

Multifaceted Discrimination: The Perception of Iranian Sunni Kurds About the Experience of Social Justice

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Abstract: Using the thematic analysis network approach, we investigated the perception of social justice experienced by Iranian Sunni Kurds. The research participants were sixteen Iranian Sunni Kurds selected using purposeful sampling. The semi-structured interview was used for data collection. The findings revealed that the participants had encountered discrimination at the intersection of four aspects: ideological discrimination, structural discrimination, agency-oriented discrimination, and intra-ethnic discrimination. The experience of multifaceted discrimination among Sunni Kurds points to a monopolistic distribution of resources, opportunities, and political power, favoring a specific ethnic group in Iran. The ethnic stratification pattern related to Sunni Kurds in Iran demonstrates the presence of a dominant core and a peripheral ethnicity. Cultural and political factors significantly shaped the core-periphery relationship between the central state and Sunni Kurds. The existence of sovereign and non-sovereign communities contributes to the persistence of discrimination against Sunni Kurds. Consequently, the perpetuation of inequality and discrimination endured by Sunni Kurds as a result of the central state's policy of homogenization has led to internal colonialism.

Keywords: Social justice, Sunni Kurds, multifaceted discrimination, Iran

Despite the continuous historical efforts of societies and states to achieve social justice, one of the most essential issues in multi-ethnic societies and ethnic-based states is the experience of ethnic discrimination. As Cornell (1995) says, one of the notable features of ethnic segregation and discrimination is its pervasiveness. In an ethnic-based state, ethnic groups form the fundamental building blocks of the political system, and many citizenship rights are only exercisable by members of a specific ethnic group (Ghai, 2011). Thus, ethnicity has always been considered a significant factor in denying or enabling admission to citizenship (Benhabib, 2004). Ethnic minorities have a weak position in society. They frequently suffer discrimination in the public sphere or private life based on their religion, beliefs, political opinion, or civil status (Marwan, 2019). In the same way, the ethnic minorities in Iran experience a pervasive sense of discrimination and deprivation towards the central state (Bradley, 2007). The objective of this study has been to investigate the perception of the social justice experience among Sunni Kurds, one of the main ethnic minority groups in Iran.

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Iran has diverse ethnic and linguistic groups or communities (Aghajanian, 1983; Amanolahi, 2005; Bradley, 2007). Historically, it has had a diverse population comprising various linguistic and cultural identities (Aghajanian 1983), and it is a multicultural and multi-ethnic entity (Hassaniyan & Stansfield, 2022), where different and layered identities play a role in individuals' socio-political lives (Mofidi & Aghapouri, 2023). Also, throughout history, the state in Iran has been ethnic-based (Bradley, 2007). It is important to note that certain states were decentralized and maintained mutual relations with other ethnic groups. In such states, ethnic groups did not face inequality and discrimination. Conversely, other states adopted a centralist policy and maintained a one-sided relationship with other ethnic groups. Consequently, inequality and discrimination were prevalent against those ethnic groups (Mohammad Zade & Khani, 2018). Hence, language and religion have consistently emerged as the two primary distinguishing factors of Iranian ethnicities, causing inequality and discrimination among ethnic groups.

In the pre-modern period, the Safavid state (1501-1736) began discriminating against ethnic groups by marginalizing and enforcing religious assimilation on non-Shia ethnicities (Kohnepushi, 2004; Serajzadeh & Adhami, 2008). Ethnic inequality and discrimination are related to the central state of Reza Shah in the modern period (Aghajanian, 1983; Amanolahi, 2002; Serajzadeh & Adhami, 2008; Vali, 2011). Reza Shah's main goal was establishing a modern, centralized, unified state under his absolute rule (Amanolahi, 2002). Therefore, as part of the appeal to nationalism and Iranianism for the country's revitalization, specific cultural changes, which were biased against non-Persian ethnic communities, were implemented alongside the process of political centralization (Aghajanian, 1983). Hence, the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) was the first to adopt a state policy of oppression and assimilation towards non-Persian ethno-nations (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020). In 1979, the dominance of the Islamic Republic over Iran's political system and the formation of the basic structures of society on the epistemological foundations of Islam, specifically the teachings of the Shia religion and the values of the Persian people, marginalized many ethnic groups and religions (Eliassi, 2021; Entessar, 1989; Yildiz & Taysi, 2007). Consequently, in the pre-modern period, religion was the cause of ethnic discrimination. In the modern period, during the Pahlavi regime, ethnic discrimination could be defined based on language, and in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the intersection of language and religion has led to the exacerbation of ethnic discrimination.

