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## RESEARCH ARTICLE | SPECIAL ISSUE: WOMEN'S STUDIES

# Iranian Women's Leisure Time Dilemmas: from the Experts' Perspective

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**Abstract:** Leisure is an opportunity for self-development, self-definition and community rejuvenation, acquisition of experience and development of social interactions. However, it is "relatively" free and constrained by factors such as gender, cultural and social policies governing societies. The current study is aimed at examining married women's leisure problems in Tehran from the viewpoint of experts. The research method is qualitative while the Thematic Analysis is used for data analysis and the illustrated problems. 23 semi-structured interviews conducted with three groups of experts (policymakers, executives and university professors). Two global themes of "Intra-governmental" and "Extra-governmental" problems are taken through the experts on the leisure problems of the target group. "Marginalization", "inequality and discrimination", "scattered policy making and implementation", "demonstrative policies" and "apathy" are "Intra-governmental problems" whereas "restriction", "excess and negligence in leisure activities" and "body as project" are forming "Extra-governmental problems". The results of this study illustrate that leisure problems for married women in Tehran have a cultural root and are caused by "cultural neglect and misunderstanding". Thus, cultural solutions can provide a framework for other solutions to function.

**Keywords:** Leisure Time; Leisure Problems; Women; Cultural Policy.

## Introduction

Leisure time is an exceptional opportunity to transmit culture and foster social cohesion and happiness. The importance of leisure time is so significant that satisfaction from leisure time activities is one of the influential factors in life satisfaction (Lapa, 2013) and the quality of life (Brajša-Žganec, Merkaš & Šverko, 2011).

Gender is one of the prominent forms of social segregation that leads to heterogeneity and inequality in leisure activities (Mattingly & Blanchi, 2003; Mi-Hye, 2006). The amount and manner of spending leisure time is influenced by gender, with men having more leisure time than women (Safiri & Modiri, 2011; Charmes,

2015; Office for National Statistics, 2017). In addition, the lack of boundary between leisure activities and house chores, as well as the feeling of self-reproach of married women after leisure time show that this concept is ambiguous for women (Mattingly & Blanchi, 2003; Safiri & Modiri, 2011). Russell also points out the disruption and fragmentation of women's leisure because the burden on women to take care of the family is heavier than that of men (Yoder, 2006). Among women, it seems that married ones are more concerned than others about the issue of sharing their leisure time with others (e.g. their husbands and children).

The statistics show that Iranian women spend most of their time on personal care, housekeeping, and mass media (Statistical Center of Iran, 2016). So far, two bills, namely "Cultural-Social Policies for Women's Sports in Iran" (Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, 1997) and "Policies on Improving Leisure Time for Women and Girls" (Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, 2003), which focused on women's leisure in Iran, have been enacted. However, these two bills were enacted too many years ago i.e. in the late 90s and early 2000s. Moreover, it is likely that they were not formed based on careful investigation of women's leisure time, and therefore, the policy maker's desirable situation was significantly different from the real one. For example, sports as one of the active forms of leisure time activities was considered by the policymaker, but in practice, sports is one of the last two activities of the women on a daily basis; so it is not welcomed by women as was intended by the policymaker (Statistical Center of Iran, 2016).

Therefore, this study examines women's leisure problems from the viewpoint of experts (three groups of policymakers, executives and university professors) with the aim of identifying problems that can lead to more accurate policy making. Since every state, at any historical stage, is faced with the issue of leisure, whether in terms of providing the infrastructure and facilities needed to improve the quality of leisure services or in terms of superstructure and culture.

In order for the governments' actions to be correct and measured, they have to make policies that are appropriate and commensurate with the desired goals. In fact, policy making is one of the first steps which are taken by governments to improve the situations; in this regard, correctly identifying the problems is a vital step. Dunn identified the problem as an inaccessible need, value, or opportunity; access to which can be improved through public action. Information about the problems that are supposed to be solved by policies plays an important role in policy analysis, and incomplete or inaccurate information can cause the big error of "determining the wrong problem" (Dunn, 2015).

