

Striving for Equality: The Forces Shaping Equal Opportunities in the Recruitment of Female Faculty Members in Iran

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Article Type: Research Article

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Cite as: Kamyabifar, Z., Nazarzadeh Zare, M., & Khakpour, A. (2025). Striving for equality: The forces shaping equal opportunities in the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran. *Higher Education Governance & Policy*, 6(1), 37-51. doi:10.55993/hegp.1651430

Access: <https://doi.org/10.55993/hegp.1651430>

Striving for Equality: The Forces Shaping Equal Opportunities in the Recruitment of Female Faculty Members in Iran

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Abstract

The study aimed to identify the factors that influence equal opportunities in the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran. To achieve this aim, we adopted a qualitative approach employing the case study method. The participants in the study were individuals with an experienced background in the faculty members' recruitment committee who were selected with purposeful sampling methods of criterion type. To collect the data, we used a semi-structured interview and performed a thematic analysis for data analysis. The findings showed that the views of the participants in the study about the factors that influence equal opportunities in the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran can be classified into three inclusive themes, including trans-organizational factors, organizational factors, and individual factors. The study had three implications. First, feminist theory, change theory, equal opportunity theory, and role congruity theory justify equal opportunities in the recruitment of female faculty members. Second, despite Iran's constitutional support for creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of women, the prevalence of a patriarchal culture in the Iranian academic system has intensified gender inequalities. Third, creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran not only requires changes in institutional-level laws but also demands a shift in the culture and practices governing universities.

Keywords: Equal opportunities, Iran's higher education, Female academic staff, Female recruitment

Introduction

Women's participation in the global workforce has grown significantly in the past decades, benefiting both women and the economies of various countries while also presenting challenges. In 1970, women accounted for 38% of the workforce, which rose to 41% in 1996 (Alaadini & Razavi, 2005). In Iran, women's economic activity stabilized after the 1979 Revolution, although women remained very active in the public arena, and the constitution guarantees equal opportunity and freedom from discrimination. For instance, the number of women employed grew marginally from 13% in 1976 to 13.39% in 2006 (Keshavarz, 2015). Despite growing awareness of the demands of gender equity and equal opportunity in employment, gender disparities continue to exist among developed and even more so developing countries. In some developed countries, such as the United States, the gender gap in the workplace has even been increasing (Llorens et al., 2021). These inequalities have consequences that extend beyond workers and workplaces since women's underrepresentation or limitations on their full engagement and career development can hinder economic development in general. Therefore, ensuring women equal opportunity in workplaces not only inspires creativity and innovation but also optimizes organizational productivity and economic development for a whole nation (Keshavarz, 2015).

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(Research Article) Cite as: Kamyabifar, Z., Nazarzadeh Zare, M., & Khakpour, A. (2025). Striving for equality: The forces shaping equal opportunities in the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran. *Higher Education Governance & Policy*, 6(1), 37-51. doi:10.55993/hegp.1651430

Received: March 4, 2025; **Revised:** April 19, 2025; **Accepted:** April 24, 2025; **(e-)Published:** June 30, 2025