As noted, this study focuses on Sunni Kurds in Iran. Kurdistan as a liminal space has been at the geopolitical interface of old empires and modern states, and the historical dynamic of this geopolitical liminality has been the primary determinant of Kurdish politics and history (Matin, 2020). The Kurds constitute the most significant religious minority in Iran, with a lengthy historical background spanning approximately three thousand years (Radpey & Rose, 2017). They are the third-largest ethnopolitical group after the Persians and Azeris in Iran (Eliassi, 2021), with an estimated population of 10 to 12 million (about 12 to 15 percent of Iran's population; Hassaniyan & Stansfield, 2022). These people primarily reside in the western and northwestern regions of Iran. They, like many other ethnic groups, have adhered to shared principles that have shaped their ethnic awareness (Entessar, 1984). So, they are distinguished from other ethnic groups by their distinct linguistic, cultural, and ideological characteristics (Gresh, 2009; Hassaniyan, 2021; Koohi-Kamali, 2003; McDowall, 2004; Radpey & Rose, 2017). Kurdish regions with religious diversity and ritualistic thoughts are the followers of different religions, including Islam, Christianity, Syriac Christianity, Judaism, and Yarsanism. However, most Kurdish people are Muslims and follow the Sunni Shafi'i religion (Bonine, 2002; Entessar, 1984; Koohi-Kamali, 2003).

The Kurds have been one of the most mistreated and neglected groups in the 20th and 21st centuries (Bonine, 2002). They have either been viewed as a minority or denied existence as a

nation in the Middle East (Eliassi, 2021). Over the past century, they have endured collective oppression and suffering (Mohammadi & Kianpour, 2023). Despite holding formal citizenship, the Kurds have not been considered legitimate constituents in Iran (Eliassi, 2021). The relationship between the Kurds and Iranian states has consistently been challenging (Koochi-Kamali, 2003). In their pursuit of consolidating power and centralism, Safavid and Qajar kings, the Pahlavi monarchy, and the IRI state have all adopted similarly uncompromising positions regarding Kurdish political, socio-economic, and cultural demands (Hassaniyan & Stansfield, 2022; Koochi-Kamali, 2003; McDowall, 2004). In the IRI state, religious factors have played a significant role in aggravating tensions between the Iranian Sunni Kurds and the Shi'a religious leadership (Entessar, 1984). Among the Kurds, both ethnicity and religion are politicized, and the Kurdish regions remain deficient and socially and economically underdeveloped (Saleh, 2013).

The political and socio-economic situation of the Kurds illustrates their enduring experience of multiple forms of discrimination and injustice, encompassing national, class, racial, environmental, and developmental dimensions (Hassaniyan & Sohrabi, 2022). As the anti-colonial resistance and struggle for self-rule have been central to Kurdish history (Matin, 2020), the consequence of this discrimination and injustice is the marginalization of the Kurds from active participation in the Iranian public life, frustration with the government, and reinforcement of their demands for autonomy (Yildiz & Taysi, 2007). Thus, we are facing two problems: First, the dominance of the central state and its discriminatory policies toward ethnic minorities, and second, the Sunni Kurdish ethnic group, which has had limited access to opportunities and resources and has endured various forms of inequalities, discrimination, and injustice over the past four decades in IRI State.

Although several studies in Iran have examined justice and its various dimensions among different groups, few have addressed ethnic justice. For instance, Yaghoobi (2009) found no significant differences between Iranian ethnic groups regarding their sense of justice; the overall sense of justice was similar across all groups. In the third wave of the survey of Iranians' attitudes and values (2016). The response from Kurdish provinces to questions on justice perception was largely negative and leaned toward injustice. Navabakhsh and Gravand (2011) discovered low economic, political, and cultural justice levels among Kurdish citizens. Talebi and Alizadeh (2017) reported that Kurdish students faced significant discrimination, inequality, and ethnic rejection in both official and unofficial university settings, particularly concerning the Kurdish language and the Sunni religion.

Accordingly, three main issues emerge: First, there is no clear and realistic understanding of the Kurdish perception of social justice in Iran. Second, most studies on social justice concerning the Kurdish people have used an etic (quantitative) approach, resulting in an incomplete understanding of their practical interpretation of social justice. Third, understanding ethnic justice in Iran requires understanding center-periphery relations between the central government and ethnic groups, a subject addressed by the internal colonialism theory but often overlooked in ethnic justice research in Iran. While some studies (e.g., Eliassi, 2021; Entessar, 2010; Hassaniyan, 2021; Hassaniyan & Sohrabi, 2022; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019) have applied this theory to explain the relations between the Iranian state and the Kurdish region, they have not directly used it to explain the ethnic justice experience among Sunni Kurds. Consequently, in line with the aforementioned studies to enhance their explanations, this research focuses on the center-periphery relationship between the Iranian central government and Sunni Kurds. Thus, the main research objective is to investigate the Sunni Kurds' perception of social justice experience in Iran and interpret their perception based on the internal colonialism theory.

The Conceptual Framework

Discrimination among Kurds in Iran is rooted in the policies of the central state towards minority and marginalized ethnic groups. Moreover, studies related to the Kurdish people confirm the centralism and center-periphery relations between the central state and Kurds based on language (or ethnicity) and religion (Eliassi, 2021; Hassaniyan & Sohrabi 2022; Mohammad Zade & Khani 2018; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019; Talebi & Alizadeh, 2018). A valuable approach to this subject is the theory of internal colonialism. Therefore, we have chosen this theory as the conceptual framework for this study because, in the words of Gutiérrez (2004), internal colonialism better explains the isolation, marginality, and backwardness of indigenous areas and groups.