Shaw regards patriarchy and traditional gender relations as limiting factors for women in leisure and believes that women's leisure provides an opportunity to counter gender constraints (Shaw, 1994). Arab-Moghaddam et al. found that the structure of the society, problems at home, economic issues, social security, leisure's cultural importance, personal time management, cultural traditions, personal responsibilities, skills and personal interests, and personal safety and health are the factors that limit women's leisure

in Iran (Arab-Moghaddam, Henderson & Sheikholeslami, 2007). The findings of a study by Keshkar et al. show that for the women in Tehran, structural factors, individual and interpersonal factors, respectively, influence participation in recreational sport activities (Keshkar et al., 2012). While examining leisure of immigrant women in Canada, Suto believes that many women generally define leisure as something that provides their physical and mental health (Suto, 2013). Khairrussalleh and Hussein examined how Malaysian women use Malaysian amusement parks and found that women are less likely to engage in leisure activities than men; because of family commitments and other restrictions (Khairrussalleh & Hussein, 2017). Gajewska and Piskrzyńska have evaluated factors such as the price of facilities, access to facilities as well as peace and tranquility during leisure and sports activities being influential (Gajewska & Piskrzyńska, 2017). Thus, most cases of past researches on women's leisure time have described how and when leisure time is being spent, and they lack qualitative and analytical approaches or focus on the leisure issues of this study's target group.

### Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine women's leisure problems from the viewpoints of experts.

### Materials and Methods

The research method in this study is qualitative. The method of data analysis is Thematic Analysis, and the thematic networks are presented at the end of the research. The thematic networks include the basic themes (codes and key points of the text), the

organizing themes (themes derived from the composition and refinement of the basic themes), and the global themes (superordinate themes encapsulating the principal metaphors in the text as a whole) (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

In the first phase of the study, after reviewing the relevant literature and collecting primary information, the interview guide was developed using the expertise of the research team, and the questions were sent to the interviewees prior to the interview. Semi-structured interviews represent the data collection technique of this study. With the help of a non-probability sampling that continued until attaining 'thematic saturation', a total of 23 people (female = 17, male = 6, mean age = 48 years) were interviewed: including 10 policy makers, 11 university professors, and 9 executive managers. The institutions that were surveyed include the Council of Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Expediency Discernment Council, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, National Olympic Committee of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic Consultative Assembly, Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, and Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs. These centers were related to leisure, women, and policymaking. As for the level of education of the participants, 11 people had master's degrees and 12 people had doctoral degrees.

For analysis, "open coding" was used to develop data categorization and "axial coding" was used to relate the categories (Chun Tie, Birks & Francis, 2019). The data were analyzed first by the researcher and then by using MAXQDA 18 software.

To ensure the validity of the results, the triangulation method was used; since there is no single method, theory or observer which can capture what is important in reality (Denzin, 1989). *Data triangulation* (the practice of collecting data from numerous and different centers which are related to the issue being studied, and from dissimilar people having different educations and track records of academic, administrative, and policymaking positions, as well as reviewing policy documents related to women's leisure), *investigator triangulation* (coding done by two investigators simultaneously) and *theory triangulation* (glancing over theories and conceptions related to leisure in order to achieve conceptual sensitivity) were used.

## Results

The results from the analysis of the interviews showed that the experts see and define women's leisure issues differently. Interviewees' definitions and interpretations of these issues have led us to provide a categorization that can cover different aspects of the subject. Hence, in the following parts, the data is presented based on the discovered categories on women's leisure issues. These findings are derived from a total of 68 initial statements that were used to form the 16 basic themes. Then they were divided into 8 organizing themes and 2 global themes. An example of transforming initial statements into global themes is illustrated in Table 1.

