



Housing as a Political Tool: Gender Inequality in Student Accommodation in Iran

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***Abstract:** This paper studies the gender inequalities in university-provided student accommodation in Babolsar, Iran, in relation to the role of the dominant political power and its approach in shaping the physical form of public dormitories and the living conditions of students. Secondary data analysis based on a questionnaire survey is utilised, and the results show that in numerous physical and non-physical ways women's public dormitories are designed and controlled in favour of the dominant political power and against the wishes of their residents. This research examines how the ideological and cultural background permeates institutional practices in housing and affects the living conditions of a disadvantaged social group, which can open a discussion on the role of housing in social exclusion.*

Keywords: gender inequality; power; housing; student accommodation; Iran.



The most successful ideological effects are those that have no words and ask no more than complicitous silence.

(Bourdieu 1977: 188)

Introduction

The role of political power in the form and function of public spaces has been an issue for several studies (Bourdieu 1977; Dovey 2014; Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991). This research explores how institutional approaches and practices, which are strictly under the control of ideological government policies in Iran, can lead to the spatial marginalisation of a social group to serve exclusive governmental regulation and, to some extent, social norms. University-provided accommodations can be considered a form of social or subsidised housing that affects the living experience of their residents - namely, the higher education student population. This social group has been referred to as an invisible population in housing and urban policy (Ackermann and Visser 2016; Fang and van Liempt 2020; Gu 2015; Kenna 2011; Prada 2019; Ruiu 2017; Smith 2005; Strzalka 2019). Specifically, student housing is neglected because it is assumed they would live in any condition (Dwyer 2008) without political power to have their voice heard (Russo et al. 2007). This research takes a step forward to investigate gender inequalities in student accommodation, focusing on institutional practices in a context where gender inequality is encouraged in public spaces and supported by civil law. This survey indicates how institutions can reinforce gender inequalities by exploring the University of Mazandaran dormitories in Babolsar, Iran, as a case.

Power and the built environment

Debates on the relationship between planning and politics, where planning is found to be a tool of the dominant power in public spaces, have been growing in recent years. For example, Dovey's discourse on the mediation of power in built form identifies five forms of power 'over'¹ space, including coercion, manipulation, seduction, segregation, and authority (Dovey 2014). Studies on Colonial Africa also show how planners were urged to use their expertise to favour the dominant political power by influencing spatial form – for instance, through racial segregation in residential areas (Njoh 2009).

Gender and urban spaces can also refer to a subset of general arguments about power 'over' the built environment. As Rosaldo (1980) notes, the division of space by gender is not rooted in biology but is a product of social processes. Lefebvre (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991) also suggests that spatial patterns are shaped by social and economic systems, and he highlights the role of institutions and individuals who have political power 'over' the formation of spaces. The creation of gendered spaces can be seen in various societies in history, formed by religious or cultural norms (Arjmand 2016). Moreover, society's patriarchal structure can enter the political body and take any form (Grosz 1992; Spain 1992). As a result, the political use of

¹ Dovey (2014) suggests two terms for the negative and positive forms of power. Power 'over' refers to the opposing power, emphasizing on the 'power of one agent over another' and a 'desire to harness the capacities of others to one's own empowerment'. In contrast, power 'to' refers to a liberating power, implying a positive interpretation of power, improving the capacity to grow.



space determines the advantage and power ‘over’ for one space compared to another (Lico 2001).

In the Muslim Middle East, where religion has shaped the traditional and cultural structure (Arjmand 2016), gendered divisions and spaces have become the norm and are also pervasive in the political body. In Iran, the Islamic theocracy is the most powerful agent of gender segregation in society; however, traditional and cultural norms play a role, too (Arjmand 2016). After the Islamic revolution in 1977, a new civil law was founded on the religious ideology that authorised and encouraged gender segregation in Iran. According to Arjmand (2016), the systematic effort to implement such division is in some ways a new phenomenon.