Although the number of female students in Iran has recently approached that of male students, the university environment is still viewed as largely male-oriented. Despite the quantitative rise in female faculty members in Iran's higher education over the last few decades, the gender gap has not been substantially reduced. The gender distribution of faculty members across academic ranks remains unequal (Keshavarz, 2020). According to empirical evidence, including study conducted by Shahbazi et al. (2020), Iran ranked 113th on the Gender Inequality Index in 2020. Furthermore, Rezaeinasab's (2022) study shows that, while women's economic engagement has increased relative to men since the Iranian revolution, this growth does not logically correspond to major social, cultural, and economic transformations in Iranian society. Thus, Iranian educated women face several social and cultural challenges including gender disparity at the work environment, low career opportunities, patriarchal ideologies hindering assessment of women's capacities and competences, gender doubt towards women, and gender views with priorities in motherhood and wifehood as being vital obligations of women (Safiri & Baghestani, 2014). This is in line with industrialized country studies, such as in the United States, where, although women's representation rose significantly at the undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral levels, they remained underrepresented among faculty (Llorens et al., 2021). Similarly, in the European Union, while women's educational attainment has risen to some extent, their representation in technical and engineering fields, basic sciences, technology, and economics is lower compared to other areas. For this purpose, the study by Ceci et al. (2014) found that in the European Union, there is approximately 50% representation of women in social and behavioral sciences and approximately 25% in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. This disparity has led to a gender disparity and a fall in gender diversity within member states' higher education systems. A look at gender representation by academic rank in Iran over the past decades also reveals that women's percentages have been significantly lower than men's at all three ranks: assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor. To be exact, in 2015, women occupied only 22.3% of assistant professorships, 14% of associate professorships, and a mere 8% of full professorships. This gender gap among Iranian faculty indicates the significant difficulty that female PhD recipients face in receiving equal opportunities in the academic world (Keshavarz, 2020). Legal, family, and cultural explanations, alongside fundamental gender stereotypes, are reported to be responsible for this gender imbalance (Ghasemi, 2022). Also, while gender inequality in organizational hiring has its roots in law and policy, the role of organizational culture and prevailing managerial environments in perpetuating this disparity should not be disregarded (Thirusanku, 2021). Based on the above arguments, the present study aims to identify the factors influencing the creation of equal opportunities for the recruitment of women in faculty positions in Iran's higher education system. It strives to provide a comprehensive and realistic picture of the present situation and to progress effectively towards gender equality in the academic setting.

Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Study

Equal Opportunities in Recruitment

Prior to exploring the notion of equal opportunities in hiring, it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with the notions of equality and gender equality. Equality is understood as equal rights of people irrespective of gender, color, race, national and social origin, political and religious convictions, wealth, and social status (Stoilkovska et al., 2015). Similarly, gender equality entails equal treatment of women and men concerning job access, recruitment, promotion, working hours, leave, wages and working conditions, advancement, and professional education, as well as insurance and other aspects (Kostić et al., 2022). The term equal job opportunities, considered part of equal rights, reflects an organization's commitment to fair treatment of all potential employees and staff, irrespective of the characteristics required for the job (Klysing et al., 2022).

Exploring Gender Equality Theories

Gender equality in recruitment can be discussed and examined within various theoretical frameworks, such as feminist theory, change theory, equal opportunity theory, and role congruity theory. Feminist theory emphasizes the pursuit of equal citizenship rights and equal gender opportunities for both men and women (Armstrong, 2002). According to this theory, women are also human beings with natural and inherent rights unrelated to gender. Any differences between men and women are not intrinsic but rather stem from social conditions and, consequently, societal norms and gender expectations (Ahmadi,

2013). Therefore, this theory seeks changes in policies and laws to ensure gender equality in job opportunities. Change theory, as another gender equality theory, is an approach to addressing the root causes of gender inequality by altering power relations, policies, and laws. This theory leverages directives from the International Labour Organization to take necessary actions for achieving equal rights for women in the workforce (International Labour Organization, 2022). In the theory of equal opportunities, a comprehensive examination of the idea of determining destiny within a society occurs. This theory scrutinizes society's responsibility to ensure fair well-being for all individuals, regardless of race, gender, or disability, in determining their destinies. Social policies based on the theory of equal opportunities are effective for everyone who has the least chance of determining their destiny throughout their lives (Mithaug, 1996). Thus, equality of opportunities is a prevalent concept in contemporary societies, representing a dominant idea in social justice (Ferreira & Peragine, 2013). The origin of role congruity theory lies in the concepts of role theory and social role theory. While role theory assumes that expectations about roles are learned through experience and that individuals are generally aware of the expectations they hold, social role theory recognizes differences in gender roles but does not provide a definite explanation for why such differences arise and persist. Therefore, people often have stereotypical expectations for individuals in specific social positions or belonging to specific social categories. Role congruity theory contends that bias may result from perceived discrepancies between stereotypes about a social group and the expected requirements for success in a social role (Del Carmen Triana et al., 2023).

An Overview of the Employment Status of Female Faculty Members in Higher Education in Iran

According to the most recent statistics released by the Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education in 2017, among the total 275,749 female and male professors working in Iranian higher education, 91,553, i.e., 33.2%, were female and 184,200, i.e., 66.8%, were male. Even with a tripling of the number of women faculty members from 2011 to 2020 compared to the period from 2000 to 2010, the Iranian higher education system still has a long way to achieve the desired gender equality in the employment of women faculty members (Ramezani, 2021).

