To be *hermeneutically marginalized* implies unequally participating in ‘the practices through which social meanings are generated’ and to be in a *hermeneutically unequal* situatedness entails that a person’s social situatedness ‘is such that a collective hermeneutical gap prevents them in particular from making sense of an experience which it is strongly in their interests to render intelligible’ (Fricker 2007: 6–7). I argue that epistemic segregation requires hermeneutic marginalization. However, one can be hermeneutically marginalized without necessarily facing epistemic segregation. For instance, historically, women are among the hermeneutically marginalized social groups because they participate in the practices through which social meanings are generated disproportionately. Nonetheless, this point on its own does not entail that women are epistemically segregated as well. In order to demonstrate how a social group is epistemically segregated, it is crucial to identify the active process of excluding a knower from knowledge production in a given topic. For example, in Afghanistan, girls are currently banned from attending secondary schools and universities (Basitkey 2023). The active process of excluding girls as epistemic agents in their capacities as knowers from knowledge production on a variety of topics demonstrates how Afghanistani women—who are hermeneutically marginalized already—are epistemically segregated as well.

As a result, epistemic segregation is intertwined with hermeneutic marginalization as not only does it already take place in a hermeneutically marginalized situatedness, but epistemic segregation also plays an important part in further reinforcing it. In the same example, the lack of accessibility to education on its own plays an important role in further hermeneutically marginalizing Afghanistani women as it systematically prevents them from participating in the generation of social meanings in society. As a consequence, tracking epistemic segregation helps track hermeneutic marginalization and how it is further reinforced. However, tracking hermeneutic marginalization on its own does not necessarily track epistemic segregation in a given case. As I argued in the first part of the paper, in Iranian society, viewing women merely as wives and mothers plays a part in legally allowing schoolgirls to leave school as early as twelve. Limiting young girls’ potential merely to becoming wives and mothers costs them education. However, the lack of accessibility to education further reinforces the notion that education for girls is useless, which is among the most important reasons for women students to drop out of school (Mehran 1997). In the sphere of epistemic practices, this case demonstrates how

epistemic segregation is intertwined with hermeneutic marginalization as by preventing women from participating in the generation of social meanings in society, their accessibility to schooling is disproportionately affected, which itself plays a part in further hermeneutically marginalizing women as it systematically prevents such participation.

### **Harm to women: epistemic segregation in the Iranian school system**

While epistemic segregation is reproduced through social arrangements within different institutions and contexts, the importance of the phenomenon in education calls for an analysis of its own. *Instructional epistemic segregation* (IES) refers to epistemic segregation where a set of epistemic practices actively excludes a student or an education professional—as a member of a social group—in their capacity as a knower from the process of knowledge production within an education system. The act of epistemic exclusion can also be due to a variety of factors, such as education policies or norms. In other words, the idea of IES is a conceptual tool that helps identify epistemically segregated patterns in education due to different social factors. For example, the Milan Conference in 1880 resulted in the banning of sign language by reaching ‘the consensus that the oral method, which includes lip-reading, hearing aids, and speech is the best method for instructing’ students with hearing impairment in schools (Tokgöz 2022: 3). While the aim of this conference was to raise the quality of education for this group of students, ‘the ban reflected the assumption of the superiority of speech over sign language’, which led to a significant decrease in the numbers of education professionals and students with hearing impairment in schools over the next century (p. 3). This case demonstrates how the epistemic dimension of privileging speech over sign language in schooling excluded students and education professionals with a hearing impairment. Despite aiming to raise the quality of education for students with hearing impairment, by reinforcing a form of IES, members of this social group were excluded from the schooling system due to the difficulty they faced in teaching and learning without sign language. This example also shows how closely intertwined IES can be with hermeneutic marginalization since the historic hermeneutic marginalization of people with hearing impairments played a role in privileging speech over sign language, which led to their exclusion from producing knowledge in the school system. This act of exclusion further hermeneutically marginalized people with hearing impairments due to their dropping out of schools later on.

