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Discussions and interventions

An autoethnography of affective–moral dilemmas in writing about authoritarian and patriarchal contexts

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Abstract

Research ethics teach us how to protect the people we portray in our studies. Yet while researchers hold the power to harm participants through what they write, they are also vulnerable in the writing process itself. In this autoethnographic piece, I revisit six moments from my recent fieldwork in Iran and reflect on the affective and moral tensions I experienced while turning lived encounters into academic arguments. Focusing on research conducted within an authoritarian theocratic system, I describe the moral weight involved in portraying state officials and religious authorities. I also reflect the tensions I felt as a male feminist researcher writing about women's lives and gender justice in a patriarchal context. By foregrounding the writing phase, this paper argues that vulnerability does not end with fieldwork but intensifies when interpretation becomes public and consequential.

Keywords: research ethics; autoethnography; authoritarian contexts; affective-moral dilemmas; patriarchy

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Introduction

Fieldwork in human geography is often associated with discovery and connection (Hubbard et al. 2001), but it is also an ethical and emotional undertaking. While moral and affective tensions can arise in many research settings, they tend to intensify in authoritarian and patriarchal contexts, where safety, access, and interpretation are negotiated under constraint. In such environments, political control and social surveillance shape not only what can be said and done in the field (Seljamaa & Siim 2016), but also how researchers later make sense of their experiences when writing about them (Bluvstein et al. 2021).

The researcher is not a detached observer but a participant in the research process (Hubbard et al. 2001), and emotions are part of how knowledge is produced (Emerald & Carpenter 2015). Seljamaa and Siim (2016) suggest that in sensitive settings, silence and hesitation can be as meaningful as explicit statements. Unease, fear, or doubt may draw attention to ethical tensions that are not immediately visible in interview transcripts or field notes (Munkejord 2009). Within an autoethnographic approach, these moments can be understood as part of the researcher's ongoing negotiation of responsibility and consequence (Ellis 2007).

This autoethnographic piece grows out of my experience as a male researcher studying tourism development, social transformation, resilience, and gender justice in the Islamic Republic of Iran (see Nikjoo 2025; Nikjoo et al. 2025a; Nikjoo et al. 2025b). Conducting fieldwork and later writing about social change within a theocratic political system and patriarchal social relations generated recurring affective and moral dilemmas that extended from interviews and observations into the stages of analysis and writing. As Steadman (2023) notes, vulnerability does not necessarily end with fieldwork; it can deepen during writing, as memory, anticipation, and moral reflection return. Ethical practice in such contexts therefore requires ongoing consideration of care, anonymity, and consequence, rather than a one-time reliance on procedural consent (Tolich 2010), particularly when institutional ethics frameworks prioritize participant protection while overlooking the affective and moral risks borne by researchers themselves (Sherry 2013).

Through this autoethnographic reflection, I show that the most difficult ethical moments of my research did not occur only in interviews or observations, but during writing. This piece shows how emotions, hesitation, and responsibility shaped the ways I represented people in my published work.

Political and gendered context of the fieldwork

I conducted my fieldwork in Iran, a political system that Seyfi and Hall (2019) describe as a complex hybrid of theocratic authority and limited democratic structure. Although the constitution allows for electoral participation, real political power rests with an unelected clerical elite that defines the boundaries of acceptable public life (Nikjoo 2025). This dual structure produces a system in which ideological control coexists with pragmatic governance (Seyfi & Hall 2019). At its core lies a strong ideological system that regulates citizens' bodies and everyday practices through biopolitical control (Rahbari et al. 2019). Mandatory hijab, restrictions on public gatherings, and gender segregation in education, tourism, and employment are among its most visible factors (Nikjoo et al. 2022). In the tourism sector, these controls extend to the regulation of

beaches, accommodation facilities, and cultural performances, where conformity to Islamic moral codes is legally enforced (Seyfi et al. 2018).