A Review of Previous Studies

The issue of inequality and equality regarding gender in female employment, particularly in faculty members' positions, remains a complex, multi-faceted subject area that has been investigated from various perspectives in earlier works. Most studies (Azam Azadeh & Moshtaghian, 2016; Alonso et al., 2017; Carlsson et al., 2021; Casad et al., 2021, 2022; Keshavarz, 2020; Llorens et al., 2021; Shaditalab & Ebrahimpour, 2017; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017) have focused on the obstacles and barriers that limit the role of women in these jobs. These barriers include women's exclusion from faculty promotion committees, family ties, limited physical, residential, and occupational mobility, limited social opportunities, lack of female elite recruitment strategies, gender stereotypes, discrimination during hiring, absence of supportive networks, a cold academic environment, biased judgments of equally qualified candidates, gender discrepancies, gender bias, lack of home support, patriarchy, organizational barriers, discrimination during applicant recruitment meetings, the presence of extra-academic selection criteria during hiring sessions, constant modifications in rules, and the presence of male-dominated lobbying networks. This range of factors, which includes the human dimensions and extent of gender inequality in higher education, restricts women's participation as faculty members. Other studies (Bryant et al., 2017; Cardel et al., 2020; Golubchik & Redel, 2018; Stoilkovska et al., 2015) have emphasized factors that augment equal opportunities and promote gender equality in women's work as faculty members. Such conditions include enhancing the university climate, encouraging professional development, strengthening social networks, encouraging an environment of equality in selection and hiring, abandoning dominant conventional policies, formulating women-supportive practices and policies, eliminating common gender stereotypes in societies against women's employment, supporting women's employment with childcare responsibilities, and reforming legislation to enable equal employment opportunities, all of which can pave the way for increased participation and attainment of women in this position.

As women's work and participation are major indicators in the modernization process of the national economy and social development (Azizi & Moradi, 2022), it is of major importance to determine the

determinants influencing equal opportunities in the recruitment of women to faculties. This information can guide policymakers and administrators in formulating effective strategies to promote gender justice at the university level. Moreover, an examination of current literature indicates that most studies conducted in Iran have focused on inequality and injustice in hiring and employing women in the higher education system. In contrast, this study broadens its focus by examining factors affecting the formulation of equal opportunities and considering the constructive and positive side of the issue. Furthermore, due to differences in social, cultural, political, and economic contexts among nations, it is not possible to generalize the results of a study from developed and developing countries on equal opportunities in the employment and recruitment of women in higher education to the Iranian situation alone. This cannot provide an accurate and relevant description of the situation regarding gender-equal opportunities in the recruitment of women as faculty members. Consequently, an investigation of the specific determinants affecting equal opportunities for women's hiring as professors and instructors in a context-specific manner, based on Iran's conditions and situation, is necessary. In balance, the present study is a necessary effort to determine the factors on which the realization of gender-equitable opportunities for women's employment as faculty members depends, and can contribute to improving human resource management quality and achieving fairness in higher education.

Method

Research Method

The present study adopted a qualitative approach employing the case study method. This choice was made due to our aim of exploring the various factors influencing the phenomenon of creating equal opportunities in recruiting female faculty members. The case study method is used when researchers seek to examine a specific case from different aspects or dimensions. In this method, a case can be an event, a unit, a person, an organization, a structure, or a social activity, and the scope of the case study is determined concerning the research issue or objective (Nouri & Mohammadi, 2015).

Participants in the Study

Participants in the study were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on specific criteria. The inclusion criteria for participation in the present study involved having a minimum of one year of experience in the faculty members' recruitment committees of educational departments and universities. Consequently, a total of 23 individuals were selected, considering data saturation (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants in the study

Participant Number	Gender	Experienced background in the faculty members recruitment committee	Participant Number	Gender	Experienced background in the faculty members recruitment committee
No.1	Male	1	No.13	Female	1
No.2	Male	2	No.14	Female	3
No.3	Female	1	No.15	Male	5

No.4	Female	2	No.16	Female	3
No.5	Female	1	No.17	Female	4
No.6	Female	1	No.18	Female	8
No.7	Female	2	No.19	Male	9
No.8	Female	6	No.20	Female	3
No.9	Female	2	No.21	Female	10
No.10	Female	1	No.22	Female	2
No.11	Female	8	No.23	Female	6
No.12	Female	5	-	-	-

Instrument for Collecting Data

To draw out factors that affect the development of equal opportunities for hiring female faculty members, a semi-structured interview instrument was used. Interviews ranged from 15 to 25 minutes, and with the consent of participants, sessions were taped. It should be noted that the interviewing process was conducted both face-to-face and non-face-to-face, such as telephone interviews, over about two and a half months.

