



Woman in Culture and Arts

Rethinking identity in the light of spiritual purpose: Phenomenology of Female Students' Lived Experiences in Jihadi Camps

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

The term “Jihadi camp” refers to voluntary endeavors of a variety of organizations, including university students, to provide material and spiritual services in underprivileged areas. These efforts are motivated by a sense of duty, selflessness, and the ideals of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Unpaid labor, challenges, and a distinctive blend of spiritual and physical exertion are the hallmarks of these programs, which have lasted for more than two decades. They are frequently located in rural or impoverished areas.

Key points include:

- Jihadi camps are the most prevalent and cohesive form of voluntary activities for university students, regardless of gender.
- These camps are uncommon experiences in other aspects of life, as they necessitate hard labor and sacrifices in difficult circumstances.
- They provide a blend of spiritual growth and labor, particularly for individuals who reside in rural areas.
- The camps prioritize religious sacrifice and selflessness, and they cultivate a sense of religious awakening in all participants, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds.
- These camps offer women a rare opportunity to engage in these activities, which is more significant for them than for men, as a result of cultural norms.

The necessity of comprehending the experiences of participants, especially women, from a sociological perspective is underscored by the persistent interest in these camps, despite the absence of material rewards. Studying these experiences can provide insight into the development of identities and social relationships, with a particular emphasis on the influence of religiously motivated voluntary activities on the perceptions of individuals throughout their lifetimes in Iranian society. This study concentrates on the experiences of female university students who have participated in jihadi camps on multiple times.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to analyze the lived experiences of female university students from Tehran who participated in jihadi camps in the summer of 2023. The interpretive approach of Van Manen, which is a component of the phenomenological method, is implemented to ascertain the significance of these students' experiences. The research concentrates on students who have participated in the programs on multiple occasions, with the exception of first-time participants. A purposive sampling method was employed to select 21 female students for interviews, and supplementary interviews were conducted for verification. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, lasting one to two hours each, and analyzed using open coding and categorization. The extracted themes were sent to participants for confirmation to ensure reliability.

Results

Several essential themes can be identified in the experiences of female students in jihadi camps, which demonstrate a distinctive combination of individual autonomy and collective engagement:

1. Fusion of Collectivity and Individuality: The camp fosters individual development while simultaneously advocating for collective objectives. In a communal, shared environment with limited privacy and a structured schedule, participants must reconcile

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personal responsibilities.

2. **Detachment from Academic Status:** Participants recognize that their academic credentials are of minimal significance in confronting contemporary challenges. The importance of practical, on-the-spot decision-making surpasses that of theoretical knowledge.
3. **Integrating Leisure and Work for Spiritual Fulfilment:** In the camps, leisure is perceived as an opportunity for spiritual growth, reflection, and connection to divine values. Work is integrated into a more extensive quest for spiritual fulfillment.
4. **Understanding Regional Norms:** In order to engage with diverse communities in a meaningful manner, participants must be aware of regional norms. This necessitates the capacity to establish positive relationships, cultural sensitivity, and flexibility.
5. **Breaking Class Barriers:** The camps allow participants to transcend conventional class distinctions and form new identities that are founded on shared values, cooperation, and individual abilities, creating dynamic social networks.

In summary, the study reveals how the camps encourage a shift from fixed academic and social identities to more flexible modes of interaction, decision-making, personal development, and spiritual contemplation.

Conclusion

The experience of participating in jihadist camps for female students can be characterized as a pathway of identity transformation and self-discovery, leading to profound and meaningful changes in individuals' identity patterns. These modifications can be attributed to five primary factors:

The identities of individuals in jihadi camps lead to significant transformations in their identities. Key points include:

1. **Detachment from Previous Identities:** Participants from urban environments, with a variety of educational, occupational, and social status backgrounds, temporarily relinquished their previous identities during their time at the camp. In this shared environment, the significance of social class and status is diminished, and individuals are regarded according to their contributions and endeavors to the community.
2. **Change in Identity Patterns:** The camp experience fosters a change in identity. Participants define themselves not by their social status or occupation, but rather by the character of their service, empathy, cooperation, and sacrifice. Working in challenging conditions fosters a deeper understanding of their own capabilities.
3. **Spiritual Purpose:** Many participants are driven by spiritual objectives, including the pursuit of personal development or the assistance of others. These moral and spiritual intentions propel them beyond self-interest, fostering a sense of spiritual identity and a connection to society and others.
4. **Self-Discovery:** The camp experience fosters self-discovery, where individuals gain a deeper understanding of their values, abilities, and capacity for overcoming challenges. They begin to acknowledge their capacity to have a positive influence on others, which results in a more robust sense of self.
5. **New and Enduring Identity:** The development of a new, enduring identity is the result of a combination of detachment from previous identities, identity change, spiritual purpose, and self-discovery. This transformation includes spiritual values, a sense of social responsibility, and a deeper understanding of shared life, leading to lasting changes in how individuals perceive themselves and interact with the world.

The results show that, as per theorists like Anthony Giddens, the contemporary world's events and phenomena induce a reevaluation of individual and collective identity. These modifications to individuals' identities become permanent over time.

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