*Gender-based instructional epistemic segregation* (GBIES) refers to a set of epistemic practices that actively excludes a student or an education professional—as a member of a social group—in their capacity as a knower from the process of knowledge production within an education system based on gender dynamics, roles, norms, or expectations. It is important to note that tracking hermeneutical marginalization and even epistemic segregation does not necessarily lead to tracking gender-based epistemic segregation in a learning environment. Thus, the theoretical significance of the concept of GBIES is that not only does it track epistemic segregation in an educational context based on the specific factor of gender, but it also

helps track broad patterns of epistemic segregation and hermeneutical marginalization in a school system.

Let us recall the case of one of the smallest schools in *Yaylaki Asb Saray* that has only three schoolgirls with a man teacher who commutes eighteen miles in two hours on rough rural roads every day for the sake of his students. The gender-segregated education policies that ban mixed schooling reinforce a form of GBIES, in which both the students and the teacher are excluded from the process of producing knowledge within the schooling system. This case also demonstrates how closely connected hermeneutic marginalization and GBIES are. Both women and socioeconomically vulnerable communities are hermeneutically marginalized as they do not fully participate in generating social meanings in Iranian society. However, through GBIES, they are further hermeneutically marginalized as this exclusionary epistemic practice weakens their capacities as knowers to participate in such practices.

Based on his *reproduction theory*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the school system in France reproduces socioeconomic inequality between classes (1993). Ebadollahi Chanzanagh, Esmaealzadeh, and Zarsazkar argue that other school systems can also reproduce other forms of inequalities, such as the Iranian school system, which reproduces gender inequality (2011). Relying on both of these arguments, I argue that the school system in Iran reproduces hermeneutic inequality by reinforcing GBIES in a variety of ways, such as physical exclusion or textbooks' visuals and contents. In the case of the physical exclusion of girls from the schooling system, particularly in rural and nomadic areas, GBIES is reinforced by excluding them from knowledge production in schools, which further hermeneutically marginalizes them by creating barriers that exclude them as knowers from participating in practices generating social meanings.

Let us recall the case of schoolgirls in Garmabsard village whose parents received a response from the Ministry of Education stating that it is far better for the villagers' daughters to drop out of school or get married off as early as possible than to get an education in a mixed school (Khabar Online 2022). In all cases, due to gender-segregated education policies that allow students to drop out of school as early as twelve or prevent them from registration in mixed schooling, girls are physically excluded from the schooling system. The epistemic dimension of the physical form of exclusion reinforces GBIES, which excludes women from knowledge production and contributes to sense-making processes in society. It is then through this form of exclusion, in some families and indeed in the state itself, that girls are either forced or encouraged to get married off as early as possible. By forcefully adhering to the gender role of becoming merely a wife or a mother as early as possible, however, they are pushed further into a hermeneutically marginalized situatedness that is *reproduced* by GBIES reinforcing within the schooling system.

As another form of reinforcing GBIES, misrepresenting women through textbooks' visuals and contents can also lead to *reproducing* hermeneutic inequality. As a mediator in the production and transfer of knowledge, textbooks are crucial to both teaching and constructing students' identities (Salami and Ghajarieh

2016). After teachers, textbooks are one of the most trusted resources used by students in their socialization process. In other words, textbooks have significant long-term effects on students regarding knowledge production as well as how they view themselves in regard to the societal values transferred to them by those books (Ndura 2004). The social self of children then is shaped through such processes, with this process coinciding with the successive schooling ages as they gradually recognize what counts as a crucial part of self, including gender (Foroutan 2019). In particular, textbooks are one of the most important parts of gender socialization (Lee and Collins 2008; Tylka and Caloger 2011; Foroutan 2012, 2019), and children between the ages of four and seven gradually come to understand gender as a vital part of the self (Foroutan 2019). Consequently, when schoolgirls experience hostile attitudes toward women underlying textbooks' visuals and contents, it distorts their image of themselves as well as their gender identity (Islam and Asadullah 2018). The direct promotion of child marriage, the characterization of women as passive and silent, the portrayal of women as mainly in indoor spaces, and the removal of girls from the covers of textbooks are different social mechanisms that reproduce hermeneutic inequality by reinforcing GBIES. In other words, the hostile attitudes towards women in textbooks' visuals and contents reinforce the barriers that exclude schoolgirls students as knowers in their capacities as a knower from knowledge production because they systematically distort and misrepresent women's contribution to the practices through which social meanings are generated.