The main justification given for this segregation is that of concerns over women’s safety and security in public spaces and the protection of women from harm by men. Surprisingly, the need to protect women is seductively justified by the concept of “exalted position of women” in Islamic ideology. The fear of violence against women is a potent mechanism for preventing women from entering men’s territory (Bauhardt 2003), and like any marginalised group (e.g., race, class) this means they may feel deprived or controlled by the dominant regime of power.

The physical presence of men and women in the same space is an issue for criminal investigation and punishment in Iran (Paidar 1997). Therefore, separate spaces for men and women are provided in sports facilities, public pools, and public transportation. In the mid-1990s there also emerged the idea of creating women’s parks, and this was done in several towns in the country after concerns were raised about the significant vitamin D deficit in women because of the lack of exposure to sunlight (Arjmand 2016), and in the parks women can be exposed to sunlight without hijab in a female-only space.

Like other public spaces, all university accommodation in Iran is separated by gender into male and female spaces. Other gender identities are excluded from housing policy altogether and need to fit into one of the two groups and hide their gender identity. Non-local higher education students who have left the parental home and found accommodation in another city are the subject of social and physical segregation studies worldwide (Fincher and Shaw 2009; Hubbard 2008, 2009; Ruming and Dowling 2017; Smith 2005). In contrast, intentional gender segregation in public spaces is not a common phenomenon worldwide. Therefore, the role of national and institutional background becomes more dominant in this case, and there is a need to understand the mechanism and tools for shaping disadvantaged female public space. Therefore, we have selected five forms of power ‘over’ the built environment to examine gender inequalities in public accommodation in Babolsar, presented in Table 1.



Table 1: Forms of power ‘over’ the built environment and definitions

Forms of power ‘over’	Definition and spatial embodiment
Force	Enforced spatial confinement and exclusion to make people comply with the will of someone else and with no option to act differently or not comply.
Coercion	A latent kind of force to ensure compliance. It occurs in cases or types of domination by architectural form, spatial configuration, signs, monuments building scale, meditating social interaction by time and space organisation.
Manipulation	A form of coercion that focuses on keeping the subject ignorant, providing false justifications, and monitoring practices like segregation, surveillance, etc.
Seduction	The interests and desires of the subject are manipulated and the space is shaped so as to meet the expectations and desires of the power, resulting in distinctions between the real and perceived interests of the subject. It is usually accompanied by propaganda strategies in support of a particular belief system.
Segregation	Making boundaries to separate space according to such attributes as gender, ethnicity, etc. The separation of space can take different forms, such as physical confinement or limiting accessibility by means of regulations.

Source: Dovey 2014; Njoh 2009.

Methodology

For this study, a mixed research method was utilised. First, we analysed secondary data on university officials, including the number and types of university-provided student accommodation and their location, and this analysis is integrated with Google map photos to illustrate the spatial distribution of the accommodation and observe the dormitories’ physical attributes. We then conducted an online questionnaire survey among 236 students out of approximate 3400 living in such accommodation to assess the indicators relating to the forms of power ‘over’ in their accommodation, their living preferences, and the facilities available in the dormitories. To gain accurate and unbiased results, the questions as much as possible avoided referring to the role of the dominant power and to inequalities in accommodation, and the questions were presented more as a general survey on satisfaction with public accommodation.

The questionnaire’s first section included 22 Likert items as indicators of five forms of power ‘over’, and the students were asked to rank them on a 1-5 Likert scale, where 1 signified strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement. A ‘Description’ box was provided for the respondents to share any relevant experience or an opinion for each item. A Chi-square test was conducted on the results from this section to check the main hypothesis, which is that ‘female students feel more pressure than male students in dormitories’. In the second section, students were asked to select their accommodation type and its facilities, and in the last section were asked to also indicate their accommodation preferences.



Table 2: Respondent profiles

Gender	Accommodation type		Education level		
	Semi-public dormitory	Public dormitory	Graduate	Postgraduate	Sum
Male	NA	60	53	7	60
Female	67	109	151	25	176
Sum	67	169	204	32	236

Source: authors.