Data Analysis in the Study

For data analysis, Attride-Stirling's thematic analysis method was utilized. Thematic analysis, commonly used in qualitative methods such as ethnography, grounded theory, and case study, is applied to identify, analyze, describe, and report on exploratory themes derived from the data (Ghoraishi Khorasgani & Nazarzadeh Zare, 2021). The steps of the thematic analysis method are as follows: In the first step, researchers aimed to take notes on important data by reading the interview texts. In the second step, they used a systematic framework to generate primary or foundational themes, extracting a total of 191 foundational themes. In the third step, researchers classified the foundational themes. In the fourth step, which pertains to reviewing the themes, researchers examined whether the foundational themes extracted from the interviews accurately reflected the meaning of the data. Some themes were excluded from the list due to overlap with others, while others were combined with others. In the fifth step, researchers organized and named the discovered themes from previous stages, using names that aid reader understanding. In the sixth step, researchers prepared and presented analyses in the form of a report.

Strategies for Credibility

In this study, two strategies were employed for credibility: checking by study participants and checking by peers. In the participant review strategy, researchers, at the end of each interview, recounted their overall interpretation to participants and received their confirmation or correction. In the peer review strategy, the main and sub-themes extracted from the interview texts were sent to research colleagues for review and modification, and their opinions were incorporated into the obtained themes. Ethical considerations, such as the voluntary nature of the interview process, the voluntary entry and exit of participants, ensuring the confidentiality of participants, conducting anonymous interviews, and obtaining permission for audio recording, were observed throughout the study.

Results

Based on the findings obtained from the analysis of interview content, the perspectives of experts on the factors influencing creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran consist of three inclusive themes: trans-organizational, organizational, and individual factors, and seven organizing themes, including the elimination of gender stereotypes in recruitment, legal mechanisms, supportive organizational structure in a university, supportive organizational culture in a university, consideration of individual capabilities, attention to personal characteristics, and support for women's mental and physical health (Figure 1).