Instead of equipping schoolgirls to be able to explore a positive sense of self-identification, the school system dictates to them who they are and what their roles in society are through reinforcing a distorted image of the gendered identities and social roles. For instance, in the Iranian school system, textbooks directly contribute to the promotion of child marriage by echoing that the self-worth of women depends on getting married as soon as possible. In general, due to the hostile undertone, the attitude, and the reinforcement of a distorted image of women in textbooks, women are portrayed as inferiors, and so do not get the opportunity to enjoy an independent sense of their gender identities including the exploration of self-identification on their own terms. Reinforcing such barriers prevents the production of self-knowledge from a young age, which not only wrongs schoolgirls in their capacities as knowers but is also an indicator that the school system does not treat them as 'fully human' (Dunne 2022). Although not being taken seriously in school is a form of dehumanization, not being able to know who a knower is as a knower, as a woman, and as a human, is also a form of dehumanization that explains the wrongness of GBIES that schoolgirls face in the school system of Iran. The hermeneutic marginalization in GBIES then starts with a negative sense of self-worth, which leads to doubting one's epistemic capabilities as well as one's standing in the process of collective meaning-making. Consider a primary school girl in the first grade who expresses that when she grows up, she wants to become a pilot or to learn what it is to be a woman for herself, but all she sees in her textbooks are images, content, and undertones that channel the message that women are not worthy

on their own, and that to be worthy they should become wives and mothers as early as possible. Under such circumstances, it would be difficult to conceive a situation where she does not end up thinking she cannot become a pilot because she is a woman, or indeed that she cannot become whoever she wants to be because she is a woman. Therefore, the Iranian school system *reproduces* hermeneutic inequality by reinforcing GBIES that wrongs schoolgirls in their capacities as knowers because it dehumanizes them.

#### Harm to society: active ignorance in the Iranian school system

It should also be noted that GBIES affects society by impacting schoolboys, albeit in a different way.<sup>5</sup> It is a common phenomenon that members of unjust societies 'have distorted images of themselves as knowers', as members of underprivileged groups underestimate their epistemic capabilities, and members of privileged groups overestimate theirs (Medina 2013: 28). However, there is also a cost for the privileged groups in the overestimation of their epistemic capabilities, as they are producing *active ignorance*. 'Those who are epistemically spoiled have a hard time learning their mistakes, their biases, and the constraints and presuppositions of their position in the world and their perspective', Medina writes (p. 30). Besides *arrogance*, *laziness*, and *closed-mindedness* are other epistemic vices that contribute to the formation of *active ignorance*, which requires the privileged group to be 'at fault for their complicity ... with epistemic injustices that support and contribute to situations of oppression' (p. 39). *Laziness* stems from ignorance in the sense that there is a lack of epistemic curiosity regarding the social domains of life and *closed-mindedness* is a sense of ignorance used as a shield to preserve privilege. As a case in point, gender blindness has an epistemic dimension that unravels how *active ignorance* functions in the privileged group. When someone in a position of privilege expresses a form of gender blindness they are actively ignorant because they assume sexism is an ideology 'that can be simply rejected by choosing what we see' due to their *arrogance*; they pronounce 'about what is there to see ... prior to and independent of empirical findings' due to their *laziness*; and 'they close their minds to certain possibilities no matter how strong their social and subjective evidence for the relevance of these considerations happens to be' due to their *close-mindedness* (pp. 37–8).