Case study

Babolsar is a small town in the north of Iran and is home to the University of Mazandaran, one of the main public universities in Iran. The main university campus is located in the eastern area of the town and has almost 12,000 higher education students (www.umz.ac.ir), including local and non-local students. The latter require student accommodation and seek it either in the dormitories provided by the university or in private rentals on the market.

Student accommodations in Babolsar

University-provided student accommodations in Babolsar is similar to the type of public student accommodation found worldwide, which in each case is modified according to its particular context and adapted to the given social and economic structure. One of the main differences in Iranian student accommodation, especially the accommodation provided by universities, is gender segregation and transgender exclusion. This means only male or female student accommodation is offered and other gender identities are not acknowledged, and where students are placed is based on the gender on their birth certificate.

Type

Two main types and categories of university accommodation exist: public and semi-public accommodation.

- *Public accommodation: university dormitories*

Public dormitories are the cheapest student accommodation in Babolsar (Talebpoor 2018). These dormitories are monitored and maintained by the university. They are off-campus, gated, purpose-built superblocks and contain shared kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms (4-6 people per bedroom) arranged along halls. They are separated by gender and accommodate 1,070 male and 1,352 female students.

- *Semi-public accommodation: boarding houses and private dormitories*

Semi-public accommodations are owned and managed by their landlords but are licensed and supervised by the university. They are more expensive than public dormitories but are less crowded, provide better services, and have more moderate regulations. All semi-public

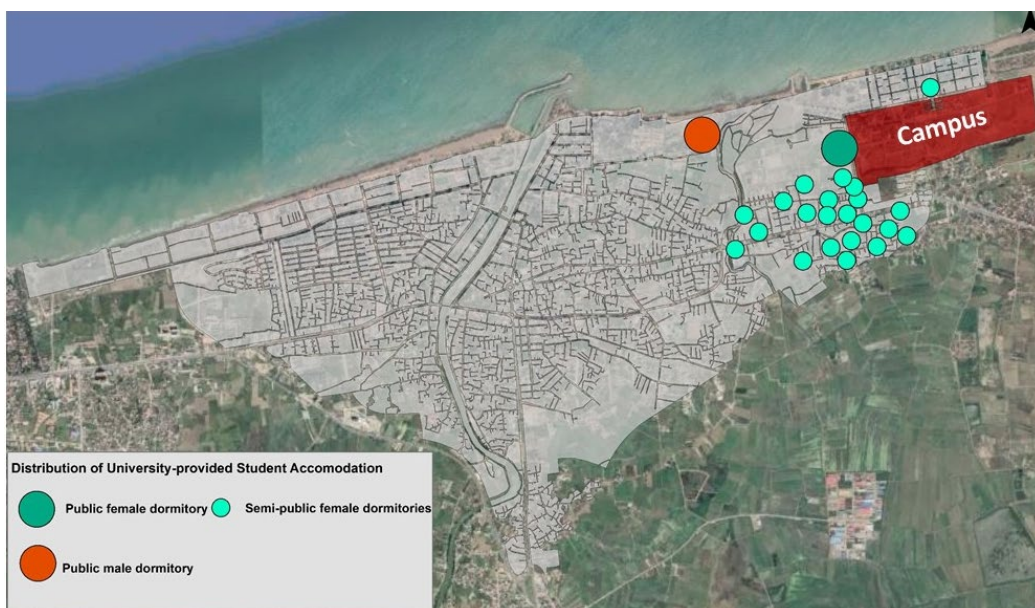


accommodation is for female students only and is located in the vicinity of the campus. There are 21 official semi-public student accommodations in Babolsar, which are home to nearly 1,000 female students. This type of accommodation has a great variety of physical forms and different types of management and services. They are either purpose-built superblocks or they are multi-storey apartments that are similar to regular single-household units.

