

Breaking boundaries: Exploring gendered challenges and advancing equality for Iranian women careers in tourism

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Gender inequality
Gender power dynamics
Gender stereotypes
Career obstacles
Women empowerment
Iranian women

ABSTRACT

While there's growing interest in gender and employment issues in tourism studies, a gap exists when examining the obstacles women face in career pursuits, especially in theocratic societies. Drawing on Risman's gender structure theory, this qualitative study investigates how Iranian women perceive the impact of gender power dynamics on their careers and those of their peers. The findings reveal inhibitory factors affecting women's quest for equal career opportunities, including deeply ingrained societal influences on gender roles, institutionalized gender discrimination, and self-imposed constraints. The findings also demonstrate how gender stereotypes and theocratic structures manifest in the Iranian tourism industry, and how Iranian women working in the tourism sector actively negotiate, resist, and challenge these stereotypes to advance their careers. In a field where most gender-related studies originate from Western perspectives, this study holds particular significance in amplifying the voices of those in non-Western, theocratic societies.

1. Introduction

The tourism sector has long been viewed as a source of significant employment opportunities, often marked by a workforce predominantly composed of women in many countries (Duffy et al., 2015; UNWTO, 2019). However, beneath this veneer of gender balance, sometimes referred to as the 'glass ceiling', the industry continues to grapple with pervasive gender-based inequalities (Carvalho et al., 2019; Chambers, 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). Women frequently find themselves relegated to part-time and casual roles within the tourism industry, a situation that fosters experiences of discrimination, abuse, exploitation, stress, and sexual harassment (Baum, 2013; Hutchings et al., 2020). These challenges, compounded by deeply rooted gendered divisions of labor, present formidable barriers to realizing gender equality and facilitating women's career advancement (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Boluk et al., 2019;

Zhang & Zhang, 2020) (see Table 1).

While research focusing on women in tourism has increasingly grown, it has predominantly fixated on developed Western nations (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Ferguson, 2018; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2022; Swain, 1995). This Western-centric approach has left notable gaps in understanding the intricate sociocultural and political contexts at play, especially within regions where women's influence in decision-making is marginalized, as is the case in Muslim Middle Eastern nations (Bagheri et al., 2022; Seyfi et al., 2023). The intersection of gender stereotypes, norms, and the unique challenges faced by women in a theocratic society like Iran necessitates a fresh examination. Indeed, in such countries where women's rights are explicitly marginalized and discriminated against under law as well as in the wider society (Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023), it is much more appropriate to refer to the career limitations on women as potentially

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2024.104913>

Received 24 February 2023; Received in revised form 14 January 2024; Accepted 19 February 2024

Available online 26 February 2024

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constituting a ‘brick wall’ rather than a ‘glass ceiling’.

The constraints and barriers faced by women in the tourism sector are inherently linked to cultural settings, norms, gender roles, societal expectations, and other contextual factors. Prior research demonstrates that in patriarchal societies, deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and traditional roles prescribed for women significantly constrain their career prospects (Aghazamani et al., 2020; Bagheri et al., 2022; Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). Despite the prevalence of women in the tourism sector, their representation in executive positions remains disproportionately low, with a mere 5% of tourism companies in the Middle East and North Africa, including Iran, have women in managerial roles (UNWTO, 2019).

Iran has experienced profound sociopolitical transformations in recent times (Daneshpour & Hassandokht Firooz, 2022; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). These changes have notably impacted women’s opportunities to establish themselves in the workforce and assume leadership roles within the economic sector, including the tourism industry (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). This study’s primary aim is to illuminate the specific challenges women face within Iran’s tourism sector, which operates under the influence of a theocratic system characterized by political authority and Islamic restrictions (Seyfi & Hall, 2019; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

The study is particularly timely in light of the current socio-political climate in Iran, characterized by the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement—a significant societal movement whereby women actively challenge the restrictive policies imposed by the theocratic regime (Daneshpour & Hassandokht Firooz, 2022; Molana et al., 2023). This presents a unique opportunity to explore the potential transformation of gender dynamics in Iran’s tourism industry, with broader implications for the global understanding of gender inequality and women’s professional advancement. By applying the theoretical lens of gender structure theory (Risman, 2018, pp. 19–43) to gendered dynamics in Iranian tourism careers, this research endeavor aims to foster inclusive tourism practices that prioritize the empowerment of women in their professional growth. The findings of the study are expected to offer a non-Western perspective on gender issues in the tourism sector, enriching the existing theoretical understanding that is primarily rooted in Western experiences.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2.1 serves as the foundation for understanding the multifaceted barriers that women encounter in pursuing equal career opportunities within the tourism industry. It specifically scrutinizes the challenges impeding women’s career progression in the tourism sector, delving into the difficulties faced by women in conservative societies and emphasizing limited opportunities for career advancement. Subsequently, Section 2.2 introduces the theoretical framework guiding the study and outlines Risman’s gender structure theory (2004, 2018), offering a multidimensional perspective on gender dynamics. This section also highlights the utility of Risman’s theory in understanding gender inequality across diverse social contexts and its relevance to analyzing gender dynamics in the tourism industry. Building upon this theoretical foundation, Section 2.3 explores gender disparity within the specific socio-political landscape of Iran, focusing on the challenges imposed by theocratic governance. This section underscores the unique obstacles, including restrictive norms, legal constraints, and discriminatory practices, collectively hindering Iranian women’s career advancement. Following the theoretical and contextual discussions, Section 3 outlines the study methods, and Section 4 delves into the study’s findings. These findings are subsequently discussed in relation to the broader literature in Section 5. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary that highlights key findings, discusses their implications, acknowledges limitations, and provides recommendations for future research—all of which are presented in the concluding section.

2. Literature review

2.1. Challenges to women’s career progression

Gender equality within the tourism industry remains a persistent concern, as indicated by research addressing issues such as occupational segregation, the scarcity of women in leadership roles, safety concerns, and the gendered nature of tourism experiences (Eger et al., 2022; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). The dynamic nature of the tourism sector, characterized by frequent employment change, seasonal work patterns, unstable contracts, and part-time employment, significantly impacts women’s careers, presenting them with unique challenges compared to their male counterparts (Costa et al., 2017). Women employed in tourism often face wage disparities, unfavorable working conditions, and limited opportunities for career advancement (Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015). These challenges are further exacerbated in conservative religious societies, where women are often discouraged from participating in tourism-related activities (Hall et al., 2023; Seyfi & Hall, 2019; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