## Discussion

The issues which were discussed by the experts fall within the two global themes of "Intra-

governmental" and "Extra-governmental" problems. Intra-governmental problems are those that are often exacerbated by government institutions and influenced by policymaking and implementation done by government institutions. Extra-governmental problems are the factors outside the government's involvement. That is, they are not a direct part of the government institutions and are not strengthened by them, but rather, the non-governmental body of society controls them. It is important to note, however, that no clear boundary can be drawn between these two factors since extra-governmental issues can be influenced by government decisions, and vice versa. The "Intra-governmental" and "Extra-governmental" problems of married women's leisure in Tehran are illustrated in Fig 1.

## Intra-governmental Problems

### *Marginalization*

The participants in this study have identified one of the leisure issues of married women in Tehran as marginalization by the two factors of "politicization" and "economization". Politicization is when women's leisure time is marginalized by political issues. In this case, the problems related to women's leisure are overtly viewed from the viewpoint of politics; or too much attention to politics causes leisure to be ignored. Managers' political self-interest, political parties' interests taking precedence over women's interests among managers, the politicization of women's presence in stadiums, NGOs' inactivity about women's leisure due to their politicization are instances of politicization.

Moreover, the relationship between leisure and economic system must not cause leisure,



which is an element of culture (Cordes 2013), being overshadowed by economic factors. Economic factors have both a deterrent and a facilitating effect on leisure time. The economic problems of societies can affect leisure time at macro-meso-micro levels (Turner, 2010); according to the participants, economic concerns were so influential in the leisure time of target group women (and their spouses at micro-level and meso-level, i.e., family) that it made leisure less prominent. Men's low income and the economic dependence of married women on their husbands (because of alimony) will lead to a decrease in the per capita cultural consumption, loss of leisure diversity, forgetting the culture of sports and even using leisure time for earning money for family. In addition, macro-level economic issues, which occur due to inappropriate economic policies, also prevent governments from addressing leisure needs. As a result, leisure becomes economized. Considering the two views presented by Ibn-e-Khaldun and Maslow regarding desires and needs, it can be concluded that leisure is at the top of the pyramid and it is one of the higher needs (Cordes, 2013). When the governing system fails to meet the low-level needs, the chance to meet the leisure needs is lost; as a result of economic problems, women's leisure will go on the sideline.

### ***Inequality and Discrimination***

Inequality and injustice exist in the area of leisure based on gender. This is particularly traumatic for sports, according to the participants, and it affects development plans. The reason is that the sports mission, goals, and functions are unique, so sport plays an important role in the realization of countries' development plans (Fasanghari et al., 2018). Injustice and discrimination can lead to a sense

of "relative deprivation" which means perceived discrepancy between the value expectations and the value capabilities of the environment (Gurr, 2015). This occurs at two levels of "resources and facilities" and "discriminatory policies".

Women being minorities in terms of access to facilities, less per capita sports premises for women compared to men, the dearth of parks specifically built for women in proportion to their population, and the lack of required standards in women's sports venues are factors regarding resources and facilities which lead to inequality and discrimination in women's leisure. Low funding for women's sports, restricting sports for girls in public spaces, policymaking with a view of absolute freedom for men versus deterrent for women, restricting leisure time for women such as entering stadiums, indoor and confined spaces for women's leisure in artificial environments due to the obligatory hijab (which is endorsed by the governing system) are factors of discriminatory policies which lead to inequality and discrimination in women's leisure.

### ***Scattered Policy Making and Implementation***

The policies adopted by a political system, although in different areas, must be aligned in the same direction; otherwise, the political system of societies will become fragmented. In other words, a single spirit is expected to dominate the policies. The lack of unified strategy in the country's cultural policies and women's leisure policies has become problematic, according to the research samples. This is due to the two factors of "person being the center of policy making and

implementation" and "the non-functionality of the legal system against the religious system".

Incorrect interpretations of the Islamic principles among policymakers, managers making decision based on individual tastes, individual-centered policymaking (versus policymaking based on common sense) lead to a person being the center of policy making and implementation. Faqihs' administration over the society that supersedes the law, weakness of law against religious jurisprudence, and dominance of unwritten conventions lead to non-functionality of the legal system against the religious system.