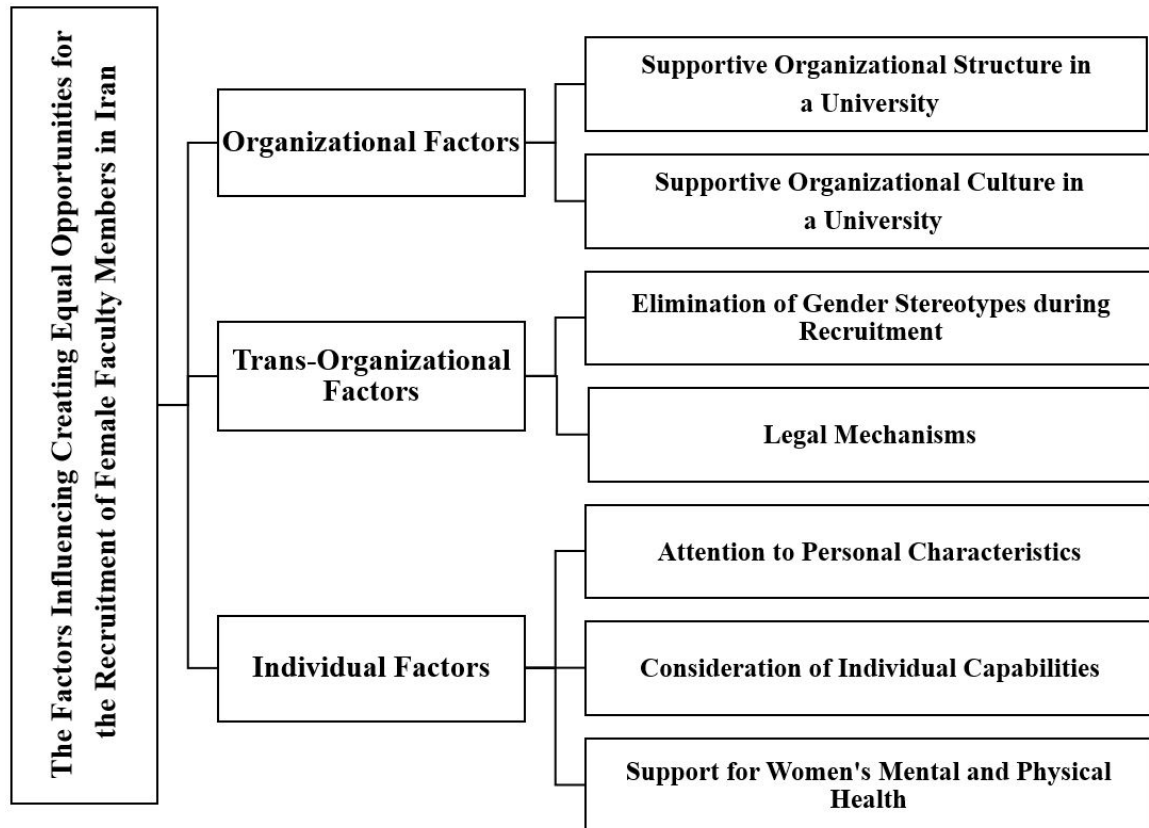


Figure 1. The Factors Influencing Creating Equal Opportunities for the Recruitment of Female Faculty Members in Iran

Trans-Organizational Factors

According to the thematic analysis of interviews with each of the study participants, the effective trans-organizational factors in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran consist of two themes: the elimination of gender stereotypes and legal mechanisms, which will be further described.

Elimination of Gender Stereotyping During Recruitment

The study participants believe that certain behaviors and prevailing attitudes in Iranian society, referred to as gender stereotypes, have helped to create gender disparities in the employment of female faculty members in universities. Therefore, to achieve equal opportunity in the employment of female faculty members, it is crucial to put an end to such issues as putting an end to negative judgments regarding women's empowerment, reducing employment segregation on a gender basis, and, in general, putting an end to gender stereotypes. Participant 3 acknowledged:

"The roles assigned to women and men in our society are different, and women are considered for secondary and less valuable positions, precisely because these tasks are seen as feminine."

Participant 19 also stated:

"Sometimes, no matter how much a lady strives to advance, she is still labeled. The derogatory attitudes towards women in our society and university environment are widespread, and while women's efforts are significant, unfortunately, these efforts go unnoticed. Sometimes, even female university staff in positions such as department managers are labeled negatively."

Legal Mechanisms

Study participants believe that to create equal opportunities for recruiting female faculty members, the presence of certain legal mechanisms, such as the development of recruitment laws compatible with gender equality, amending and eliminating gender bias in recruitment policies, and considering the multiple responsibilities of women, are important and helpful. Participant 9 stated:

"Gender equality is not evident in the recruitment laws in Iran, as priority in recruitment is given to men, considering them as the breadwinners of the family. Therefore, amending laws should be considered to create equal opportunities for recruiting female faculty members."

Participant 16 also mentioned:

"In university recruitment committees, women have no role, or if they do, their number is limited. Therefore, women are less present in professional positions such as councils and even in major decision-making."

Organizational Factors

Based on the experiences of the study participants, the effective organizational factors in creating equal opportunities in recruiting female faculty members in Iran are composed of two organizing themes, including support from the university's organizational structure and support from the university's organizational culture, which we will further describe below.

Supportive Organizational Structure in a University

Study participants believe that organizational policies such as recruitment and appointment in universities based on meritocracy, reduction of conflicts between male and female faculty members, and strengthening communication and interaction between male and female faculty members play a significant role in creating equal opportunities for recruiting female faculty members. For example, Participant 20 acknowledged:

"University management in Iran and the prevailing laws within universities each have their influential roles in creating equal opportunities for recruiting female faculty members. Often, male managers in universities tend to lean more towards recruiting other males than females."

Furthermore, Participant 11 stated:

"It is important that the university's hiring process is merit-based and expertise-based. For instance, during my recruitment as a faculty member, there were three male competitors, but I was hired."