The barriers to women’s career progression are multifaceted. While women’s presence in the workforce and their roles in mid-level managerial positions are increasing globally (Bazazo et al., 2017), attaining higher leadership positions remains challenging due to factors such as family responsibilities, gender stereotyping, and male-dominated corporate cultures (Freund & Hernandez-Maskivker, 2021). In the Middle East, where women’s employment and leadership roles are subjects of significant debate, Islamic patriarchal governments influence societal and organizational structures that hinder women’s opportunities for professional growth (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Hutchings et al., 2010). Middle Eastern societies are shaped by a specific type of Islamic patriarchy, blending traditional cultural beliefs about gender roles with conservative religious perspectives on social life (Hosseini et al., 2023; Seyfi & Hall, 2019; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Research, such as Öztürk’s (2023) examination of the connection between Islam and patriarchy, underscores that religious patriarchy is the prevailing norm in the region. Similarly, Rodríguez and Scurry’s (2019) study of highly skilled migrant women leaders in Qatar notes that gender control is established and manipulated in ways that perpetuate gender bias and amplify intersectional discrimination, disproportionately impacting foreign women. In their study, Almathami et al. (2022) illuminate the considerable gender gap prevalent in Saudi Arabia’s tourism industry. Their research highlights the persistent influence of sociocultural norms and restrictions that persistently hinder women’s participation in specific tourism-related roles, despite ongoing efforts to enhance their involvement. Traditional gender roles, which restrict women’s engagement in sectors requiring interaction with men or foreigners, pose substantial obstacles to women’s career advancement in Saudi Arabia.

In a similar vein, research by Vij et al. (2023) highlights substantial gender disparities observed in labor market engagement across Arab nations. The study emphasizes the underrepresentation of women in executive and ownership positions within the travel and tourism sector. Farahani and Dabbaghi (2018), along with Bagheri et al. (2022), similarly observe this gender disparity, exploring how deeply ingrained cultural and societal norms undermine the empowerment of Iranian women in their tourism careers. Other research underscores the challenges faced by these women, stemming from family obligations, legal disparities, limited access to credit, and societal perceptions of gender roles and norms (e.g., Ghaderi et al., 2023). In these societies, women’s professional achievements are strongly influenced by cultural norms and values that often emphasize upward advancement, a concept traditionally associated with masculinity (Tlaiss, 2014). Women are frequently excluded from leadership roles and organizational decision-making, limiting their career progress (Abalkhail & Allan, 2016; Sidani et al., 2015). This research aims to explore the experiences

and perspectives of women in the Iranian tourism industry, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities in their pursuit of equal career opportunities, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of gender equality within the sector.

2.2. Gender structure theory

This study applies [Risman's \(2004, 2018, pp. 19–43\)](#) gender structure theory to examine the challenges encountered by Iranian women pursuing professional careers in tourism within the theocratic society of Iran. As a gender sociologist, Risman underscores the intricate nature of gender as a structure, highlighting that gender roles transcend individual choices and are deeply embedded in the broader social framework. According to [Risman \(2004, 2018, pp. 19–43\)](#), societal institutions, including family, education, economy, and politics, play crucial roles in shaping and perpetuating gender norms by establishing and reinforcing a hierarchical structure that favors one gender over the other, leading to an uneven distribution of resources, opportunities, and power based on gender.

Although the theory has a longstanding presence ([Risman, 2004](#)), [Risman \(2018, pp. 19–43\)](#) distinguishes between cultural and material processes within each social dimension. This revision establishes a multi-dimensional framework that integrates previous gender theories. The theory conceptualizes gender as a structure intricately shaping individuals' personal orientations (micro-level), interpersonal interactions (meso-level), and macro-level patterns ([Scarborough et al., 2017](#)). In contrast to the conventional emphasis on static and distinct representations within the three levels, the theory underscores dynamic interconnections among them ([Scarborough et al., 2017](#)).

On an individual level, this theory scrutinizes self-perception concerning a specific gender, influencing personality, expressions of femininity or masculinity, and decision-making. At the interactive level, individuals feel compelled to conform to societal expectations associated with their gender when interacting with others, even if their structural roles are identical ([Risman, 2018, pp. 19–43](#)). This conformity is characterized as “gender role expectations” by [Eagly and Koehnig \(2006\)](#) and conceptualized as “doing gender” by [West and Zimmerman \(2009\)](#). Finally, at the institutional level, the theory elucidates how social, cultural, and organizational frameworks perpetuate distinctions between genders, shaping institutional and societal based differences in tasks, hierarchies, and power dynamics. Elements of the institutional level are linked to the preservation of power and resources, predominantly controlled by men. [Risman \(2018, pp. 19–43\)](#) contends that the key aspect in comprehending gender structure lies in the dynamic interconnections between levels, challenging the more static and distinct representations of three levels ([Legerski & Cornwall, 2010](#)).

Primarily employed in sociology, this theory examines gender inequality across various social contexts, including families, workplaces, and communities. Its application extends to areas such as gender socialization ([Scarborough & Risman, 2017](#)), gender roles in families ([Dominguez-Folgueras, 2022](#)), gender disparities in the labor force ([Stojmenovska, 2023](#)), and the impact of cultural ideologies on gender dynamics ([Sullivan, 2004](#)). This theory has also found some application in tourism and hospitality. For example, [Segovia-Pérez et al. \(2019\)](#) explore challenges faced by women pursuing leadership roles in the Spanish hospitality industry. Similarly, [Bolukoglu & Gozukucuk, 2024](#) use this theory to discuss the increased representation of women in tourism in EU countries, emphasizing the impact of gender norms and stereotypes on occupational structures. In another study, [Segovia-Pérez et al. \(2021\)](#) examine impediments and enablers for women aspiring to attain high-level hospitality management positions, identifying stereotypes and institutional factors as significant obstacles. Their study highlights challenges such as the industry's continuous demand for availability and cultural barriers hindering women from entering management roles. [Martín-Duque and Romero-Padilla's \(2023\)](#) employ this theory to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women

managers in the Spanish hotel sector. Their research explores work-life balance, salary levels, and job stability, revealing substantial gender-based disparities in the hospitality sector. Similarly, [Figueroa-Domecq et al. \(2023\)](#) apply this theory to the interconnected dynamics of gender, sustainability, and entrepreneurship in Spain, emphasizing women's focus on social sustainability compared to men and highlighting the gender influence on risk perception.

Tourism researchers, initially concentrating on macro-level change, have also focused on interactions and individual constraints ([Wang & Sun, 2023](#)). However, as per [Risman \(2018, pp. 19–43\)](#), it is crucial to recognize that structure not only influences individual choices and interactions but also contributes to self-perception, provides tools for action, and enables agency—potentially leading to social change. Nonetheless, the application of gender structure theory remains notably scarce in the context of religious societies and in a developing country context. Despite the tourism sector being a central focus for investigating gendered experiences, the intricate dynamics of gender roles, power structures, and expectations within religious contexts have been largely overlooked. Thus, this research utilizes the gender structure theory as its conceptual framework to delve into the hurdles faced by women in professional tourism careers in Iran. The rationale behind the adoption of this theory lies in its capacity to dissect the intricate interplay of cultural and material processes at individual, interactive, and institutional levels. With this theoretical approach, the aim is to present a comprehensive insight into the lived experiences and varied perspectives of the Iranian women in tourism careers. This study contributes to the broader tourism literature by providing a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within a socio-cultural context that has received relatively limited exploration.