The concept of internal colonialism has had various interpretations by different users and has been applied in multiple formulations, emphasizing diverse aspects and serving various purposes. In our intended context, this concept refers to the inequality and discriminatory relationship between the central state and a marginalized ethnic minority. As Walton (1975) says, internal colonialism is the intra-national exploitation of culturally distinct groups (Rogerson 1980, 107). Hind (1984) explains that “in internal colonialism, the colonizer and colonized live in the same country, and political subjection, economic exploitation, cultural domination, and racial/ethnic conflict occur widely within internal colonies” (Kürt, 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, Internal colonialism describes how political, cultural, and economic inequalities exist between the center and diverse regions within a particular state. These inequalities are commonly structured along ethnolinguistic, racial, and religious cleavages (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019a).

According to Gonzalez-Casanova (1965), the prior thesis of internal colonialism referred to disadvantaged ethnic groups under the nation-state system. A researcher noted that the new colonial circumstance was based on administrative, political, social, and economic inequalities between culturally distinct dominant and subordinate communities within the same territory (Diaz, 2021; Tugrul, 2022). He explains, “Internal colonialism corresponds to the structure of social relations based on domination and exploitation among the culturally heterogeneous, distinct group” (Gonzalez-Casanova, 1965, p. 33). Additionally, he emphasized the ethnic components of internal colonialism. Therefore, cultural pluralism constituted a vital aspect of his scheme, and he applied the concept of internal colonialism within the context of multi-ethnic societies. Finally, for him, internal colonial relations are not necessarily confined to the economic aspects (Love, 1989, pp. 906–907). Michael Hechter (1975) developed the internal colonialism theory. He argues that

internal colonialism focuses on political conflict between core and peripheral groups, mediated by the central government. From this perspective, the backwardness of peripheral groups can only be aggravated by a systematic increase in transactions with the core. The peripheral collectivity is seen to be already suffused with exploitative connections to the core, such that it can be deemed to be an internal colony. The core collectivity practices discrimination against the culturally distinct peoples who have been forced onto less accessible inferior lands.” (p. 32)

Ethnic stratification in multi-ethnic societies exhibits diverse organizational patterns. The dominant core and aggregation of peripherals best describe the situation of the Kurds in Iran (Entessar, 1989). In this pattern, “the core group views itself as the historical, institutional, and symbolic creator, and hence appropriate hegemon, of the state” (Rothschild, 1981, p. 72). In Iran, the dominant core consists of the Persians of the central Iranian plateau, with groups such as the Kurds, Baluchis, and Turkmen constituting the periphery (Entessar, 1989). On the one hand, the

centralized development strategy has led to a broad socio-economic gap between the center and the peripheries, characterized by an uneven distribution of power, socio-economic resources, and socio-cultural status (Bradley, 2007). On the other hand, over the past four decades, the IRI has subjugated non-Persians to domination and systematically attempted to destroy non-Persian cultural identifiers. The methods employed by the IRI and its treatment of ethnic minorities are typical examples of internal colonialism (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019b). Internal colonialism in Iran has given rise to internal center and periphery relations through a sustained de-development of non-Shii and non-Persian regions (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020). The central government in Iran has marginalized and excluded ethnic minorities from participating in power-sharing arrangements (Saleh, 2013). Thus, internal colonialism and the uni-ethno-religious political system in Iran have engendered sovereign versus non-sovereign communities (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020).

Scholars of Kurdish studies often describe the Kurdish region as an internal colony within the Iranian state. This feature highlights the unequal center-periphery relations and sociopolitical, economic, and cultural discrimination faced by the Kurdish population. The systematic exploitation and destruction of both the Kurdish people and their natural resources occur by the central state (Eliassi, 2021; Entessar, 2010; Hassaniyan & Sohrabi, 2022; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019). Mohammadpour and Soleimani (2020) divided the Iranian polity into sovereign and non-sovereign communities, with the Kurds falling into the latter category. The Kurds differ ethnically and religiously from the sovereign Perso-Shi'i community. In the Kurdish region, the formation of sovereign versus non-sovereign communities, severe securitization, and de-development have sustained asymmetric and unequal political, economic, and cultural relations. Hassaniyan (2021) says internal colonization is relevant in considering the oppressor-oppressed relationship across all parts of Kurdistan. He believes political and cultural discrimination, along with economic disenfranchisement, prominently characterize Kurdish society in Iran, representing enduring legacies of Reza Shah Pahlavi's authoritarian modernization and unsuccessful homogenization policy. The prevailing socio-political and economic deprivation experienced by the Kurds and other minority national communities in Iran is evidence that changing Iranian governments have perpetuated these policies toward the periphery (Hassaniyan, 2021). The term periphery has a dual application when referring to the Kurds in Iran: They are considered peripheral not only in geographical and territorial contexts but also in their exclusion from decision-making processes and power-sharing (Hassaniyan & Stansfield, 2022). Consequently, the relationship between the IRI state and the Kurds is characterized by political, social, and cultural dominance, as well as economic exploitation. This dominance and exploitation are rooted in center-defined religious-national identity and peripheral ethno-religious identity, which is a form of internal colonialism.