To show that an epistemic practice reproduces *active ignorance* in privileged groups is to demonstrate that practice produces *arrogance*, *laziness*, and *close-mindedness*. Using this conceptual framework, I argue that through the reinforcement of GBIES, the Iranian school system reproduces *active ignorance* in schoolboys. In order to show how GBIES within the schooling system of the country makes schoolboys *actively ignorant*, I argue that this form of GBIES produces *arrogance*, *laziness*, and *close-mindedness* as epistemic vices in schoolboys.

<sup>5</sup> The other social groups affected by GBIES in the school system of Iran are sexual and gender minorities. Due to the complex status of LGBTQ+ rights in Iran, this topic requires its own discussion in a separate paper.

Multiple studies across the country in different age groups show that there is an increasing rate of aggression within boys-only schools, such as in how teachers treat schoolboys or how schoolboys treat each other (Hosseinpour Zenouzi 2016; Ebrahimi Moghadam et al. 2019; Ghaderzadeh and Rostamizadeh 2021). Multiple studies show that in Tehran across different age groups, teachers' physical and verbal bullying in boys-only schools is significantly higher than in girls-only schools (Ebrahimi Moghadam et al. 2019). Indeed, as one study shows, one of the reasons boys express a higher level of aggression as early as in primary boys-only schools is that through some of the most crucial years of gender socialization, they can only see, be friends with, learn from, and play with others in school and through this absence of femininity they experience a form of hypermasculinity that is similar to heavily man-dominant environments, such as war zones (Hosseinpour Zenouzi 2016: 9). It is then no accident that in Iranian society, and specifically, through the school system, gender roles for women inculcate a sense of passiveness, that women are worthy only as long as they become mothers and wives, while gender roles for men inculcate a sense of hypermasculinity that encourages them to express themselves through forms of aggression, both physical and verbal, among themselves as well as via their interaction with men teachers.

This form of hypermasculinity, however, turns through the school system into *hegemonic masculinity*, a notion that refers to 'the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that, operating on the terrain of common sense and conventional morality, defines what it means to be a man' (Hanke 1990: 232). In other words, the school system normalizes hypermasculinity within boys-only schools through *hegemonic masculinity* as this is the 'normal' way of being a man and taking men's roles. One of the most significant mechanisms to reproduce this form of *hegemonic masculinity* is via the epistemic situatedness of textbooks. As studies show, in Iranian textbooks, from primary school to high school, there is an overwhelming presence of schoolboys shown with attributes such as being active or independent, specifically in outdoor settings. However, this man-dominant undertone is not merely a reflection of a hypermasculine learning environment. Rather, by reproducing similar dynamics through their visuals and contents, textbooks, as mediators in the production and transfer of knowledge that is used to construct students' identities (Salami and Ghajarieh 2016), reproduce *hegemonic masculinity* through normalizing hypermasculinity. Indeed, removing schoolgirls from the cover of the mathematic books and showing only boys together in an outdoor activity that is similar to a boys-only learning environment, serves to promote hypermasculinity. Similarly, the science textbook of the fifth grade which shows only schoolboys exploring jungles and mountains (Ebadollahi Chanzanagh et al. 2011) is also another example that demonstrates how hypermasculinity is normalized through the overrepresentation of schoolboys in a boys-only setting. It is not merely that this misrepresentation of schoolgirls that distorts their image of themselves and their contribution to the practices through which social meanings are generated. For schoolboys, this overrepresentation normalizes a boys-only environment but also reproduces a distorted image of themselves that leads to their overestimating their epistemic capabilities.