### ***Demonstrative Policies***

Policies are made to solve problems and the first step in policy making is identifying those problems. The adopted policies are expected to be implemented and lead to resolving the identified problems. But sometimes policies themselves become problems. This happens in several ways.

The first is when the needs of the target group are not assessed. One of the most important tools for policy making is need assessment; and weak need assessment makes it difficult to identify the policy problem (Moshabaki & Khademi, 2008). For instance, due to differences between districts and neighborhoods in Tehran metropolis and the lack of need assessment in every separate neighborhood, the specific cultural requirements and conditions of each district are not taken into account. Other factors are superficial understanding of the law (such as law about sports activities for government employees which are reduced to only holding sports matches), short-term attention to women issues by the governments, short-term

and seasonal planning in government institutions, disregard for the legal and macro-level capacities available in the country (such as Sports' Supreme Council for Government Employees (The Council of Ministers, 1997)), managers' disregard for the existing documents about leisure, and passed upstream policies being inactive. All of these factors make enacted policies demonstrative and nonfunctional.

### ***Apathy***

Participants acknowledged that women's leisure suffers from apathy. Apathy toward women leisure appears in two ways: "social apathy" and "policy apathy".

Social apathy happens when actors do not try to improve the undesirable condition in which themselves, their relatives or others are living (Almadar, Javadi & Rahmani, 2018). In the case of women's leisure of the target group, the participants stated that there is no sisterhood attitude among women in the body of the governing system to reach communal interests. So, passivity and indifference toward women issues among women in the body of the governing system is prevalence. Besides, women are not united and univocal to take top management positions to have a greater impact on women's issues including women's leisure. Regarding the policy apathy; devising only two policies focusing on women's leisure which date back to the last decades, and these two were devised regardless of recent developments in Iranian society and the international community is the example of apathy. However, the recent development in technology and cyberspace has greatly affected the leisure phenomena and has created different circumstances for leisure compared

to the last decades. Experts believe that not only at policy making step but also in implementation we can witness apathy toward women's leisure among managers and institutes of the governing system. This issue is especially true in developing countries such as Iran.

### **Extra-governmental Problems**

#### ***Restriction***

The participants in this study believe that women's leisure is restricted: in two forms of "role-related restriction" and "self-driven restrictions".

The role-related restriction is defined for women by the cultural system, and gender roles are very prominent in it. Other research studies have already referred to the impact of structural gender roles that restrict leisure for women (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Okumdi & Asiazobor, 2011). Not only gender roles restrict women's leisure, Shaw also believes that the restrictions women face in their leisure are related to structural-social gender roles and that leisure activities on their own restrict women; because these activities intensify gender roles which are based on hegemony (Shaw, 1994). The implications that common beliefs have on gender roles—such as the responsibility of caring for family members, full-time motherhood, full-time housekeeping, and mother as the sole caretaker of children; in short, unequal gender division of labor—create role-related restrictions.

As for self-driven restrictions, we should say that women themselves have restrictive notions of themselves. Various kinds of leisure restrictions imposed on women by social conventions are even reproduced by women themselves. The experts' perceptions

correspond with what Henderson et al. (1989) indicate: i.e. external constraints that are situational or environmental as well as internal constraints that include individuals' perceptions of their personal capacities and abilities, their knowledge of opportunities, women's beliefs about their right to leisure and their interest in activities (Harrington, Dawson & Bolla, 1992). Women's traditional understanding of gender division of labor in life, not claiming the right to leisure for themselves, feeling of betraying children among women if they spend leisure time for themselves, considering leisure activities as being useless for themselves, and feeling self-contempt among women after spending leisure time for themselves are factors which have been turned into beliefs by women themselves and thus intensifying self-driven restrictions.