Location and Design

All public and semi-public student accommodation for female students is located about a one-kilometre distance from the campus. Male dormitories are located further from the campus and benefit from a one-kilometre private beach. They are also closer to the city centre and to public transportation, which means that male students have better opportunities to look for and obtain employment. It is also harder for female students to get back to the dormitory at night because there are no buses or taxis heading towards the women’s campus from early hours at night. The women’s dormitories are surrounded by agricultural fields, so, in terms of their location, they are alienated from the rest of the town and residential areas, which is a form of ‘segregation’, a force that separates them from the community (Dovey 2014). In contrast, the men’s dormitories are in the middle of residential areas and have better access to the city centre and recreational areas.

Figure 1: The distribution of university-provided student accommodation



Source: www.umz.ac.ir

There are also significant differences between the men’s and women’s dormitory sites and blocks, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. The women’s dormitory site contains several 3-4 story buildings and few open-space facilities, including benches and some outdoor exercise equipment. The men’s dormitory site has several two-storey blocks, distributed appropriately, and a view of the Caspian Sea. Also, it is located by the coast, and only the dormitories’ residents can enter and use the beach there. Figure 2 also shows that their dormitory site contains outdoor sports facilities available for male students.



Figure 2: Men’s public dormitory site



Figure 3: Women’s public dormitory site



Source: authors.

Questionnaire survey results

Forms of power ‘over’ in student accommodation

Table 3 shows the results of the questionnaire conducted among students living in public and semi-public dormitories in Babolsar, separated by female and male respondents. The numbers in the table are the arithmetical means of the responses to the questions specified in the Appendix. It is worth mentioning that some of the questions have a reverse scale (e.g., in some questions, a higher score meant a better situation and in some higher means it signified a worse situation), so in order to present the results in a way that is logically consistent and that would allow subsequent calculations, the items are converted to the same direction in this table.

As a result, the table shows to what extent students agree or disagree with each item’s existence in their accommodation. Next, an overall score for five forms of power ‘over’ in student accommodation is calculated based on the items’ mean scores in that category.



Table 3: Questionnaire results on forms of power ‘over’

Forms of power ‘over’	Female	Male
<i>Force</i>	4.019	3.759
1- Enforced gender segregation	3.980	4.340
2- Enforced racial exclusion	2.214	2.860
3- Enforced religious exclusion	4.120	3.316
4- Transgender exclusivity* ²	4.780	4.180
5- The dorm is a gated impermeable complex, surrounded by walls	5.000	4.100
<i>Coercion</i>	4.364	3.690
6- Strict regulation of check-in and check-out times	4.825	4.680
7- Strict surveillance over regulations (dress code, noise, smoking, etc.)	4.218	2.160
8- Sense of being under control because of guards and managers	3.604	2.012
9- Existence of Islamic ideologic signs and events	4.486	4.760
10- Absence of other ideological/religious signs and events *	4.690	4.840
<i>Manipulation</i>	4.060	2.899
11- Insufficient services and facilities inside the dormitory*	3.604	3.054
12- Feeling unsafe in the neighbourhood where the dormitory is located*	4.382	1.808
13- Feeling unsafe and uncomfortable with the guards and the strict surveillance*	3.530	2.132
14- Planning and regulation of dormitories are not based on modern human demands*	4.724	4.600
<i>Seduction</i>	4.017	3.734
15- More public accommodation is provided for female students because of social and cultural norms that demand more control over and monitoring of women	3.870	3.740
16- Encouraging women’s education is not the only reason why more public accommodation is provided for female students*	4.120	3.340
17- The surveillance and strict regulations in dorms are not for the students’ sake*	4.060	4.122
<i>Segregation</i>	3.983	1.954
18- Poor access to facilities around the dormitory*	4.750	1.862
19- Poor access to the town centre and facilities in the town*	4.022	2.322
20- Poor access to quality public spaces*	4.138	1.751
21- Poor access to jobs*	3.846	1.542
22- Poor access to public transportation all day long*	3.161	2.294

Note: The items are ranked by following Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Source: authors.