2.3. Research context: gender disparity in Iran's theocratic system of governance

Gender disparities are a longstanding issue in Iran that have only been exacerbated since the 1979 revolution. The foundation of Iranian society is built upon strict theocratic norms deeply rooted in conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings and cultural traditions, particularly in rural areas ([Bavili, 2022](#)). However, this does not mean that discriminatory practices that have severely restricted their freedoms and opportunities have not been previously contested. In the 1920s, during Reza Shah's monarchy, there was an attempt at modernization by mandating that women shed their hijabs as a symbol of modernity. However, this period also ushered in a repressive social and political atmosphere with little tolerance for independent women's groups ([Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021](#)). The rule of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (1951–1953) under the nationalist government saw women intensifying their efforts to secure their rights to education and employment, while a women's movement promoted women's visibility in society ([Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021](#); [Razavi, 2021](#)).

Prior to the 1950s, women were predominantly engaged in Iran's agricultural sector, with over half the population residing in rural areas ([Poya, 1999](#)). However, as Iran began to modernize, a significant number of women entered the workforce as unskilled laborers in the 1960s, although earning considerably less than men ([Afshar, 1989](#)). The growth of the oil economy and socioeconomic reforms also resulted in a limited number of urban women gaining employment ([Moghissi, 1991](#); [Poya, 1999](#)). By the 1970s, employers began improving conditions, including covering maternity leave costs and setting up on-site nurseries ([Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021](#)). Despite these changes, within Mohammad Reza Shah's regime (1941–1979), only a small fraction of women could benefit from these limited reforms, leaving many, especially from the working class, without the benefits of modernization ([Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021](#); [Poya, 1999](#)).

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 marked a significant turning point in gender regulations and norms. While women

initially welcomed the revolution with hopes of a more democratic and egalitarian society, the Islamic republic introduced stringent gender regulations that had far-reaching effects on women's lives and employment (Moghissi, 1991; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Following the 1979 Islamic revolution, legislation influenced by specific interpretations of Islamic law imposed restrictions on Iranian women's freedom in both public and private domains (Hosseini et al., 2022; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015). In particular, the reinforcement of cultural and religious norms by the new regime significantly constrained women's professional participation, with women being expected to prioritize their family's needs over other activities (Nikjoo et al., 2022), thereby limiting women's opportunities for career advancement and equal treatment (Farahani & Dabbaghi, 2018). Gender inequality is also further intensified by unequal access to education, employment, and other societal privileges, which predominantly favor men in Iran and perpetuate power imbalances (Rafatjah, 2012).

Iranian family law also limited women's employment opportunities and hindered access to the labor market. Husbands are obligated to be the primary providers for the family as the household's leader, creating substantial obstacles for women seeking to enter the workforce (Hosseini et al., 2022). Additionally, Iranian women are required to obtain their husbands' permission to acquire passports and travel abroad, further contributing to the barriers they face in pursuing employment and personal autonomy (Seyfi & Hall, 2019). Legal and cultural norms additionally restrict women's mobility and hinder their access to opportunities in Iran (Nikjoo et al., 2022; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Consequently, many businesses within the tourism industry prefer to hire men over women, especially for roles involving substantial travel.

The imposition of sanctions on Iran since the 1980s has also disproportionately impacted women due to the country's traditional and patriarchal structure (Fathollah-Nejad, 2014; Seyfi et al., 2023). Pervasive unemployment resulting from the sanctions has disproportionately affected women, further reinforcing male-dominated gender norms. The sanctions have led to a significant increase in unemployment rates in Iran, with many women facing financial instability (Taheri & Guven-Lisaniler, 2018). Limited job opportunities exacerbate the issue, leaving women with few employment options and making them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Tahmasebi, 2018). A study on the impact of sanctions on Iranian women in tourism by Seyfi et al. (2023) revealed that sanctions have erased a crucial opportunity for women's empowerment. They argue that sanctions reinforce deeply ingrained conservative gender roles, perpetuating gender inequality and inhibiting women's independence within Iran's legal and political systems. The study also notes that the partial lifting of sanctions between 2015 and 2018 initially presented opportunities for women in the tourism sector, given that its 'service' roles were perceived as being more 'suitable' for women (Seyfi et al., 2023). However, the reintroduction of sanctions by the Trump administration in 2018 reversed these gains, significantly impacting the empowerment of women through the industry. Despite higher levels of education, Iranian women continue to face disproportionately high unemployment rates, with 42% of women aged 15 to 29 being unemployed (Seyfi et al., 2023). Iran's low ranking in the Global Gender Gap Report of 2021, 143rd out of 146 nations, reflects significant gender inequality and underscores the deeply ingrained nature of gender discrimination in the country, particularly in economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2022). The overall participation of women in Iran's job market remains very low, with only 17% taking part (SCI, 2019).

Frustration among Iranian women due to persistent discrimination, inequality, and violence in contemporary Iranian society has become a significant driving force behind their engagement in activism, exemplified by the recent 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement (Molana et al., 2023). The current state of Iranian society reflects a heightened level of

historical consciousness among women. Unlike in the past when women's activism often took a backseat to male concerns, today, women's demands play an integral role in driving political and social change (Daneshpour & Hassandokht Firooz, 2022). Despite the significant restrictions faced by Iranian women, Salehi et al. (2020) argue that they actively challenge ideological taboos and enhance their collective social capital. The authors contend that Iranian women address gender bias, which may not only exist externally but also within women themselves, fostering greater solidarity and empowerment. This underscores the importance of women's efforts in overcoming internalized barriers and working together to achieve gender equality and empowerment, not only in Iranian society as a whole but also in the context of the tourism industry. Traditionally considered a more women-friendly sector for employment and career advancement (Duffy et al., 2015), the tourism industry is an arena where these efforts can make a significant impact.

3. Method

This research adopts an interpretive paradigm, utilizing qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of Iranian women's lived experiences and diverse perspectives in the tourism industry, thereby illuminating career challenges. Qualitative research proves particularly suitable for capturing contextual factors that shape women's experiences and viewpoints within a specific environment, encompassing cultural customs, religious beliefs, and socio-economic frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The convenience sampling method was chosen due to limited prior knowledge about the target population (Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011). Furthermore, snowball sampling was employed to identify additional interviewees capable of offering insights into the study's subject (Dusek et al., 2015). Initial interviewees were asked to recommend other potential participants with whom they were acquainted and who were willing to be interviewed.