Supportive Organizational Culture in a University

Study participants believe that the dominant culture and atmosphere within the organization, such as setting aside the idea of same-sex hiring in recruiting faculty members, the absence of discriminatory attitudes from the educational group and recruitment committee towards marital status in the recruitment of female faculty members, and a change in the recruitment committee's perspective regarding women's pregnancy as a hindrance to their performance in faculty positions, have a significant impact on creating equal opportunities in recruiting female faculty members in Iran. For instance, Participant 14 admitted:

"Individuals bring their beliefs into the organization, and there is still a notion that there is less inclination to recruit women in faculty positions and even in management positions because, in some universities, it is established that interacting with and communicating with men is easier than with women."

Additionally, Participant 3 also stated:

"We live in a society with a predominantly patriarchal culture where women are perceived as weak and men as the breadwinners who need jobs more. Therefore, the administrative system in many universities

is also highly patriarchal, and this is one of the reasons why women are recruited less as faculty members."

Individual Factors

According to the experiences of the study participants, the influential individual factors in creating equal opportunities in recruiting female faculty members in Iran are composed of three organizing themes, including consideration of individual capabilities, attention to personal characteristics and support for women's mental and physical health which we will further describe below.

Consideration of Individual Capabilities

Study participants believe that considerable attention needs to be given to the impactful abilities of women. These abilities include possessing high scientific research capabilities, strong communication skills, and high educational and research skills among female applicants. These factors are effective in creating equal opportunities for recruiting female faculty members in Iran. Participant 5 admitted:

"It has been observed that women tend to undervalue their own scientific and literary abilities compared to men and claim that we are less talented, while in reality, some women possess significantly higher capabilities compared to men when it comes to being recruited as faculty members."

Additionally, Participant 11 stated:

"If the abilities and talents of applicants are considered in the faculty recruitment process, not their gender, then equality occurs."

Attention to Personal Characteristics

Study participants believe that women possess important personality traits, such as diligence in performing educational and research tasks, high self-confidence, and adherence to rules, which can have a significant impact on creating equal opportunities for recruiting them as faculty members. For example, Participant 17 acknowledged:

"The capability of women to perform tasks more accurately than some men is high, as their level of precision is high, while some men, even if they lack expertise in a field, accept the responsibility, and it does not matter to them if they lack expertise in that field."

Furthermore, Participant 14 stated:

"The self-confidence of women and their self-esteem, and the subsequent belief in the competence of women by universities where men predominantly manage, can be influential in creating gender equality in their recruitment as faculty members."

Support for Women's Mental and Physical Health

Research participants believe that issues such as sharing family responsibilities in the lives of female faculty members, support for balancing family and career, and support from spouses and families for women's pursuit of doctoral studies play an influential role in creating equal opportunities in recruiting female faculty members. Participant 1 stated:

"The multiple roles of women in Iranian society, such as the roles of wife and mother, have prevented equal recruitment opportunities for women, so women need to be supported in this regard."

Furthermore, Participant 21 expressed:

"If a woman wants to do a Ph.D., typically due to marriage, child-rearing, and children, she has fewer opportunities. Even some families don't allow their daughters to attain higher studies compared to their sons, and some men will not allow their wives to study."

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study was conducted to identify the factors influencing the creation of equal opportunities for the recruitment of women as faculty members in Iran. The study results identified a broad spectrum of factors contributing to the establishment of equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in the Iranian higher education system, which can facilitate their inclusion. In the context of Iranian higher education, the most significant factors in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members are trans-organizational, organizational, and individual factors, which we will discuss below.