The mean scores for the five categories show that the respondents do experience these forms of power ‘over’ their living environment. The results for the ‘force’ category indicate that both the men’s and the women’s dormitories neither support nor oppose gender, racial, or religious diversity in some cases. The scores for items 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, and 17 highlight the dominance of Islamic ideology and social norms that encourage strict surveillance over young people. Items 7, 8, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22 show how female and male students have different

² The items with (*) have different direction questions in the survey, so they are reversed to be logically consistent.



experiences of power ‘over’ in the dormitories. Residents of the women’s dormitories more frequently report the remote location of the dormitories and more stringent regulations and surveillance as factors of power ‘over’ that they have experienced. Also, the responses of both female and male students to items 15 and 16 suggest existence of a seductive approach towards female students. Rooted in Islamic ideology, this seductive approach aims to bound and control women in the name of supporting or protecting them and is a practice that has also permeated the space of higher education. The shared opinion on this practice among both male and female students shows that although male students may not have experienced it, they are aware of its existence.

After the survey we conducted a Chi-square test for independence to see if the difference in questionnaire results was statistically significant and whether there was an association between variables. In this research, the test was applied to the two categorical variables studied here: gender and forms of power ‘over’. The null hypothesis was defined as: There is no difference between the pressure felt by men and women. A p-value of less than 0.05 means that the null hypothesis is rejected and the differences are statistically significant.

Each participant’s responses to the five categories (force, coercion, manipulation, seduction, and segregation) were calculated and then the Chi-square test was performed to look for any association between gender and the feeling of being subjected to forms of power ‘over’. As we can see in Table 4, the test results suggest an association between gender and the feeling of being subjected to pressure in every category.

Table 4: Chi-square test results

Number	Category	N	DF	X ²	P-value*
1	Force	234	4	9.76	0.045
2	Coercion	236	4	27.88	<0.001
3	Manipulation	235	4	119.96	<0.001
4	Seduction	234	4	12.75	0.013
5	Segregation	233	4	190.96	<0.001

Note: *P-value < 0.05 = statistically significant.

Source: authors.

As noted above, all student accommodation in Babolsar is gender-specific, meaning that the students have no choice for gender-inclusive accommodation, and, more importantly, other gender identities are neglected. The dominance of Islamic signs, events, and spaces is significant in all the dormitories, regardless of gender, while the same scores for other religions are minimum. These results show a combination of force and coercion in both the women’s and men’s accommodation and both these forms of power ‘over’ scored relatively high.

Although there are special regulations for all students who live in dormitories, female students reported serious confrontations like aggressive behaviour, threats, reprimands, and even eviction from the dormitory for disobeying check-in and dress code regulations. In contrast, the responses from the male students indicate that they do not experience severe pressure from the dormitory guards and management. These strict regulations, especially in the women’s dormitories, are forms of coercion that transform the public dormitory into an organisational space in which students’ behaviour must align with the dominant power’s will (Weinstein 2017). These regulations are, to some extent, based on conditions that exist socially, so they