In this study, the authors were mindful of their positionality and reflexivity. Reflexivity involves recognizing the interconnectedness of researchers' background, experience, and positionality with the entire research process (Crossley, 2021). Embracing an interpretivist research philosophy, the researchers positioned themselves as integral participants in the study (Crossley, 2021). One author, uniquely positioned as the founder of a tourism business, faced challenges akin to those expressed by participants in both her entrepreneurial ventures and prior employment in tourism, all while striving for leadership positions. This direct engagement with the industry afforded her an insider's perspective, enabling a nuanced approach to interviews with a pre-existing understanding of the challenges faced. In addition to this entrepreneurial insight, the other authors, originating from Iran with extensive research backgrounds in gender and tourism, brought contextual knowledge to the study. Their collective expertise, developed through prior research initiatives and familiarity with the Iranian context, played a pivotal role in shaping the research design. Leveraging their understanding of the sociocultural dynamics of Iran, these authors actively participated in conceptualizing and designing the study. Furthermore, their engagement extended to practical research aspects, including the identification of study participants and the formulation of interview questions. Non-Iranian scholars in the authors' team, sharing similar research experiences, provided perspectives in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing the research while also being familiar with the employment experiences of Iranian women and the regional context. While the Iranian-origin authors offered an insider's view, non-Iranian scholars brought an external gaze that fostered a more holistic understanding of the studied topic. This collaborative and cross-cultural approach, evident in multiple meetings and discussions of the study results and data analysis, facilitated a nuanced comprehension of the topic. However, the authors collectively approached their previous knowledge as a tool for initiating the project rather than shaping

assumptions about the data and participants (Crossley, 2021). The study draws on the lived experiences, perspectives, and narratives of interviewees to reconstruct a narrative understanding of reality, exploring how they navigate challenges in the pursuit of professional advancement in their tourism careers.

To ensure a diverse range of study participants and capture the experiences of both managerial and non-managerial women employees, the sample included 18 managers from various sub-sectors within the tourism industry, such as travel agencies, hotels, food and beverage services, tourism education and training centers, as well as national and provincial tourism administrations. Within this sample, four participants held senior positions, five mid-level positions, and nine junior positions. Additionally, we conducted eight interviews with women employees that did not hold a managerial role. In this study, sampling adequacy was assessed using the saturation method (Creswell & Poth, 2016), and theoretical saturation was reached after 26 interviews, as the last interviews did not yield any new insights. Given the sensitive nature of the study’s topic and the political climate in Iran, the study participants opted for anonymity, and pseudonyms were employed.

The interview consisted of open-ended questions structured in two sections. The first section gathered general background information, including their current employment, job position, responsibilities, and previous work experiences in the tourism industry. In the second section, respondents discussed the challenges they faced in their tourism careers. Ethical considerations were meticulously observed, with participant anonymity safeguarded to protect their identities.

The qualitative transcript data underwent a thorough thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase process. This methodical approach involved becoming acquainted with the data through transcription and multiple readings, generating initial codes, organizing coded text extracts into overarching themes, reviewing themes in relation to coded text extracts and the entire dataset, defining and naming the themes and subthemes, and ultimately producing a comprehensive analysis report. This rigorous process ensured a systematic and in-depth examination of the data, resulting in the emergence of meaningful themes and insights which are summarized in Fig. 1.

Table 1
Profile of interviewees.

Name	Sector	Position	Year of experience
Maryam	Hotel	Senior position	12
Sara	Travel agency	Junior position	6
Fatemeh	Travel agency	Mid-level position	8
Zahra	Hotel	Non-managerial employee	4
Neda	Travel agency	Senior position	11
Leila	Travel agency	Non-managerial employee	5
Parisa	Travel agency	Mid-level position	7
Shadi	Hotel	Senior position	10
Nasrin	Travel agency	Junior position	4
Roya	Hotel	Non-managerial employee	7
Mahsa	Food and beverage services	Mid-level position	5
Farideh	Hotel	Mid-level position	9
Negar	Hotel	Junior position	6
Mona	Travel agency	Non-managerial employee	5
Fariba	Food and beverage services	Junior position	7
Sahar	Hotel	Non-managerial employee	4
Hoda	Provincial tourism administration	Non-managerial employee	6
Elham	Hotel	Junior position	5
Shabnam	National tourism administration	Senior position	14
Farnaz	Provincial tourism administration	Junior position	4
Bahar	Tourism education and training center	Junior position	8
Arezo	Food and beverage services	Junior position	9
Roxana	Travel agency	Non-managerial employee	7
Anahita	Tourism education and training center	Non-managerial employee	4
Sanaz	Tourism education and training center	Mid-level position	8
Nooshin	Tourism education and training center	Junior position	7

4. Research findings

4.1. Societal influences on gender roles

4.1.1. Patriarchal culture and gender stereotypes

The poignant narratives shared by participants in this study unveil the harsh realities and gender disparities deeply rooted within the Iranian tourism industry. These personal accounts shed light on the challenges faced by women striving to build their careers in male-dominated environments. For instance, Farideh, a former junior manager at a prominent hotel, expressed frustration over a perceived lack of trust in women’s abilities:

I used to be a junior manager at this big hotel. My boss never seemed to trust anything we women did. It felt like if a woman did something, it was automatically seen as wrong. On the other side, my men coworkers could mess up without any problem. But when things went wrong, it was always us women who got the blame. It was seriously frustrating (Farideh).

Fatemeh, working in a travel agency, recounted the constant need to prove herself due to gender assumptions affecting her prior junior management role:

When I started working at a travel agency, I constantly felt the need to prove myself. People often assumed I couldn’t handle as much responsibility just because I was a woman in a junior management role (Fatemeh).

Maryam, in a senior position, highlighted the persistent need to work twice as hard for equal recognition compared to male colleagues:

I constantly find myself needing to work twice as hard to earn the same recognition as my male colleagues. Even though I’m in a senior position now, it’s still the same (Maryam).

Mona emphasized the extra effort required by women to prove their value, despite consistent superior performance:

Even though my performance at work has consistently been better than that of those of my peers, my employer hasn’t been as supportive. We almost always have to put in extra effort to prove our value (Mona).