Focussing on the relationship between the overestimation of epistemic capabilities and *hegemonic masculinity* shows how GBIES in the school system of Iran reproduces *active ignorance* in schoolboys. First, it reproduces *arrogance* because through *hegemonic masculinity* it normalizes schoolboys presupposing their 'superior' position in society, such as by making negative assumptions about the gender roles of women while viewing their own situation as the default (Joukar et al. 2012). Schoolgirls, however, do not have the same high level of negative assumptions about men's gender roles, even though they do not view their own gender or gender roles in a positive light. For instance, in the city of Ilam, in Ilam province, with a majority population of socioeconomically vulnerable Kurds and Lurs, across different age groups in schools, 70 per cent of schoolboys agree that 'boys should not cry and crying is for girls', while only 32 per cent of schoolgirls agree with this statement (Joukar et al. 2012: 9). The same goes for stereotypes, such as 'boys should receive more pocket money than girls', 'parents should love their sons more than their daughters', 'girls cannot be equal to boys due to physical weakness', 'boys are more aggressive than girls', 'girls are more emotional than boys', and 'the best job for a mother is to be a housewife rather than working outside', which the vast majority of schoolboys believe to be true but the schoolgirls do not (Joukar et al. 2012: 9).

Additionally, GBIES in the school system of Iran reproduces *laziness* in schoolboys because, through their *arrogance*, *hegemonic masculinity* becomes normalized and prevents them from being intellectually curious about how to define themselves beyond the hypermasculine boundaries. For instance, in the same study, it was found that most schoolboys believe grocery shopping, making important decisions for the family, or being the head of the family is a man's job while doing the dishes and washing clothes is a woman's job (Joukar et al. 2012). This is an indicator that schoolboys internalize gender roles that highlight their hypermasculinity without becoming intellectually curious to explore a positive sense of self-identification that is beyond the traditional man's authority figure. This lack of epistemic curiosity also indicates how their views on women students become fixed from a young age, without the willingness to learn more about girlhood and womanhood beyond the traditional figure of women's passivity in a family.

GBIES in the school system of Iran also reproduces *closed-mindedness* in schoolboys because as *hegemonic masculinity* becomes the default for them; they learn to ascribe positive connotations to their own hypermasculinity and negative connotations to girlhood and womanhood. For example, the same study shows that the majority of schoolboys believe that 'boys are better than girls', 'boys and girls are not intellectually the same', 'girls are deceitful and love gossiping', and 'girls are unfortunate' (Joukar et al. 2012: 9). Such negative connotations then become a shield to preserve their privilege that leads to overestimating their epistemic capabilities and normalizing a sense of superiority concerning themselves and inferiority concerning schoolgirls.

Consequently, it is important to note that in the sphere of epistemic normativity, the distorted self-images of schoolgirls and schoolboys harm society in general. In

other words, it is wrong to assume that in the Iranian school system, schoolgirls get hermeneutically marginalized while schoolboys remain in an unaffected position. It is rather through situating schoolboys in an epistemically ‘superior’ position overestimating their epistemic capabilities that schoolgirls are hermeneutically marginalized and situated in an epistemically ‘inferior’ position. The reinforcement of *hegemonic masculinity* in the school system is an extension of the hostile attitude of the schooling system that hermeneutically marginalizes schoolgirls as well. Therefore, the reproduction of *hermeneutic inequality* and *active ignorance* by GBIES in the school system of Iran affects both schoolgirls and schoolboys.

## CONCLUSION

In the Iranian school system, there is a bidirectional relationship between gender-based social norms and gender-segregated education policies that results in a hostile attitude towards schoolgirls. Through this hostile attitude, schoolgirls are *hermeneutically marginalized* through social mechanisms that reinforce GBIES, such as physical exclusion from the school system or misrepresentation in the contents and visuals of textbooks, which prevents them from participating in practices of generating social meanings in society. Further, it affects society by impacting schoolboys through the reproduction of *active ignorance*. I conclude that, in societies such as Iran, where highly gendered norms play out in the school system and are further reinforced by that system, the result is not limited to gender segregation itself but extends beyond it, to a form of epistemic injustice that wrongs students by reproducing and reinforcing those highly gendered norms.

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