#### ***Excess and Negligence in Leisure Activities***

The experts who participated in this study believe that leisure activities of the target women are repetitious and they are using limited types of leisure activities. That is, when some types of leisure activities are used "excessively" and other possible types of leisure activities are "neglected".

Giving too much attention to beauty and body's demonstrative aspect, spending too much time on shopping, excessive attention to modeling, the dominance of the culture of consumerism, excessive cyberspace leisure and usage of the media would cause indulgence in some leisure activities while neglecting activities such as charity that has an impact on building the community (Arai & Pedlar, 1997). Statistics also show that volunteering and charity activities are not a priority for women when spending leisure time (Statistical Center

of Iran, 2016). Conversation and the possibility of establishing new relationships or strengthening the previous relationships are other capacities in leisure which according to the participants have been neglected for married women leisure in Tehran. In fact, one of the leisure functions is to strengthen social interactions, and the social aspect of leisure—alongside the individual aspects—is also considered important.

### ***Body as Project***

The interviewees suggest that target group (married women in Tehran) treat their bodies deliberately as projects; as Harris (2004) has said, 'surfaces on which we can display signs of belongings and difference' (Harris 2004). From this point of view, we refer to leisure activities focused on the beauty of the body as a project. The participants believe that changes made to the body are done by planning, like the plot of a play. The project happens in two forms: "disorder in defining the values" and "disorder in defining a legitimate body."

In this case, leisure time is spent on making the body beautiful in an excessive manner, with the goal of receiving admiration from others, displaying excellence and obtaining dignity as a reward. Therefore, beauty becomes more important than health and activities like sports are done for beauty, not improving health. Which in fact, this beauty is perceived as false and unrealistic by the participants in the research. For the participants, transcendent values such as moving towards divine growth and perfection are important.

### **Conclusion**

Leisure is a relatively free opportunity for self-development, self-definition, community

rejuvenation, acquisition of experience and development of social interactions (Kuentzel 2000; Lobo 1999; Arai & Pedlar 1997) is constrained by factors such as gender, cultural and social policies governing societies. In Iran, as a society whose constitution emphasizes the role of the state in guaranteeing women's rights in all dimensions in accordance with Islamic principles, and obliges the government to create favorable conditions for the development of the woman's personality and the restoration of her material and moral rights (retrieved from Act 21 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran), identifying women's leisure issues as a prerequisite for solving problems is essential. This study, which was conducted through interviews with experts, showed that married women's leisure time problems in Tehran are influenced not only by the inconsistent body of government actors but also by non-governmental factors.

The results of this study indicate that although leisure of the target group is primarily a cultural matter, its problems are intertwined with other systems (such as political, economic, religious, etc.). This complicates leisure-related issues and doubles the required efforts for alleviating leisure problems. However, pursuing these problems through cultural solutions remains a top priority, and this study shows that leisure problems for married women in Tehran have a cultural root. Thus, cultural solutions can provide a framework for other solutions to function. This claim, however, does not mean reducing solutions to merely cultural. Rather, it seems that improving the leisure time of married women in Tehran is possible with the focus on cultural approach and using the capacities of other systems.