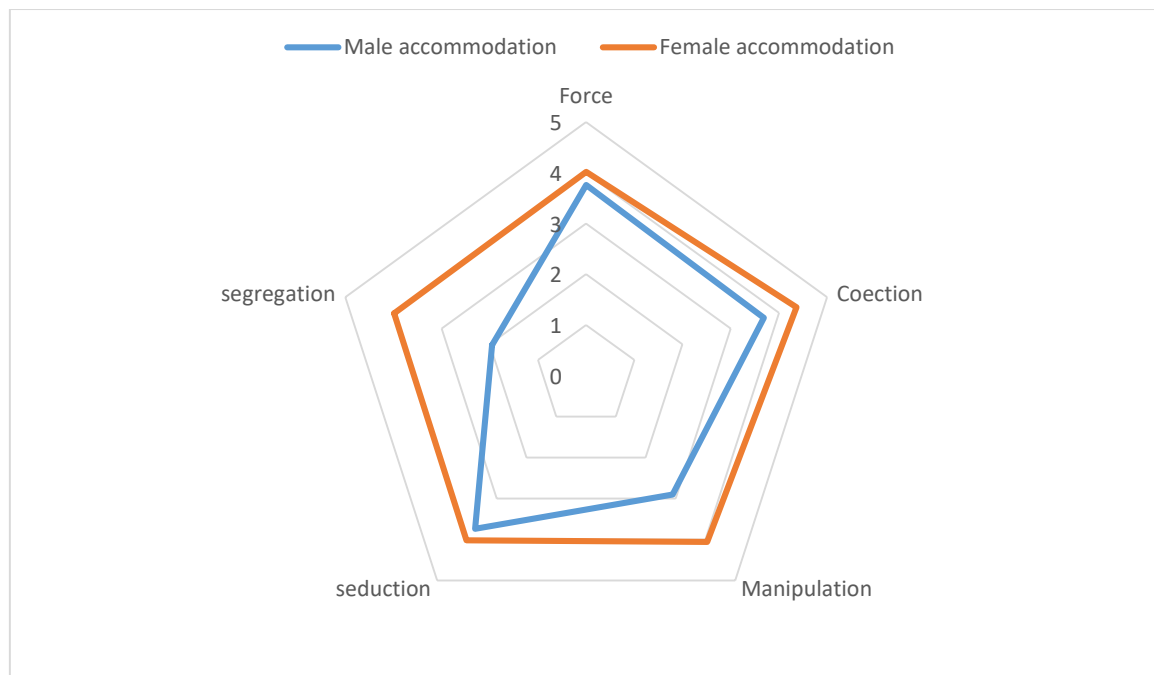
embody ‘the power to circumvent argument and to frame the terms of reference of any discussion’ (Dovey 2014).

Since seduction and manipulation are mostly non-physical, the questionnaire assessed the students’ ideas about what kind of living conditions they wanted. As the social context suggests, women should be protected, live in a safe environment, and have good access to the facilities they need, so they do not need to commute long distances.

Paradoxically, female students feel unsafe in the neighbourhood where all the women’s dormitories are located because it is far from the residential neighbourhoods and activity centres. Because the women’s dormitories were built during the last 15 years, it can be concluded that the safety issue has been used as a tool to keep female students living in a separate space and near to the campus. The location of the women’s dormitories has segregates female students from the rest of the town, and poor transportation pushes female students away from the majority of the student labour market.

As both male and female students stated, the reason for the existing variation of university-provided accommodation types for women is to comply with the ideological, cultural, and social background, and not to empower women or supporting their education. Also, other practices like regulation, location, and accessibility confirm this assumption. As Figure 2 shows, the women’s accommodation is ranked significantly higher in all five forms of power ‘over’ the built environment. Although the men’s accommodation is not ranked low either, it should be considered that all social groups may experience forms of power ‘over’ their living environment under a totalitarian government.

Figure 2: Ranking of forms of power ‘over’ student accommodation



Source: authors.



Dormitory facilities

Table 5 presents the facilities that are available in the men’s and women’s public dormitories. Gender inequality also exists inside the dormitories. The women’s dormitories do not have outdoor sports facilities, a dining room, or a TV room; even the bathroom ratio per student is significantly different. Semi-public women’s dormitories have better conditions and are less crowded, but lack sports facilities, and only two of them have transportation to campus and study rooms.