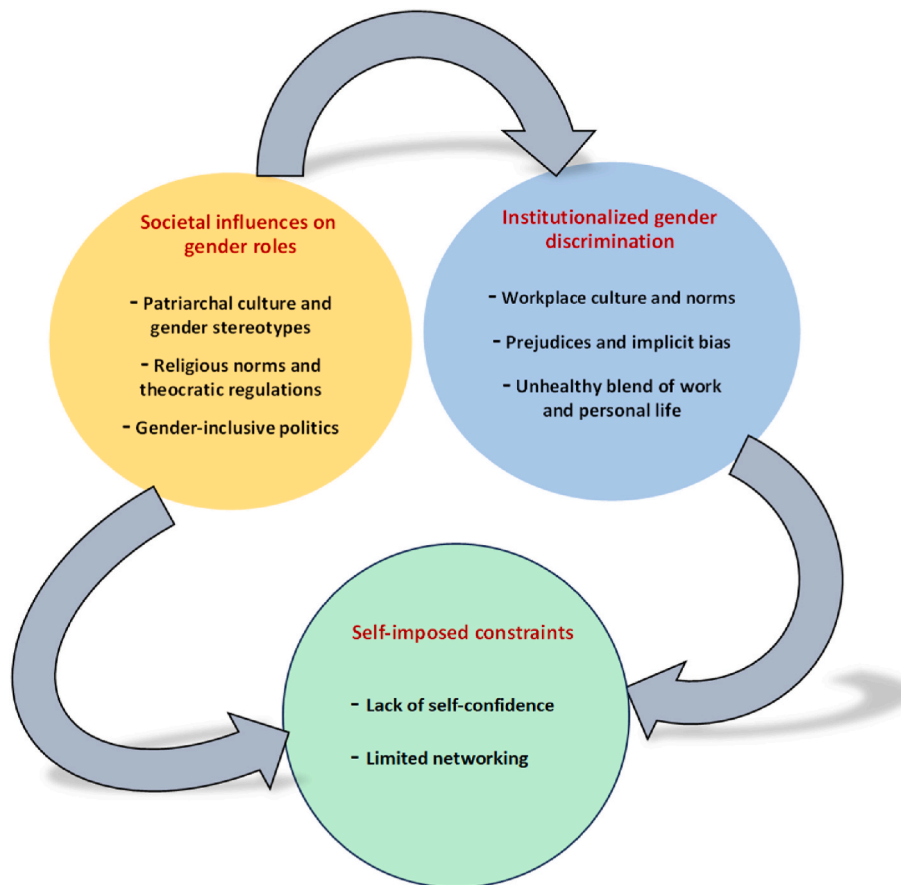


Fig. 1. The research conceptual framework.

Similarly, Shabnam, with a relatively long leadership experience, faced stereotypes linking leadership roles to assertiveness and authority, traits traditionally associated with men:

As a woman with over a decade of leadership experience in the tourism industry, I've often faced the stereotype that leadership positions demand a more assertive and authoritative attitude, traits often linked to men. This stereotype has had a substantial impact on the progress of not only myself but also my women colleagues. It consistently makes me feel like I have to put in extra effort to demonstrate my suitability for leadership roles (Shabnam).

Elham, in the hotel business, revealed similar challenges faced by women in moving up to higher leadership roles:

In the hotel business, some people think men are better at being big bosses, making decisions, and running things. This idea can make it hard for women like me to move up to higher leadership jobs (Elham).

Nasrin shared her brief and unfavorable experience, citing unfair treatment due to her gender:

I didn't expect my job to be so bad. I only lasted a month because they treated me unfairly for being a woman. Right from day one, I knew something was wrong. It wasn't a normal place to work. The guys would give me strange looks and assign me tasks that were too hard for me. I'm just glad I could leave (Nasrin).

4.1.2. Religious norms and theocratic regulations

While the tourism industry presents growth opportunities, entrenched religious norms pose substantial obstacles for women seeking career advancement in Iran. The following narratives share the

experiences of women who have grappled with these challenges, offering insights into the profound impact of religious interpretations and theocratic institutions on their professional lives. Zahra, reflecting on her experiences, highlighted how religious legal interpretations dictate aspects of women's dress and interactions with tourists, limiting her ability to use her skills to advance in her tourism career.

It's like being in a tight spot where I can't really use my skills to grow in my tourism career (Zahra).

Fatemeh and Parisa, both in mid-level positions, highlighted the impact of restrictive laws on women's career progression, especially in the tourism sector. Parisa shared a personal example, illustrating the impact of strict religious laws that limit Iranian women from traveling alone without a male guardian.

Strict religious laws impose restrictions on Iranian women traveling alone without a male guardian. This restriction has made it difficult for me personally to accept jobs that involve frequent travel, which has had a negative impact on my career growth and my ability to explore new opportunities ... Laws that limit what jobs women can do and where they can go can really slow down their careers. Let's say in the tourism, if women can't travel freely or work in certain positions, it makes it super hard for them to move up in their careers (Parisa).

Similarly, Mahsa emphasized how religious interpretations significantly shape and constrain women's professional trajectories within the tourism industry:

Religious norms in the country often limit the types of jobs women can have in the tourism industry. We're usually directed towards roles that people think are better for us because we're women. This

makes it hard for us to get into leadership positions and advance in our careers (Mahsa).

4.1.3. Gender-inclusive politics

Power dynamics in Iranian society have erected formidable barriers impeding women's access to managerial positions, fostering the perception that women's authority in managerial roles is deemed 'abnormal.' Farnaz highlighted the lack of transparency in the selection of managers within Iranian organizations, emphasizing how political mechanisms often dominate the process:

Generally, in Iranian organizations, the selection of managers is mostly done through political mechanisms without sufficient transparency. This leads to confusion in the promotion path and a reduction in motivation for women to achieve management (Farnaz).

Shabnam discussed the perception of women in leadership roles within the political landscape of the country and noted that:

When you look at the political positions in the country, it's like women being in charge is seen as something 'weird' because of these power imbalances (Shabnam).

Sanaz, expressing the discrimination faced by women in Iran, pointed to the workplace preference for men, leading to unfair treatment and limited career opportunities for women.

Women in Iran face some serious discrimination when it comes to getting jobs. It's because the workplace tends to prefer men over women. This unfairness means that women have a hard time, dealing with obstacles, unfair treatment, and not many opportunities to move up in their careers. It's pretty unfair (Sanaz).

4.2. Institutionalized gender discrimination

4.2.1. Workplace culture and norms

In exploring the challenges faced by women in the Iranian tourism industry, it becomes evident that alongside the complexities of the work itself, women grapple with unfavorable organizational and institutional attitudes. The interviews conducted shed light on a myriad of issues, ranging from insufficient pay, limited opportunities, discrimination, disrespect for pregnant women's rights, inadequate training, poor organizational communication, to a discernible absence of meritocracy between men and women. Among these, the challenge of availability emerged as a significant barrier, amplifying the hurdles faced by women in tourism businesses. Hoda shared her perspective on how managers often underestimate women's abilities, linking certain roles to a perceived inability to commit ample time to the job:

Managers often underestimate our abilities and believe that certain roles are only suitable for those who can commit a lot of time to the job. They think that, as women, our primary responsibility is our family, and we can't dedicate enough time to our work. This bias particularly affects our chances when there are opportunities for managerial or higher positions (Hoda).

Elham and Bahar discussed the challenges that women face in the hospitality industry, emphasizing the impact of demanding schedules on personal life. Roxana noted that:

Working in the hospitality industry often requires flexibility in your schedule, and being a woman can particularly affect your ability to attain higher-level positions. This job's demanding hours can significantly impact your personal life, especially if you're married, and frequently, it creates substantial challenges for women (Elham).

Negar, another interviewee, reflected on the sacrifice she made in delaying family plans due to concerns about potential discrimination and the risk of losing opportunities at work if she became pregnant:

I had to delay my plans to start a family because I was concerned about potential discrimination and the risk of losing opportunities at work if I became pregnant. I had recently transitioned into a junior management position, and I knew that taking time off for pregnancy could put my role in jeopardy (Negar).