Method

In this research, we employed thematic analysis and the thematic network approach. The research field focuses on the socio-cultural area, covering the Kurdish provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan in western and northwestern Iran, where people with Sunni religious affiliations. The research participants comprised sixteen Sunni Kurds. The sampling method was purposeful, and we used snowball sampling to reach the research participants.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants*

No.	Gender	Age	Education	Province	Job
1	Male	37	Ph.D.	Kermanshah	Researcher
2	Female	36	MA.	Kurdistan	Housewife
3	Female	34	BA.	Kurdistan	Employee
4	Male	36	Ph.D.	Kurdistan	University lecturer
5	Male	35	Ph.D.	Kermanshah	Faculty member of the university
6	Female	39	MA	Kermanshah	Freelance (insurance)
7	Male	39	Ph.D.	West Azarbaijan	Researcher
8	Male	37	MA.	Kermanshah	Teacher
9	Male	34	MA.	West Azarbaijan	Employee
10	Female	38	BA.	Kurdistan	Teacher
11	Male	36	BA.	Kermanshah	Employee-private sector
12	Male	36	MA.	Kurdistan	Author
13	Female	35	BA.	West Azarbaijan	Housewife (tailor)
14	Male	31	BA.	West Azarbaijan	Municipal employee
15	Female	37	MA.	Kurdistan	Housewife
16	Female	35	MA.	Kermanshah	Teacher

We used the semi-structured in-depth interview for data collection and the coding tool to analyze the interviews. Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) guidelines, we extracted basic themes by identifying the main points related to the research goals and then derived the organizing themes by summarizing and combining the basic themes. The global theme emerged through the integration of these organizing themes. Finally, we drew the thematic network of organizing and global themes. Member-checking (validation by participants) and external audits (Creswell & Miller, 2000) were employed to validate the processes of data collection, analysis, and the resulting findings. Specifically, several participants confirmed the accuracy of the research findings. Additionally, a second researcher—a Sunni Kurd with expertise in qualitative research methods—acted as an external auditor, independently reviewing and verifying the coding, data analysis, and extraction of research themes. The member-checking technique was applied during the open coding and initial concept extraction phases to ensure that the codes and concepts aligned with the participants' narratives in a relevant and coherent manner. Participants provided their perspectives on these elements, and their feedback was used to revise the codes and initial concepts accordingly. The external audit technique was also utilized to validate the entire research process. We documented the inquiry process by creating memos, keeping a comprehensive research log of activities, and systematically outlining the data analysis procedures. Following this, the external auditor reviewed and offered insights on the data analysis procedures, codes, initial concepts, and the thematic framework, including basic, organizing, and global themes. His feedback was subsequently applied to revise these elements. Importantly, any disagreements with participants or the external auditor were resolved through constructive dialogue.

Findings

The major inequalities and discriminations faced by Sunni Kurds encompass various aspects, as interpreted by the research participants. These include the lack of economic development in the Kurdish region, the absence of parent industries established in Kurdish areas, restricted access to resources and opportunities for Sunni Kurds, limited access to attaining high

political positions, the deprivation of Sunni Kurds from specific government jobs, the ban on teaching the Kurdish language in schools, and the restrictions imposed on cultural and religious ceremonies held by Kurds. They attribute these inequalities and discriminations to factors, including state ideology, political structure, state agents, and Kurdish agents. Therefore, their experience of social justice, or what they have encountered in their personal and social lives, is called ‘multifaceted discrimination.’

Table 2

The Basic, Organizing, and Global Themes for the Perception of the Experience of Social Justice Among the Sunni Kurds

Example Quote	Basic themes	Organizing themes	Global theme
The dominance of a specific religion, Shia, has resulted in the exclusion of all other religious groups.	Shiite ideology	Ideological Discrimination	Multifaceted Discrimination
In my opinion, inequality and discrimination are deeply rooted in religion.			
Political leaders utilize religion for their survival, leading them to reject other religions.			
Persian concepts are both ideological and political, which has led to the formation of domination against us.	Persian ideology		
In the political structure of the Islamic Republic, the Persian people are considered superior.			
I experience discrimination because Persian people occupy a central role in the state ideology.			
The Constitution designates Shia as the official religion of the country, which implies the marginalization of other religions.	Ethnoreligious-based laws		
When the laws state that the country's official language is Persian, other languages are excluded.			
According to the Constitution, only a Shiite individual can hold the position of president.			
Resources and opportunities are distributed in a centralized way, focusing on an ethnic-religious ideology.	Centralism	Structural Discrimination	
Ethno-religious centralism has led to the disregard for the rights of ethnic minorities, including Kurds.			
All parent industries were established in the central regions of the country.			
Many policies and practices of the political system about ethnic and religious minorities are based on force and coercion.	Force-oriented system	Agency-oriented Discrimination	
The state tries to implement its cultural activities through coercion among ethnic and religious minorities.			
The governance restricts the implementation of Sunni Kurds' religious and cultural ceremonies.			
The Constitution is not transparent about ethnic minorities' rights.	Non-transparent laws		
Some of the articles in the Constitution concerning non-Persian ethnic groups exhibit contradictions.			
The lack of transparency stands as a primary weakness within the laws regarding religious minorities.			
Some agents interpret and implement laws based on their opinions.	The fluidity of laws		
The political structure agents interpret and enforce the law in a way that leads to injustice.			