Table 5: The facilities available at public and semi-public dormitories

Facilities	Male		Female
	Public dormitory	Public dormitory	Semi-public dormitories
Kitchen	Yes	Yes	All
Bathroom	1 per 12 students	1 per 15 students	Approximately 1 per 4.5 students
Outdoor sports facility	Beach volleyball court and grass football field	No	None
Indoor sports facility	Yes	Yes	1 dormitory
TV room	Yes	No	All
Dining room	Yes	No	All
Elevator	No	No	none
Parking	For staff only	For staff only	For staff only
Study room	Yes	Yes	2 dormitories
WiFi	Yes	Yes	14 dormitories
Transportation to campus	Yes	Yes	2 dormitories

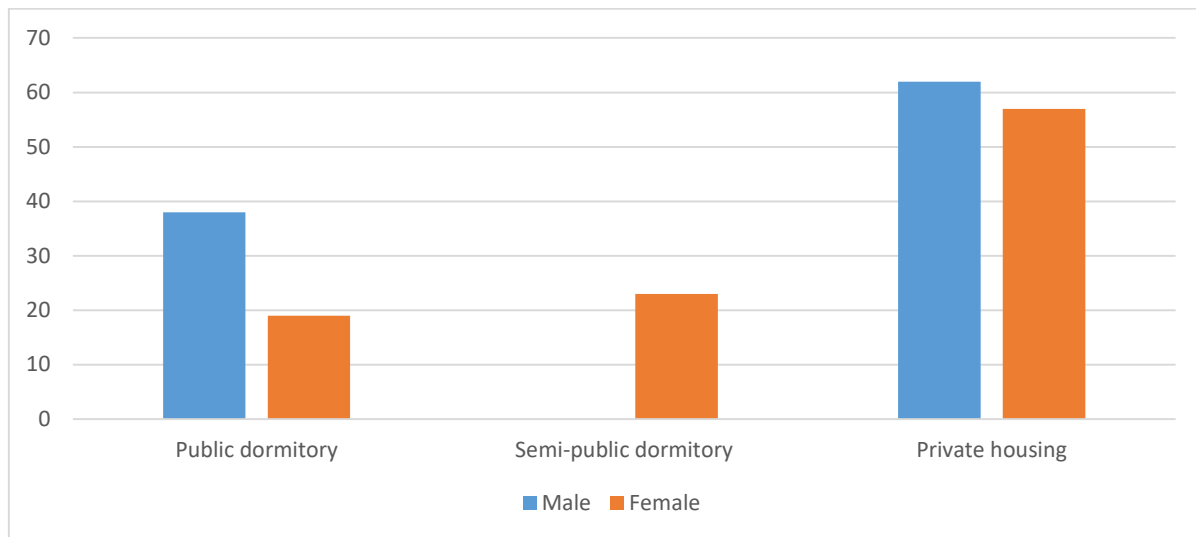
Source: authors.

Student residential preferences

To understand the students’ perspective on their living conditions in university-provided dormitories, we ask them to indicate their preferred living conditions and the reasons for their preferences. As Figure 3 shows, the most preferred accommodation for both male and female students is private rental housing, and the main reasons cited for this were more freedom, privacy, and less crowding. Meanwhile, the university accommodation forces the students to live like atoms, under surveillance and away from social interaction (Barnes 1988) with communities outside the dormitory.



Figure 3: Male and female students accommodation preferences (%)



Source: authors.

Conclusion

National and governmental approaches play a crucial role in any form of social or subsidized housing and have various social consequences. University-provided accommodations can be regarded as a form of subsidised housing for students. A study of this accommodation shows that the dominant ideological regime directly influences students’ lives by intervening in their housing conditions in terms of the physical and social aspects of their housing. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, Iran is ranked 150 among 157 countries in the global gap index ranking (World Economic Forum 2021). Inequalities can be observed in numerous ways.

As the observations and questionnaire results suggest, five forms of power ‘over’ the built environment, including force, coercion, manipulation, seduction, and segregation, are witnessed in relation to the accommodation for female students and much more so than in the case of the accommodation for male students in Babolsar. Moreover, ‘deprivation’ is another factor of inequality that is observed in relation to the available facilities in the women’s dormitories and that can be added to the abovementioned list of forms of power ‘over’.

When university students leave the parental homes, they try to start their lives as adults and live an independent life (Smith and Holt 2007). The overall characteristics of the women’s dormitories in Babolsar influence job and socialising opportunities for female students by keeping them under control and distant from the town’s activity centres and job opportunities. Preventing female students from engaging in outdoor sports activities even on the women’s dormitory site has the effect of internalising a sense of inferiority and obedience in the women. Institutional practices relating to female student accommodation seem to use the characteristics of the university dormitories to try to oppose the natural process of independence among women.