4.2.2. Prejudices and implicit bias

Within the confines of the workplace, women managers often find themselves navigating a labyrinth of challenges, particularly in their interactions with male colleagues. Personal narratives shed light on the intricacies of these challenges. Shadi, reflecting on her experience as a woman manager in a hotel, highlighted direct challenges from male colleagues that questioned her leadership abilities and competence:

I've had to deal with direct challenges from male colleagues. They've questioned my leadership abilities and competence, often undermining my authority in front of the team. These actions have made it challenging to navigate the work environment (Shadi).

Sahar shared a specific incident where her male colleagues made it difficult for her to gain support for a project plan she proposed:

I've faced moments when my male colleagues made things a bit tough for me. For instance, in a recent project meeting, I shared a smart plan to make things work better. Even though my idea made total sense with facts and logic, some of the guys weren't totally on board. One of them asked, 'Are you sure this is the right way?' I had to really push to get my point across (Sahar).

Sara expressed her disappointment when tying for a new senior job, facing a lack of support from male colleagues who played a role in the selection process:

When a new senior job was available at work, I told them I wanted it because I thought I was qualified. But it was kind of sad that some guys who could help pick the new boss didn't really support me. That made it hard for me to compete fairly with my men colleagues (Sara).

Anahita emphasized the challenges she encountered in advancing towards a managerial role, citing an unclear career path and the existence of networks that appeared to favor men:

I noticed that getting ahead in my career wasn't clear at all. Challenges came up when I interacted with my male colleagues and bosses. It seemed like there were these big networks of men helping each other out to get and keep top jobs (Anahita).

Roya and Fariba lamented the unwelcoming atmosphere in the workplace that led some female colleagues to leave. For instance, Roya noted:

Some of my colleagues had a hard time at work before and ended up leaving. They couldn't get higher positions in their jobs ... It's really sad when a workplace that's not welcoming makes women quit their job (Roya).

4.2.3. Unhealthy blend of work and personal life

The intricate balance between work and personal life poses a formidable challenge for women working in Iran's tourism industry. As primary caregivers, women often find themselves torn between family responsibilities and professional aspirations. The narratives from interviewees underscore the societal expectations that prioritize family duties, creating hurdles for women aspiring to move into management roles and secure promotions. Anahita pointed out the strong influence of family responsibilities on women's career choices, emphasizing how these concerns can hold women back from pursuing management positions:

Women often have a lot of family responsibilities ... Women really prioritize family and they're ready to give up many opportunities

and responsibilities for it. These concerns are sometimes really strong. So, family duties can hold women back from moving into management and getting promotions in a company (Anahita).

Mona highlighted the gendered division of household responsibilities in traditional Iranian families, affecting women's ability to balance work and home duties:

Because families in Iran often don't cooperate as much, it's usually women who end up taking care of everything at home. In more developed countries, both men and women share these responsibilities, but in traditional and mostly Islamic places, it's often women who have to do all the housework (Mona).

Sanaz emphasized the inevitable prioritization of family duties for women, irrespective of their education or job significance, hindering their career advancement:

No matter how educated we are or how important our job is, as women, our families always come first, and we have to help with household chores. There's no way around it, and it can really hold back our careers (Sanaz).

4.3. Self-imposed constraints

4.3.1. Lack of self-confidence

The poignant narratives from the interviewees underscore a pervasive challenge faced by women, as expressed through their personal experiences. Sara, reflecting on her initial months as a junior manager, confessed to feeling significant anxiety despite her usual confidence:

During my first months as a manager, I felt really anxious. I'm usually confident, but I was so scared of what others thought (Sara).

Mahsa recounted the familial challenges she faced when initially working outside the house, and how those experiences still linger in her professional life:

When I wasn't married, my family was really against me working outside the house. It led to a lot of conflicts at home, especially with my older brother, who was upset that I had to go to work. My relatives would always warn me that I wouldn't accomplish anything. I distinctly remember feeling disbelief when I started my own business. Even now, when I begin a new job, I have these lingering doubts, like 'Can I really do this?' It's something that stays with me, even after running my own business (Mahsa).

Leila expressed a preference for staying as an employee or starting her own business, highlighting a lack of interest in pursuing leadership positions because of the challenges faced:

Honestly, I just want to stick to being an employee or start my own business. I don't really have any interest in leadership positions (Leila).

Zahra conveyed the impact of societal expectations and the challenge of balancing work and home life on her self-confidence regarding leadership roles:

Because my coworkers have certain ideas about what women can do, and because I have to juggle work and home life, it's hard for me to feel sure about taking on managerial roles. I'm not really sure if I can be as influential as the men on the team (Zahra).

4.3.2. Limited networking

Embarking on a leadership journey in the Iranian tourism industry often becomes an isolated endeavor for many women, primarily due to limited networking acting as a self-imposed barrier. Several interviewees acknowledged their tendency to undervalue the importance of professional networks, leading to missed opportunities for mentorship

and career advancement. Nooshin reflected on this aspect, stating:

I've figured out something important about my career. I didn't realize how much professional connections could help me with advice and moving forward. Looking back, I see I missed out on some chances. Now, I understand how crucial it is to have a strong professional network (Nooshin).

Neda, sharing her experience in a predominantly male-run environment, admitted undervaluing the significance of networking with other women in leadership roles for mentorship:

I've had to navigate working in a mostly male-dominated environment on my own. It would have been great to connect with other women in leadership roles at my job to learn from their experiences and get their advice (Neda).

5. Discussion

The compelling personal accounts of Iranian women serve as stark reminders of the gender-related obstacles persisting within the Iranian tourism sector (Boluk et al., 2019; Carvalho et al., 2019; Chambers, 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). The country's patriarchal culture, reinforced by the theocratic system of governance, as evidenced in these stories, reinforces traditional gender roles, perpetuating specific expectations and behaviors for women (Bagheri et al., 2022; Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2019; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). This corroborates Risman's gender structure theory which emphasizes the influence of societal institutions on shaping and reinforcing these gender norms, particularly within family and workplace settings (Risman, 2018, pp. 19–43). Within the context of the workplace, the narratives vividly illustrate the discrimination women face in decision-making processes, promotions, and access to leadership positions echoing Risman's (2018, pp. 19–43) notion of a hierarchical gender structure where power and resources are unevenly distributed based on gender (Scarborough et al., 2017). The gender stereotypes associating leadership qualities with masculinity, noted in the accounts, further align with Risman's perspective on the complexity of gender as a structure, extending beyond individual choices (Scarborough et al., 2017). The intertwining of these personal stories with existing literature (Hoominfar & Zanganeh, 2021; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023) reinforces Risman's argument that gender structures are deeply ingrained in social systems.