One influential factor in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in Iran was trans-organizational. These factors refer to effective policies aimed at creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in the Iranian higher education landscape. In this regard, Konrad & Linnehan (1995) acknowledged in their study that institutional or organizational factors are crucial in establishing equal opportunities, as administrative structures are influenced by institutional pressures. The trans-organizational factors in our study include the elimination of gender stereotypes in recruitment and legal mechanisms. According to the participants in our research, removing gender stereotypes in recruitment is a key driver in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of women in the Iranian higher education system. Gender stereotypes arise from societal perceptions of the different roles men and women play, and these roles are historically rooted in biological differences (Schneider & Bos, 2019). As a result, women worldwide have a lesser presence in the job market compared to men (Kray et al., 2017). These stereotypes and preconceptions create invisible barriers for women in organizations, known as the "glass ceiling" (Nazari, 2021). Some gender equality theories, such as feminist theory, emphasize achieving equal citizenship rights and opportunities regardless of gender (Armstrong, 2002). From the perspective of this theory, women are also human and possess natural and innate rights similar to men, and these rights have nothing to do with gender; they pertain to human existence, irrespective of gender (Ahmadi, 2013). Golubchik & Redel (2018) also highlighted the elimination of gender stereotypes in societies as a factor in achieving gender equality in women's recruitment. In addition to eliminating gender stereotypes in recruitment, legal mechanisms were identified as another effective driver in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in the Iranian higher education system, as mentioned by the participants in the study. Equal opportunities are a fundamental human and legal principle that refer to creating an equitable environment for all to benefit from education, recruitment, and other significant social advantages (Shirbagi et al., 2018). Therefore, creating equal opportunities must be envisioned and formulated through constitutional law and other national and international agreements that are integral to a government's legal system (Stoilkovska et al., 2015). Article 28 of the Iranian Constitution also emphasizes the role of the government in creating equal conditions for job attainment for all members of society, ensuring that everyone has the right to choose a profession that complies with Islamic principles, public interests, and the rights of others (Taj Mazinani & Yaseri, 2013). Gender equality theories, such as the theory of change and the theory of equal opportunities, suggest changing power relations, policies, and laws in society, as well as implementing social policies for the fair treatment of all individuals, regardless of race, gender, or disability, to address the root causes of gender inequality (International Labour Organization, 2022; Mithaug, 1996). In this regard, Stoilkovska et al. (2015) also proposed legal reforms as a factor in creating equal job opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their gender.

Organizational factors constitute the second significant element in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in the Iranian higher education system. These factors include a supportive organizational structure and a supportive organizational culture within a university. According to the study participants, support from the university's organizational structure is considered one of the crucial drivers in fostering equal opportunities for the recruitment of women in the Iranian higher education system. Structures, cultures, and organizational practices disproportionately disadvantage women and minority racial groups in societies (Bird & Rhoton, 2021). Thus, the roots of gender inequalities within organizations need to be explored within organizational structures (Campos-Serna et al., 2013). Organizational structure and the ensuing managerial atmosphere play a prominent role in creating both equality and inequality in job opportunities (Bush & Middlewood, 2013;

Thirusanku, 2021). For this reason, the theory of deficits posits that structural aspects governing academic environments have provided fewer opportunities and more obstacles for female academics compared to their male counterparts (Janalizadeh Choub Basti et al., 2009). Conversely, gender equality theories, such as change theory, emphasize altering power relationships and policies to combat gender inequalities within organizations. In this regard, researchers such as Casad et al. (2022); Casad et al. (2021), and Sheridan et al. (2010) highlighted in their studies the importance of improving the campus environment, nondiscriminatory recruitment, and management and leadership functions to minimize gender disparities in learning institutions. Apart from the presence of a supportive organizational structure in a university, the creation of a supportive organizational culture is identified as another significant factor that determines the establishment of equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in the Iranian higher education system, as emphasized by the study participants. Organizational culture is often defined as the shared values, perspectives, and beliefs among an organization's employees (Thirusanku, 2021). The prevailing organizational culture in most organizations reflects male desires and needs (Burkinshaw & White, 2017), leading to the emergence of the phenomenon of patriarchy or androcentrism in organizations and the subsequent prevalence of gender inequality. "Androcentrism," which focuses society around male needs, priorities, and values, positions men as the gender-neutral standard while defining women as a specific gender (Bailey et al., 2019). Iranian society is also recognized as a patriarchal community; therefore, the prevalence of androcentrism in the cultural context of Iranian universities and its impact on recruiting female faculty members are not hidden. Meanwhile, gender equality theories, such as change theory and feminist theory, emphasize changing policies and laws governing society and organizations to achieve gender equality in accessing job opportunities. In this regard, Llorens et al. (2021); Carnes et al. (2015); Sheridan et al. (2010) emphasized, in their studies, the absence of gender bias and the reduction of gender bias in favor of women in recruitment.