As Dovey (2014) notes: ‘This relegation of built form to the unquestioned frame is the key to its relations to power’. The structure of power is more embedded in housing as a major



component of everyday life; it thereby becomes less questionable and effectively serves the will of the dominant political power. This way, housing becomes complicit with other exclusivist institutional practices by shaping women's perceptions and preferences, so that women accept the existing conditions as natural or unchangeable and do not ask for an alternative. Thus, it can be concluded that social and subsidised housing can encourage exclusion, especially of disadvantaged social groups in terms of class, race, or gender, through various physical and non-physical ways that originate from institutional approaches. In such cases, the residents and authorities would probably ignore or accept the circumstances as unchangeable conditions. These approaches are common in totalitarian political regimes, where the housing disadvantages are often more neglected. However, any housing practice can lead to similar outcomes in other contexts, either intentionally or unintentionally.



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Appendix

To what extent you agree with the following statements about your accommodation?
Please provide a brief description about your experience or opinion on each item.
(1=strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree)

Part 1	1	2	3	4	5
The dormitories are gender-specific (divided by gender) with no gender-inclusive option.					
Students can accommodate in the dormitory regardless of their race and ethnicity.					
Students can accommodate in dormitory regardless of their religion.					
There are specific accommodation options available for transgender students.					
The dormitory is surrounded by walls, merely accessible for authorised individuals (resident students, staff, etc.)					
Part 2					
Dormitories have strict check-in and check-out time regulation.					
Managers and guards constantly monitor students' behaviour to ensure they obey all the rules (like dress code, smoking, noise, etc.)					
I feel under control because of guards and managers' constant surveillance.					
I often see Islamic icons (like praying rooms, monuments, banners, or ceremonies) inside the dormitory.					
I often see other religions' icons (like praying rooms, monuments, banners, or ceremonies) inside the dormitory.					
Part 3					
The facilities and services inside the dormitory provide various options for different activities (e.g. studying, leisure, exercise, etc.)					
I feel safe in the neighbourhood where the dormitory is located.					
The existence of guards and several surveillance tools (CCTV cameras, blocks managers, etc.) makes me feel safe and comfortable in the dormitory.					
The dormitory environment and regulations meet my psychological, social and physical needs as a modern individual.					
Part 4					
The officials claim that the reason for providing more dormitories for female students is the cultural background and the Islamic law that legitimise monitoring and controlling women and their living environment, and I believe it is true.					
The officials claim that the reason for providing more dormitories for female students is to encourage woman to educate and develop and I believe it is true.					
The officials say that The strict regulation (check-in and check-out time, dress codes, etc.) and surveillance (gated entrances, CCTV cameras, etc.) in public dormitories are for student's sake to protect them and I believe it is true.					
Part 5					
I have good access to nearby urban services and facilities from the dormitory.					
I have good access to the town center services and facilities from the dormitory.					
I have good access to high quality public spaces from the dormitory.					
I have good access to jobs and activity centres from the dormitory.					
I have good access to public transportation from and to dormitory all day long.					



Which of the following facilities exist in your accommodation? Please provide a brief description about their quality and using conditions

Facilities	Answers		Description
	yes	no	
Kitchen	yes	no	
Outdoor facilities	yes	no	
Indoor sport facility	yes	no	
TV room	Yes	No	
Dining room	Yes	No	
Elevator	Yes	No	
Parking	Yes	No	
Study room	Yes	No	
Wi-Fi	Yes	no	
Transport to campus	yes	no	
bathroom	On average, how many students share 'one' bathroom?		

What is your residential preference as a university student in Babolsar? Please provide a brief description about your reason.

Public dormitory	Semi-public dormitory	Private renting
Your reason:		

Source: authors.