Regarding Persian-Shiite and Sunni Kurds, Laws are not implemented similarly.		
When it comes to Sunni Kurds, laws do not always ensure the necessary enforcement.		
The Constitution allows us to teach our literature using ethnic language in school, but it has not been implemented.	A weak guarantee of law enforcement	
Despite the fairness of many laws about ethnic-religious minorities, these laws are not effectively implemented.		
Some state agents act beyond the laws toward ethnic and religious minorities, including Sunni Kurds.		
In most situations, the laws and the executors' actions conflict regarding us.	Extra-legal activism	
Some state agents ignore laws for their own and their groups' benefit.		
Our silence is one of the reasons for the continuity of discrimination against us.		
A significant portion of Sunni Kurds are in a situation of collective passivity.	Silence in the face of discrimination	
Part of the Sunni Kurds accepted discrimination due to the fear of punishment by the governance.		Intra-ethnic Discrimination
We have Sunni Kurds affiliated with the state that have good access to resources and opportunities.		
In every Kurdish region, some individuals work for the state and act against the interests of the Kurdish people.	Livelihood-Oriented Compliance of Kurdish agents	
Sometimes, discrimination against Sunni Kurds is perpetrated by state Kurdish agents.		

Ideological Discrimination

This is the fundamental aspect of discrimination against ethnoreligious minorities in Iran. Ideological discrimination refers to the unfair treatment and exclusion of Sunni Kurds based on their beliefs, opinions, or ideologies. In IRI, Ideology originates explicitly from the two categories of ethnicity and religion. The definition of the Shiite religion as the country's official religion in the Constitution, with Persians as the majority of its followers, has been a point of departure for inequality, discrimination, and the marginalization of other religions and ethnic groups in this political structure. This ideology is the construct of the Persian-Shiite ethnicity. The political structure bases itself on it and dictates how resources, opportunities, advantages, and power are distributed. Since this ideology considers the Sunni Kurds both ethnically and religiously outside its domain, and even on the opposite side, it minimizes their access to distributed opportunities, resources, advantages, and power, causing them to experience a kind of double discrimination compared to other ethnic groups and religions.

Interviewee: “If I am under discrimination, it is because the combination of the centrality of Persian ethnicity and the Iranian Islamic ideology of the Islamic Republic has created a dangerous situation that has made the experience much more bitter and tragic.”

Interviewee: “In Iran, possessing the ability alone is insufficient for progress if one lacks specific political and ideological affiliations. Progress is deeply rooted in ideology, with dominance and control over resources being heavily influenced by ideological factors.”

Structural Discrimination

It is a form of discrimination that originates from the basic structures of society and institutions that shape the nature of the existing political system. Structural discrimination refers to the systematic and institutionalized patterns of unequal treatment toward Sunni Kurds. Structural discrimination involves three main themes: discriminatory laws, a centralist approach, and a force-oriented system. In other words, the basis for organizing and formulating a large part of this structure and its institutions is limited to a specific ethnicity, religion, and ideology. Thus, it has marginalized other people with different affiliations as ‘others’ and subjected them to discrimination. Another aspect of structural discrimination is the distribution of centralizing resources, opportunities, and political power in the specific cultural geography scope (or central plateau) in favor of a particular ethnicity and religion. Finally, using force and coercion to impose the will and ideology of the central state on other ethnic and religious minorities is considered another aspect of structural discrimination.

Interviewee: “The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not provide justice. There are religious and ethnic categories in this Constitution. For instance, the official religion of the country is Shia, and only followers of this religion can become president. Consequently, other religious groups are marginalized.”

Interviewee: “In our society, discrimination is systematic, pervading all levels of society. Political ideology, ethnicity, and religion play a role in the formation of this discrimination. The political structure stands at the core of this discriminatory system.”

Agency-Oriented Discrimination

Another aspect of discrimination experienced by the participants is related to the agents of political structure who can make decisions and perform actions. They interpret and implement some of the just laws in the Constitution in a way (or prevent their desirable implementation) that results in a discriminatory and unfair situation. This aspect of discrimination appears in the form of unfair procedures, which may be said to have nothing to do with the Constitution and other laws and are even in conflict with them. In fact, in a large part of the Constitution and other laws related to the political structure, there is no trace of discrimination and injustice. However, some unwritten and implied procedures tend towards discrimination and injustice against some ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups, including the Sunni Kurds.

Interviewee: “In many cases, I believe the problem is not related to the law itself but rather its inadequate implementation. Therefore, it can be argued that inequality and discrimination are linked to the actions of executives, individuals, and actors. The procedures are unfair as they prioritize their interests while disregarding others that do not benefit them.”

Interviewee: “The agents who possess political power do not adhere to their Constitution. The Constitution defines the right to citizenship. The Constitution does not explicitly grant priority to Shiites in employment. However, in practice, there have been several cases where Sunni Kurds have encountered discrimination for employment in government jobs.”

Intra-Ethnic Discrimination

Internal discrimination is another aspect of discrimination experienced by the research participants. It implies a situation where individuals or subgroups within an ethnic community discriminate against or marginalize others. Intra-ethnic discrimination is a form of discrimination that happens with the complicity and cooperation of the Kurds' people and agents. This aspect of discrimination has two different forms. The first form is related to the Kurdish people's passivity and non-demanding behavior against the unfair distribution of resources and opportunities. The participants believe that Sunni Kurdish people have consented to the unfair situation and are in collective passivity. Hence, they do not do effective collective activism to eliminate inequality and discrimination. The outcome of this inaction is the perpetuation and intensification of discrimination.