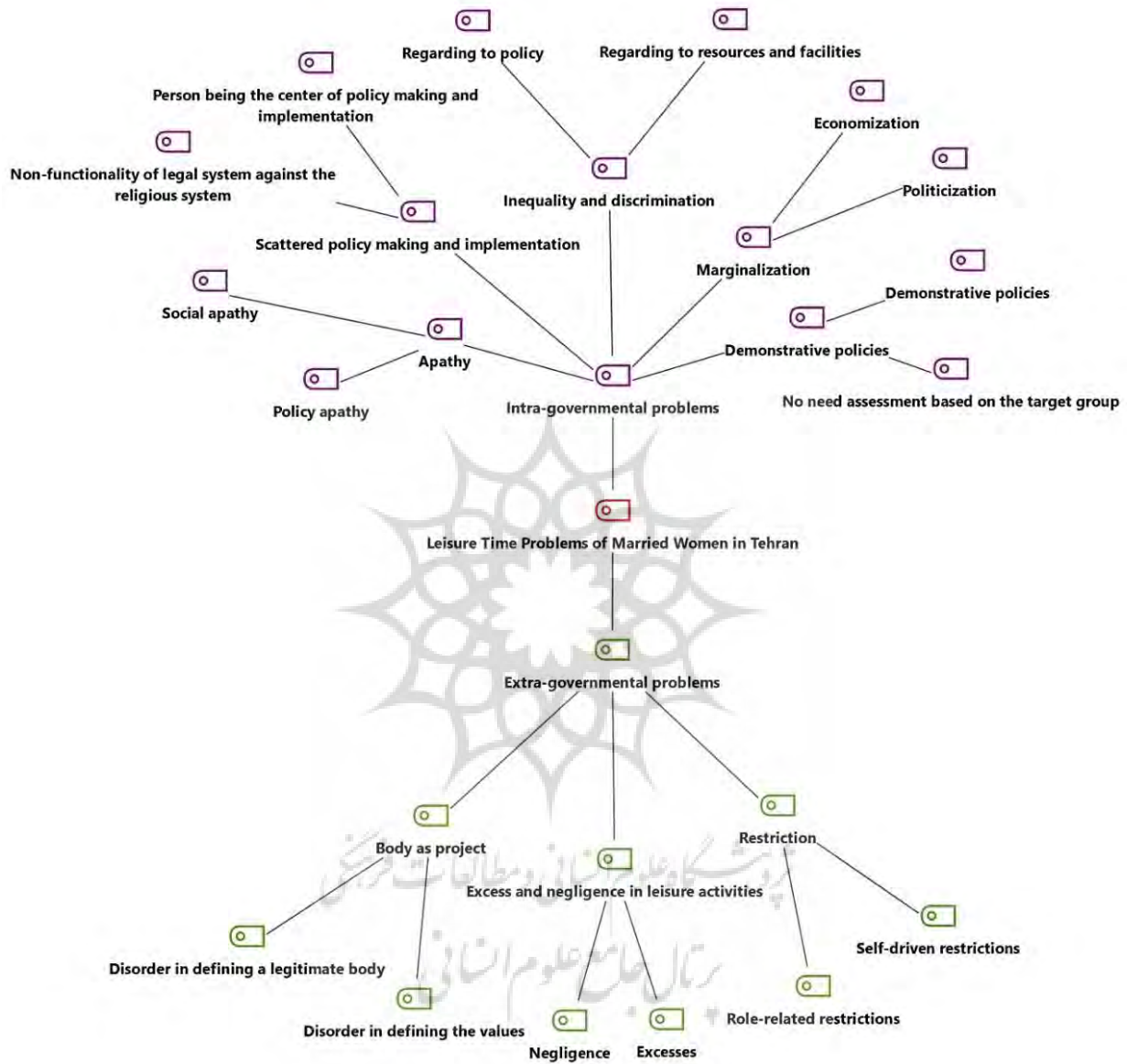
Although economic and political changes are necessary to eliminate the marginalization of leisure for women, leisure should not be defined only by the political and economic systems, since the cultural aspect of leisure is the most important among all the aspects. Leading the attention of the managers and policymakers toward leisure's cultural aspects, providing a cultural definition of leisure to change their perceptions about it, and attracting attention to leisure's cultural functions will make the change possible; i.e. will make the cultural aspect of leisure become the foremost aspect. Even reducing restrictive policies for women and establishing gender equality and positive discrimination for the benefit of women in leisure opportunities (such as expanding women's parks), given the decisive role of women in the prevailing Iranian culture because of childbearing, is another way to improve target women's leisure conditions, which is feasible at first via cultural methods and then requires building infrastructures at macro-level. It seems that apathy toward women's leisure, whether in the social or the policy dimension, arises from cultural problems. Thus, employing solutions related to cultural systems along with capacities from other systems such as economic, political and religious will be effective in improving the situation.