The urgency expressed in dismantling the barriers identified from the respondent's accounts aligns with Risman's call for transformative changes in societal institutions, such as the workplace, to foster inclusivity and equity (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). However, there are major challenges that women face at the intersection of religious norms and career aspirations in a conservative theocratic society (Bagheri et al., 2022; Seyfi & Hall, 2019). The impact of religious norms on women's professional paths, as depicted in these narratives, resonates with Risman's emphasis on the influence of societal institutions on gender norms. The quotes vividly illustrate how religious interpretations extend beyond concerns of mere equality, intricately shaping women's career prospects in tourism. This echoes prior research in tourism in Iran (e.g., Bagheri et al., 2022; Ghaderi et al., 2023; Hosseini et al., 2023; Seyfi & Hall, 2019; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). Seyfi and Hall (2019) also demonstrated that the influence of religious norms is not limited to personal choices but permeates work environments, affecting hiring practices and promotional opportunities, reflecting Risman's perspective that gender structures are deeply ingrained in social structures, impacting various aspects of individuals' lives. Religions prescription of specific gender roles, designating men as providers and relegating women primarily to caregiving duties at home are formidable barriers, steering women toward predetermined roles and hindering their access to leadership positions (Begum, 2023; Fazal et al., 2019; Hosseini et al., 2023), and reflecting a hierarchical gender structure that favors one gender over the other.

The skewed power dynamics highlighted in the narratives align with Risman's emphasis on the hierarchical structure within gender systems. The lack of transparency in managerial appointments reflects the unequal distribution of power and resources based on gender, as conceptualized in gender structure theory. This lack of clarity in the promotion path not only creates confusion but also contributes to the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination, restricting women's progress within the political sphere. The interviewees' experiences of facing challenges in a political climate where their leadership aspirations are perceived as unconventional resonate with Risman's exploration of gender norms extending beyond individual choices. Furthermore, the designation of family responsibilities and motherhood as primary and essential for women, as outlined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Tavakoli & Mura, 2015), reflects institutional influence on gender expectations. Risman's theory aids in understanding how these prescribed gender roles contribute to the marginalization of women within the broader societal framework, limiting their involvement in political decision-making processes. The juxtaposition of these personal accounts with existing literature, including the academic observations made by scholars such as Zamani-Farahani and Henderson (2010), reinforces this argument. The urgency to address these deep-rooted gender inequalities within the political landscape, highlighted by Seyfi et al. (2023), underscores the transformative changes needed within Iranian societal institutions and for which many Iranian women have been campaigning. This includes a reevaluation of gender norms, the implementation of gender-inclusive policies, and a broader shift in societal perceptions, to foster a more equitable and supportive environment for women in Iranian organizations and politics.

These personal narratives also provide a rich understanding of the nuanced challenges faced by women in the Iranian tourism industry at the interactional level. The narratives shed light on the complex dynamics within workplace cultures and norms, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive examination that extends beyond mere job tasks. Discrimination against women, deeply rooted in societal attitudes within firms, is a pervasive issue (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). The 'maternal wall' phenomenon, where biases against pregnant women persist despite legal prohibitions, further complicates women's career trajectories. Some interviewees reported delaying pregnancies due to fears of leave or job loss, highlighting the tangible consequences of these organizational attitudes. Risman's focus on interactional processes resonates with the examination of workplace culture and norms in the Iranian tourism industry. The 'maternal wall' concept underscores the biases women face, linking societal norms, legal frameworks, and lived experiences as barriers to leadership. Gender-based stereotypes, questioning leadership abilities, and microaggression contribute to a hostile work environment, hinder professional growth and limit opportunities for career advancement. The challenges elucidated by the interviewees are not isolated incidents but reflect systemic issues embedded in the Iranian tourism and hospitality sector's workplace culture. Gender-based stereotypes and implicit biases play a pivotal role in shaping these challenges. Women managers may encounter exclusionary behavior or microaggression rooted in societal norms and cultural expectations surrounding gender roles. The study's findings reveal a persistently challenging work environment, where women managers confront not only explicit biases but also implicit predispositions. These biases manifest in unequal treatment, restricted advancement opportunities, and exclusion from decision-making processes. The lack of transparency in career progression, coupled with challenges in travel and interactions with tourists, male colleagues, and the prevalence of male networks, further compounds the career difficulties faced by women.

The self-perception of reduced capability or authority among women, as illuminated by these narratives, reflects Risman's exploration of gender at an individual level. Risman's emphasis on the development of gendered selves aligns with the narratives, illustrating how societal expectations and discriminatory practices impact women's self-perception, creating barriers to advancement. The challenge, as revealed by the interviewees, goes beyond individual experiences; and is deeply entwined with societal expectations and ingrained gender stereotypes. Cultural norms shape

women's perceptions of their capabilities, fostering a profound sense of professional self-doubt. Culturally ingrained gender stereotypes play a pivotal role in women's self-perception, especially concerning leadership roles (Ryan, 2023). The multifaceted impact of these stereotypes becomes evident as women grapple with doubts about their abilities to excel in positions traditionally deemed outside the gender norm. The lack of self-confidence reported by women in the Iranian tourism industry is not confined to personal insecurities; it is exacerbated by negative workplace interactions. Instances of sexual harassment, marginalization, unequal treatment, and unquantifiable yet time-consuming job expectations contribute significantly to the erosion of self-confidence. Notably, feeling undervalued compared to male colleagues emerges as a pivotal factor hindering their willingness to assume leadership roles. In essence, the identified lack of self-confidence is a multifaceted challenge rooted in societal expectations, cultural stereotypes, and negative workplace experiences. The narratives from interviewees offer poignant insights into the intricate interplay of self-confidence, societal expectations, and workplace dynamics. The entanglement of family responsibilities, particularly in traditional Islamic societies like Iran, adds another layer of complexity. Women often find themselves burdened with unequal distribution of household chores, compounded by restrictive laws and limited job opportunities, hindering their career progression in the tourism sector. This inequality is exacerbated by laws restricting women's job opportunities and mobility, creating formidable obstacles to career progression. The tourism sector, in particular, becomes a challenging terrain for women when limitations on travel (Kiani et al., 2023; Nikjoo et al., 2022) and job positions and contact with male tourists and employees impede their upward mobility (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). The experiences shared by the interviewees align with existing literature, portraying the entanglement of family and work life as a pervasive challenge for women (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2010). The quote from one interviewee particularly resonates, highlighting the unavoidable reality that, regardless of education or job significance, women often find their careers hindered by the overarching expectation that family always takes precedence. The perpetuation of these constraints is deeply ingrained in government policies, cultural attitudes, religious beliefs, and societal norms, contributing to the perpetuation and strengthening of these types of hurdles against women (Seyfi & Hall, 2019).