Interviewee: “We Kurds are also complicit in this discrimination and injustice. If there is no oppressed, there is no oppressor. We often passively accept discrimination while we have to fight for what we want. For instance, I emigrated to India immediately after they said I could not work at the university in Iran.”

Interviewee: “Unfortunately, we have mostly been silent about discrimination at different levels. A kind of institutionalized fear makes us want to avoid incurring the wrath of the discriminating person or institution. Therefore, if there is discrimination or injustice somewhere, we prefer to remain silent instead of protesting.”

Another form of intra-ethnic discrimination is related to the individual and group conformity of some Kurdish agents with the existing unjust structure. This conformity, which takes place to gain access to resources, opportunities, and distribution privileges, is caused by the structure and paves the way for discriminatory actions against these people. In fact, by serving the goals and ideology of the political structure to secure their own individual and group interests, some Kurdish actors directly and indirectly discriminate against their people.

Interviewee: “Some Sunni Kurds are affiliated with the Islamic Republic and integrated into it. This group has enjoyed favorable access to opportunities and resources. The irregular access of this Kurdish group to opportunities and resources has resulted in discrimination against other Kurds.”

Interviewee: “A group of actors who commit unjust deeds against the Kurds is the Kurds themselves. They prevent the implementation of laws due to their individual and group interests and trample the principles they believe in. They are either affiliated with the state or doing this for their livelihood.”

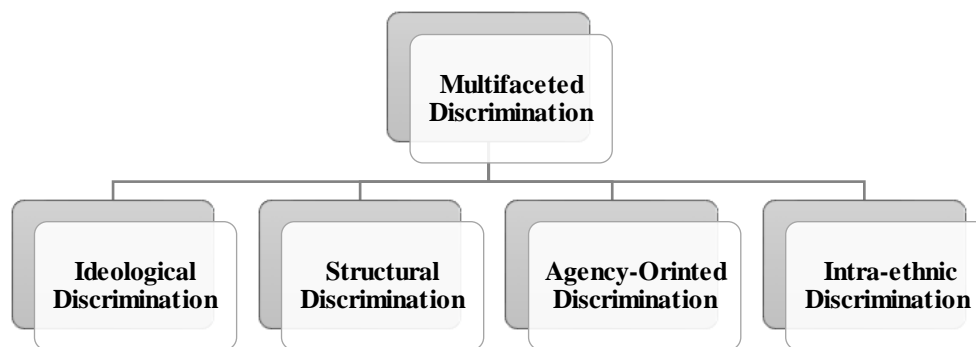
Multifaceted Discrimination

Multifaceted discrimination is a complex form of discrimination involving intersecting and overlapping factors. Based on what has been discussed, one can infer that participants experience multifaceted discrimination, which forms at the intersection of many primary components, including political (or ethno-religious) ideology, discriminatory basic structures, agency-oriented discrimination, and intra-ethnic discrimination. Hence, multifaceted discrimination [as a whole] in different domains and levels represents Sunni Kurds' experience of social justice in Iran. The origin

of their discrimination experience is related to ethnic-religious ideology; the basic structures regulate the rules of discrimination, and the sovereignty agents drive unjust procedures. Finally, the passivity and non-demanding behavior of the Kurdish people against discrimination, along with certain Kurdish actors who align themselves with the state, serve to perpetuate discrimination.

Figure 1

The Thematic Network of Multifaceted Discrimination



Regarding the relationship between the aspects of discrimination among Sunni Kurds, ideological discrimination plays the role of a foundation for others. In other words, the ethno-religious ideology is the focal point and fundamental aspect of the discrimination experience, which perpetuates and reproduces discrimination in other aspects. This ideology is the origin and basis for the formation of inequality and discrimination against Sunni Kurds as an ethnic minority because language and religion, as factors of ethnic distinction and inequality in Iran, are its core elements. Also, this ideology has shaped the unjust basic structures of society. Therefore, the main political, social, cultural, and economic institutions are marked by inequality and discrimination. The consequence of this situation is the centralized distribution of resources, opportunities, and political power in favor of specific ethnic and religious communities, particularly the Persian-Shiite groups.

Regarding the other aspect, sovereignty agents employ various tools, both implicitly and explicitly, to regulate unfair procedures based on ethno-religious ideology and discriminatory fundamental structures. Finally, intra-ethnic discrimination occurs for two reasons: Firstly, a major part of Sunni Kurds do not demand social justice to avoid incurring personal and group costs. At the same time, the demands of other people for social justice often fail to receive a favorable response from the central state and, frequently, are faced with violence. Secondly, some Sunni Kurd individuals prioritize personal interests over collective or ethnic interests, effectively acting as agents of the authorities within their community. As a result, in addition to facing external discrimination, intra-ethnic discrimination within the Sunni Kurdish community has led to a situation of double discrimination.