Women's leisure sociability and redefining the social values to exercise the right to leisure

for self through childhood education by agents of socialization such as parents and formal educational institutions can innate valuing themselves and recognizing and practicing rights that women have alongside their duties. Educating and training children to perceive their mothers' right to have independent leisure is also effective. Change of men's attitude towards greater responsibility in housekeeping and caring for others via formal and informal training is useful to establish gender equality in leisure, though it takes time. In the meantime, using NGOs' capacities and more importantly, strengthening the relationship between NGOs and women and, of course, government control over them to prevent doubt about politicization is also effective.

Overall, it seems that leisure problems for married women in Tehran are caused by "cultural neglect and misunderstanding" about "woman" and also about "leisure" itself at macro-meso-micro levels. Therefore, alleviating target women's leisure problems requires action at all three levels; government and its subsets related to policy making and legislation (at macro-level), family, media related organizations, NGOs, women's or leisure executive institutions (at meso-level), policy makers, managers, even the member of family such as children, men and women themselves (at micro-level).

Fig 1. Thematic Network of Leisure Problems - MAXQDA Software Output.



**Table 1. An example of the process of converting an initial statement into a universal theme**

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme	Initial Statement
Intra-governmental problems	Marginalization	Politicization	Managers' political self-interest
			Political parties' interests taking precedence over women's interests among managers
			Politicization of women's presence in stadiums
			NGOs' inactivity in women's leisure, due to their politicization
		Economization	Inappropriate economic policies
			Men's low income (as providers of the alimony for women)
			Decrease in the per capita cultural consumption
			Forgetting the culture of sports
			Using leisure time for earning money for the family

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## مسائل اوقات فراغت زنان ایرانی: دیدگاه کارشناسان

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**چکیده:** اوقات فراغت فرصتی برای خود شکوفایی، جوانمندسازی جامعه، کسب تجربه و گسترش تعاملات اجتماعی است. اما اوقات فراغت «نسبتاً» آزاد است و با عواملی نظیر جنسیت و سیاست‌های فرهنگی و اجتماعی حاکم بر جوامع محدود می‌شود. این تحقیق با هدف دستیابی به مسائل اوقات فراغت زنان متأهل شهر تهران از نگاه متخصصان انجام شده است. روش پژوهش کیفی بوده است. در این پژوهش از تحلیل مضمون برای تحلیل داده‌ها استفاده شده و شبکه مضامینی از مسائل ترسیم شده است. ۲۳ مصاحبه نیمه‌ساخت یافته با متخصصان در سه گروه سیاست‌گذاران، مدیران اجرایی و اساتید دانشگاه انجام شده است. یافته‌ها نشان داد که ۲ مضمون فراگیر «درون‌حاکمیتی» و «برون‌حاکمیتی» رویکرد متخصصان را نسبت به مسائل جامعه هدف تشکیل می‌دهد. «حاشیه‌ای شدن»، «بی‌عدالتی و تبعیض»، «سیاست‌گذاری و عملکرد جزیره‌ای»، «سیاست‌های نمایشی» و «بی‌تفاوتی» مضامین تشکیل‌دهنده مسائل درون‌حاکمیتی هستند. «محدودیت»، «افراط و تفریط در فعالیت‌های فراغتی» و «بدن به‌عنوان پروژه» مسائل برون‌حاکمیتی اوقات فراغت زنان متأهل شهر تهران را تشکیل می‌دهند. این مطالعه نشان داد که مسائل اوقات فراغت زنان متأهل شهر تهران دارای ریشه فرهنگی و ناشی از «کم‌توجهی و کژفهمی فرهنگی» است. به نظر می‌رسد راهکارهای فرهنگی می‌تواند بستری برای عملکرد سایر راهکارها فراهم آورد.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** اوقات فراغت، مسائل اوقات فراغت، زنان، سیاست‌گذاری فرهنگی



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