6. Conclusion and implications

While research on women and employment in tourism has gained attention, limited studies have focused on the unique employment challenges and career limitations experienced by women in theocratic societies and developing countries like Iran. Guided by gender structure theory, the findings of this study illuminate the intricate landscape of gender inequality within the Iranian tourism industry, where women continue to grapple with multifaceted challenges in their pursuit of leadership positions, despite tourism often being framed as 'women's work' and therefore a potential pathway for Iranian women's economic and personal empowerment (Seyfi et al., 2023).

Drawing on Risman's (2004, 2018, pp. 19–43) gender structure theory the analysis unveiled three primary factors critically contributing to this gender disparity: societal influences on gender roles (encompassing patriarchal culture and gender stereotypes, religious norms and theocratic regulations and gender-inclusive politics); institutionalized gender discrimination (entailing workplace culture and norms, prejudices and implicit bias, and unhealthy blend of work and personal life), and self-imposed constraints (involving lack of self-confidence and limited networking). These factors are deeply ingrained in Iranian society, creating significant hurdles for women who aspire to achieve equality, advancement, and leadership roles in various aspects of life. The influence of these factors reaches into cultural, religious, and institutional dimensions, and they collectively form a complex array of challenges that women must navigate as they seek to break free from traditional gender roles and norms. The utilization and modification of

Risman's theoretical framework for understanding women pursuing careers in the Iranian tourism industry have been instrumental in pinpointing crucial elements. These include contextual factors specific to Iran's theocratic society and the interpretative influence of religious norms, either hindering or facilitating women's professional advancement. In applying Risman's model to the unique sociopolitical landscape of Iran specific factors were identified that revealed the dynamic interplay between individual, societal, and institutional levels that affect women's careers in tourism, but which also potentially assist in identifying measures by which careers may be improved by organizations, policy-makers and committed individuals.

This research adds a unique perspective to the existing gender and tourism literature, making several contributions to the field. First, based on empirical evidence and guided by gender structure theory, the study provides a theoretical framework for uncovering how gender roles perpetuate preconceived notions and stereotypes that impede women's access to managerial positions in tourism. The study highlights how patriarchal culture and societal expectations reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. This underscores the importance of understanding how these stereotypes influence women's career choices and self-perception, contributing to their limited representation in leadership roles. Furthermore, and extremely significant in the Iranian context, intertwining religious norms and cultural values with institutional structures can result in a conservative view of women's leadership as incompatible with society's expectations, further marginalizing their career opportunities. The study clearly acknowledges that gender discrimination and limitations on women's career advancement cannot be fully understood without considering the broader social and cultural context.

Second, by incorporating factors such as religion and culture into the framework, the research captures the intricate relationships and power dynamics that shape women's experiences in managerial positions within Iranian tourism. This intersectional approach contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender inequalities intersect with other forms of discrimination and disadvantage, shedding light on the multifaceted barriers that women face in their professional lives. The study underscores how societal influences and patriarchal culture intertwined with institutional constraints, such as laws regarding travel, perpetuate traditional gender roles. Theoretical implications revolve around the need to explore how deeply ingrained societal norms continue to reinforce gendered beliefs, limiting women's career choices and prospects, and how these become formalized in institutional regulations. It also reveals how women often internalize gender norms, leading to self-doubt and a lack of confidence in leadership roles. This highlights the importance of examining how individuals (self) construct their gender roles and the implications of self-imposed limitations on women's career advancement for both theory development and the capacity for change. The internalization of gender norms can lead to self-doubt and a lack of confidence in leadership roles.

Third, the research also underscores the significance of organizational culture and norms in perpetuating gender discrimination and how negative cultures are reinforced from above, i.e. from institutions, and below, by individuals. It raises significant theoretical questions about how gender biases are embedded in work environments and how these biases affect women's career progression. Importantly, the theoretical implications of the study suggest a need to explore the dynamic nature of cultural narratives and how they evolve over time to either support or challenge gender equality in light of the three different but entwined levels of Risman's theoretical framework.

From the perspective of empowering women in the tourism industry this study underscores the critical need for organizations within the Iranian tourism industry to implement diversity and inclusion initiatives. Companies can actively address gender biases and create an environment where women have equal opportunities to advance their careers, to the potential economic and managerial benefit of the business. To combat gender stereotypes and biases, organizations can introduce gender sensitivity training for employees at all levels which can raise awareness about unconscious biases and provide strategies to promote fair treatment and

opportunities for women. Flexible work hours, parental leave, and other family-friendly policies can empower women to pursue leadership roles without compromising their personal lives in an economically beneficial way for companies. Creating mentorship and leadership development programs specifically aimed at women can help address the lack of role models in leadership positions. Pairing aspiring women leaders with experienced mentors and providing training in leadership skills can also inspire and prepare women for leadership roles. However, it must also be acknowledged that while such measures are appropriate, tourism and hospitality businesses as well as destination agencies may require somewhat enlightened leadership that is willing to challenge not only potentially entrenched attitudes from their own (male) employees, but also those of external stakeholders and institutions.

The study focused on the Iranian tourism industry, where cultural and religious factors exert a particularly strong influence. However, this limited scope does not fully encompass the diversity of challenges that women face in other sectors or societies. It is recommended that future comparative studies be conducted across different countries or sectors to examine how gender inequality manifests in a variety of cultural and professional contexts, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Moreover, longitudinal studies are also suggested to track changes in gender inequality and career progression over extended periods, offering insights into trends, fluctuations, and the effectiveness of gender equality interventions. In addition, the study predominantly collected women's perspectives, possibly overlooking the viewpoints of men working in tourism careers. To gain a comprehensive understanding of gender inequality and potential organizational constraints, future research should consider gathering insights from all workplace stakeholders, including men, employers, and policymakers.

Impact statement

This research illuminates the challenges women encounter in pursuing equal opportunities in Iran's tourism industry within its patriarchal and theocratic society. Through an examination of gender stereotypes, norms, and theocratic dynamics, the study contributes to our understanding of non-Western gender inequality in tourism. By applying Risman's gender structure theory to Iran's sociopolitical landscape, this study identifies the dynamic interplay among individual, societal, and institutional levels influencing women's careers in tourism. These insights can potentially inform measures for improvement by organizations, policymakers, and committed individuals. The findings illustrate how gender stereotypes and theocratic structures manifest in the Iranian tourism industry, revealing that Iranian women actively negotiate, resist, and challenge these stereotypes to advance their careers. This study amplifies the voices of Iranian women in tourism, urging a critical examination of stereotypes, a reevaluation of societal expectations, and advocating for diversity and inclusion initiatives in the tourism sector to promote gender equality.

Funding for open access charge

University of Málaga/CBUA.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

María Jesús Carrasco-Santos: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Resources. **Siamak Seyfi:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Syedasaad Hosseini:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **C. Michael Hall:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Boshra Mohajer:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Fernando Almeida-García:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Rafael Cortes Macías:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgements

The research was also funded by the project Adaptation Strategies and Alternatives from Inland Tourism Destinations in Times of Change (ADAPTATUR) (PID2020114186RB-C22), Ministry of Science and Innovation, Government of Spain.

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