Disadvantaged ethnic groups under the nation-state system, as the prior thesis of internal colonialism (Gonzalez-Casanova, 1965), can help elucidate multifaceted discrimination among Sunni Kurds in Iran. In other words, according to internal colonialism theory, multifaceted discrimination is the result of center-periphery relations between the central state (IRI) and minority ethnic groups (Sunni Kurds), leading to an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. In the IRI, Perso-Shi'i ideology is the main axis that forms this center-periphery relation and its associated disadvantages. This ideology has shaped the unjust basic structures of society, and its agents have enforced unfair procedures based on these structures. Moreover,

following the dominant core and peripheral ethnic stratification patterns (Rothschild, 1981), the central state, as the core group, views itself as the symbolic creator and the appropriate hegemon. It does not recognize other ethnic ideologies, thus emphasizing an uneven distribution of power, socio-economic opportunities, and resources. Lastly, according to Mohammadpour and Soleimani (2020) and Eliassi (2021), intra-ethnic discrimination, as another aspect of multifaceted discrimination, arises from the center-periphery relations between IRI and Sunni Kurds, the dominance of the center over the periphery, and the use of violent force against peripheral agents by the center.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the perception of Sunni Kurds regarding their experience of social justice in Iran. The research results characterize the perception of Sunni Kurds as a multifaceted experience of discrimination across various aspects. In other words, their experience of social justice as multifaceted discrimination reveals a monopoly in allocating resources, opportunities, and political power that favors a particular group of people with ethno-religious affiliations, as determined and endorsed by political sovereignty. As mentioned, multifaceted discrimination has occurred in four distinct yet interconnected aspects. Subsequently, each aspect is explained and interpreted according to the research's conceptual framework.

Before we delve into the results based on the conceptual framework of the research, it is important to note that the findings of this study partially confirm the results of previous research. For example, Kohnepushi (2004) concluded that there is discrimination against the Kurds by the central government from the highest level to the lowest level in society. He has evaluated the discrimination against the Kurdish people in the third degree, that is, hard and severe discrimination. In other words, inequality and discrimination stem from deliberate social actions and public policies implemented by the central state. Navabakhsh and Gravand (2011) found that Kurdish citizens perceived relatively low economic, political, and cultural justice. Moreover, their research results indicated that the average ranking of justice dimensions, from highest to lowest, was political, cultural, and economic justice. The research conducted by Talebi and Alizadeh (2018) revealed that Kurdish students faced notable levels of discrimination, inequality, and ethnic exclusion throughout their university experience, both in official and unofficial settings. These students commonly encountered discrimination and inequality based on factors such as the Kurdish language and Sunni religious affiliation.

Ideological discrimination is the primary form of discrimination against Sunni Kurds in Iran, rooted in Persian ethnicity and Shia religion, as explicitly stated in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic (e.g., Articles 12, 15).³ Therefore, the intersection of the Persian language and Shiite religion is the focal point for forming the political and cultural core-periphery divide within the Islamic Republic of Iran. This intersection serves as the departure point for inequality and discrimination against minority ethnic groups, including Sunni Kurds. Gonzalez-Casanova (1965) defines internal colonialism as the disadvantaged status of ethnic groups within the nation-state system, and Hechter (1975) argues that internal colonialism focuses on political conflict between core and peripheral groups, mediated by the central government. Similarly, in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), a core-periphery distinction based on ethnicity and religion is evident. We observe

³ Article [12]. The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school [in usual al-Din and fiqh], and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Article [15]. The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian.

various forms of administrative, political, social, cultural, and economic inequality structured along ethno-religious cleavages between the core and periphery. Thus, as the central state, the IRI drives and mediates these inequalities and discriminations against minority ethnic groups. According to the categorization by Mohammadpour and Soleimani (2020), Sunni Kurds are classified as non-sovereign communities (or peripheral regions) due to their ethnic and religious differences from the sovereign community (or core regions). As a result, they experience political, economic, cultural, and administrative inequalities and discrimination. The central ideological state is the primary cause of these inequalities and discriminatory practices against them.

Another aspect of discrimination is Structural discrimination, which operates explicitly and implicitly towards the goals of ethno-religious ideology. This form of discrimination profoundly embeds itself in the basic structures of society. As a basic structure, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic serves as one of the leading indicators of structural discrimination. While a large part of the Constitution may be just, certain primary articles within it become focal points for inequality and discrimination against ethnic groups. For instance, Article 12 designates Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school as the official religion of Iran, Article 15 establishes Persian as the official language, and Article 115 mandates that the president must be elected among religious and political personalities who hold a firm belief in the country's official religion. Based on these Articles, Sunni Kurds have limited access to resources and opportunities. For instance, the system prohibits them from being elected president and being employed in high political positions. It also bans them from teaching the Kurdish language in schools and restricts their employment in specific jobs. Centralism in the distribution of resources and opportunities is another element of Structural discrimination. As the custodian of the distribution of resources and opportunities, the central government has allocated many resources and opportunities to the Central Plateau as the main stronghold of IRI political ideology. Hence, as Hechter (1975) attributes the backwardness of peripheral groups to the center, centralism has led to inequality, non-development, and de-development in the Kurdish region as a peripheral ethnic group. Utilizing force and coercion against Sunni Kurds represents another element of structural discrimination. The state's adoption of force-oriented policies aimed at assimilating Sunni Kurds constitutes another form of internal colonialism within the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). These policies are frequently implemented within official government organizations to promote linguistic and religious assimilation.