The final influential factor in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in the Iranian higher education system is the individual factor. This factor pertains to considering individual capabilities, paying attention to the personal characteristics of female applicants for faculty positions in universities, and supporting the mental and physical well-being of women. According to study participants, focusing on individual capabilities is one of the crucial drivers in fostering equal opportunities for the recruitment of women in the Iranian higher education system. One of the obstacles to women's access to academic positions in Iran is the stereotypical assumptions about women's competencies and the misguided evaluations of their abilities (Safiri & Baghestani, 2014). However, organizations should seek applicants based on their abilities and talents, regardless of gender, to select qualified and deserving individuals (Saadat, 2018). Some gender equality theories, such as feminist theory and equal opportunity theory, emphasize achieving equal opportunities regardless of gender and ensuring fair treatment of individuals irrespective of their race or gender. In this regard, Llorens et al. (2021) demonstrated in their study that hiring evaluation criteria contribute to gender inequality. Conversely, Bryant et al. (2017) argued in their study that focusing on the competencies of women, regardless of their gender, can contribute to improving gender equality. Another effective driver in creating equal opportunities for the recruitment of female faculty members in the Iranian higher education system is attention to personality traits, as highlighted by the study participants. There is often an assumption that women lack commitment and occupational motivation for success in a merit-based environment because female faculty members are in the minority and face numerous obstacles to career success (Taylor, 2022). However, femininity is often defined by qualities such as empathy, politeness, caring, and nurturing, and these roles are recognized in society (Calás & Smircich, 2019). Therefore, paying attention to the personality traits of female applicants can also contribute to creating equal opportunities for their recruitment. Another influential factor in creating equal opportunities for recruiting female faculty members in the Iranian higher education system is supporting the mental and physical well-being of women, as highlighted by the study participants. Women employed in environments such as universities must manage their maternal responsibilities alongside academic activities without any support (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Consequently, reasons that contribute to women's lower presence in science and academic positions, and hinder their career advancement, include childbirth, childbearing, and childcare, globally recognized as the "motherhood penalty" (Arêas et al., 2020). On the other hand, societal gender norms, which emphasize a woman's importance solely

in her maternal duties, have persisted despite the industrialization of societies, preventing women's entry into the workforce (Schneider & Bos, 2019). Traditional gender roles associate women with "caretaker" roles and men with "breadwinner" roles (Kray et al., 2017). The combination of child-rearing and employment with rights poses a significant challenge for many women (Looze, 2017). However, in gender equality theories, such as role congruity theory, bias may arise from perceived mismatches between stereotypes about a social group and the expected requirements for success in a social role (Del Carmen Triana et al., 2023). According to equal opportunities theory, societal policies play a significant role in the fair treatment of individuals regardless of race, gender, and disability in determining their destinies (Mithaug, 1996). In this regard, researchers such as Shaditalab & Ebrahimpour (2017); Yousaf & Schmiede (2017) identified women's responsibilities in the family, the extensive scope of educational and family activities, and insufficient support for women at home as reasons for the low number of women in academic faculties and their scarce presence at higher levels of universities. Conversely, Cardel et al. (2020) emphasized, in their study, that supporting women's employment with a commitment to childcare is one of the factors contributing to gender equality.

Implications and Limitations

Enabling the creation of equal opportunities for the appointment of women faculty members is considered a necessity for Iran's higher education. Our study findings reveal that, firstly, feminist theory, change theory, equal opportunity theory, and role congruity theory justify equal opportunities in appointing women faculty members. Secondly, even as the Iranian constitution favors ensuring equal opportunities for women's recruitment, the pervasiveness of patriarchal culture within the Iranian higher education sector has intensified gender inequality. Thirdly, ensuring equal opportunities for recruiting female faculty members in Iran entails a change of legislation at an institutional level in addition to reforming the university culture and practices. Although the current theoretical and practical study can be of assistance to higher education managers and policymakers, it has its limitations. Initially, data were collected based on a qualitative method, and consequently, employing more diverse study methodologies can provide an improved understanding of the factors controlling the provision of equal opportunities for women's appointments as faculty members. Second, the quantity and type of participants in the study may limit the generalizability of the findings. Thus, including the views of other stakeholders in higher education, such as female candidates and university managers, would provide a fuller understanding of the determinants influencing the establishment of equal opportunities for women's employment. Therefore, incorporating the perspectives of other stakeholders in universities, such as university managers and women applicants, could lead to a sharper insight into forces shaping the realization of equal opportunities for women's employment.

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The authors of the study declared the following points within the framework of the “COPE-Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors”

Funding: No funding was received from any institution or organisation for this study.

Acknowledgement: ...

Ethical Clearance: The authors received approval from their institutions.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed to the research equally.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The authors have no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship, or publication of this article.