Another aspect of discrimination is agency-oriented discrimination, which highlights the conflict between the Constitution and the actions of sovereign agents. According to Yildiz and Taysi (2007), despite the 1979 constitution supposedly guaranteeing equal rights to all ethnic minorities [as stated in Article 19]⁴, there is a lack of explicit recognition for other non-Persian ethnic groups residing in Iran. As Soleimani and Mohammadpour (2019b) noted, despite the elevated status of Shi'ism as the official state religion, other religions also received some

⁴ Article [19]. All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; and color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.

recognition, as outlined in Articles 12⁵ and 13⁶. However, this recognition remained largely symbolic and had no practical impact. The Constitution theoretically permitted teaching languages other than Persian, as stated in Article 15⁷, but this provision has never been implemented. According to Hassaniyan and Stansfield (2022), the IRI's words and actions concerning ethnonational and linguistic variety are contradictory. So, based on the participants' narrative, the lack of recognition for languages and religions, including the Kurdish language and Sunni religion, and the failure to implement the Constitution can be attributed to two main factors: the inadequate enforcement of laws and the illicit actions of sovereign agents. These signify an additional manifestation of internal colonialism carried out by those agents without well-defined regulations and assurance regarding proper implementation.

Intra-ethnic discrimination, as another aspect of discrimination against Sunni Kurds, occurs through the association of some people and Kurdish agents in two ways. Firstly, a significant part of Sunni Kurds exhibit passive behavior in response to inequality and discrimination, inadvertently contributing to the perpetuation of discrimination against themselves. Eliassi (2021) says that Kurdish identity has been suppressed both violently and through cultural assimilation and economic deprivation. Mohammadpour and Soleimani (2020) say one of the strategies the central state employs to maintain the cohesion of the nation-state is the utilization of violent force. Thus, the primary reason for the passive behavior of Sunni Kurds towards inequality and discrimination is the central state's use of violent repression against them. Secondly, certain Kurdish agents advertently contribute to the discrimination faced by their people through their association with the political structure of the central state. In this situation, according to Saleh (2013), the main factor behind the appointment of particular ethnic minority officials within the regime's political system is their loyalty to the regime rather than a genuine recognition of the political participation demands of their ethnic groups. These individuals are not genuine representatives of the aspirations of ethnic groups; instead, they are viewed as essential components of the stagnant political system. Ultimately, in both of these situations, intra-ethnic discrimination confirms internal colonialism. In the first case, the violent suppression of the demands of Sunni Kurds for justice has rendered them passive. In the second case, the central state utilizes Kurdish agents as a means of discriminating against their people.

Finally, we can summarize the research findings based on the conceptual framework by considering several key points. First, the ethnic stratification pattern concerning Sunni Kurds in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) exhibits a dominant core and a marginalized peripheral ethnicity. Second, the core-periphery relationship between the central state and Sunni Kurds is rooted in

⁵ Article [12]. The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school [in usual al-Din and fiqh], and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali, and Zaydi, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites. These schools enjoy official status in matters pertaining to religious education, affairs of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and wills) and related litigation in courts of law. In regions of the country where Muslims following any one of these schools [fiqh] constitute the majority, local regulations, within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils, are to be in accordance with the respective school [fiqh], without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools.

⁶ Article [13]. Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.

⁷ The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.

cultural and political factors. Third, the significant socio-economic gap between the dominant core and the Sunni Kurdish regions is marked by unequal power distribution, socio-economic resources, and socio-cultural status. Fourth, within the Sunni Kurdish region, asymmetric and unequal political, economic, and cultural relations persist due to the formation of sovereign and non-sovereign communities. Fifth, the enduring inequality and discrimination faced by Sunni Kurds can be attributed to the central state's policy of homogenization, which has led to internal colonialism.

Since every empirical research has limitations, the most important limitations of this research related to the qualitative approach include the limited number of participants, the use of an in-depth interview technique as the only data collection method, and the difficulty in generalizing research results to a larger population. Another limitation of this study is the use of internal colonialism as the sole theory for explaining ethnic discrimination. Therefore, regarding the mentioned limitations, it is suggested that: (1) Future research should focus on using multi-method or mixed-methods approaches and triangulation techniques to gather rich data and examine all dimensions and aspects of the ethnic discrimination phenomenon. (2) Utilizing other theories to explain ethnic discrimination can provide a multifaceted insight into explaining this phenomenon. (3) Lastly, according to the internal colonialism theory, the key interventions to reduce ethnic discrimination are as follows: decentralization of power and resources from the dominant center to marginalized ethnic groups; bolstering marginalized communities and ethnic groups by enhancing their social, political, and economic empowerment; recognizing and valuing cultural diversity by promoting multiculturalism, protecting cultural heritage, and preserving minority languages and traditions; enacting and enforcing anti-discrimination laws and policies to prevent ethnic discrimination; and promoting social integration and cohesion by encouraging interactions and collaboration among various ethnic groups.

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