Many government employees, at both national and regional levels, operate within this ideological system without necessarily endorsing its principles (Seyfi & Hall 2019). They often move between bureaucratic obligations and private disagreement with official policies, creating spaces for negotiation and selective compliance (Nikjoo et al. 2025b). Over time, the tension between the state's ideological core and the everyday realities of citizens has deepened (Nikjoo 2025). Ordinary people have developed ways of living that extend beyond the reach of religious authority, shaping a parallel moral order that diverges from official prescriptions (Khosravi Ooryad 2024). These tensions came to the surface in the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement, which expressed a collective demand for bodily autonomy and broader political change (Fadaee 2024).

Within this setting, gender relations were shaped by long-standing patriarchal traditions that defined gender roles through intertwined notions of religious morality and cultural honour (Babakhani 2024). Two key concepts, gheyrat, referring to male protective pride, and haya, referring to female modesty, have historically structured this gendered moral order (Najmabadi 2005). Traditional femininity was associated with obedience, chastity, and domestic responsibility, while masculinity was linked to control, financial responsibility, and the protection of women's moral virtue (Babakhani 2024). These norms were reinforced through both Islamic teachings and customary expectations, forming a moral framework that governed behaviour in both public and private life (Rahbari et al. 2019). Over generations, these values became internalized not only by men but also by women, reproducing a deeply rooted gender hierarchy that legitimized male authority and limited women's autonomy (Carrasco-Santos et al. 2024).

Iranian society has recently shifted from more traditional toward more secular values (Nikjoo 2025), shaped by urbanization, higher education, digital expansion, and domestic tourism (Mokhles & Sunikka-Blank 2022). Internal travel has facilitated encounters between urban women and rural communities, circulating new ideas about gender and visibility and challenging established norms of femininity, particularly among younger women in peripheral regions (Sharifi-Tehrani et al. 2024; Ghaderi et al. 2025).

Traditional gender separation in communication, labour, and mobility continues to shape daily life, although its boundaries are increasingly blurred (Rahbari et al. 2019). Many women navigate these contradictions creatively, balancing respect for cultural expectations with quiet acts of defiance (Nikjoo et al. 2025a). Müller et al. (2024) note that silence itself can be a form of agency, allowing individuals to resist, delay, or reshape dominant expectations without open confrontation. The coexistence of Islamic, traditional, and emerging secular femininities illustrates the layered and evolving nature of gender relations in contemporary Iran (Asadi Zeidabadi 2025). It was within this complex terrain that I conducted my fieldwork, where the intersections of theocracy, patriarchy, and everyday negotiation shaped not only social interactions but also the emotions, responsibilities, and silences that later resurfaced in my writing.

Autoethnography

In this paper, I draw on an autoethnographic and reflexive approach to reflect on the affective and moral tensions that arose during my fieldwork in Iran and resurfaced later when I began writing about it. Autoethnography, as Ellis (2007) explains, allows me to

take my own experiences and emotions seriously as part of the research process, while recognizing that writing about them inevitably involves others. This approach treats knowledge as situated and shaped by positionality and reflexivity (Kusow 2003).

Reflexivity here is not limited to stating who I am in relation to the field. As Lichterman (2017) explains, it involves examining how my interpretations developed, where I hesitated, and how ethical concerns influenced what I emphasized or left aside. Instead of presenting my analysis as coherent from the outset, I return to moments of uncertainty and revision that shaped the final text. In this sense, writing becomes part of the research itself, where interpretation and responsibility remain closely connected (Edwards & Goussios 2021).

My positionality in the field combined proximity and distance in what is often described as an insider–outsider position (Kusow 2003). As an Iranian familiar with the language, customs, and social codes, I shared cultural proximity with many participants. At the same time, I remained an outsider to the specific localities I studied and to the political and religious worldviews that structured everyday life there. My secular values and critical stance toward religious authority further shaped how I interpreted practices grounded in traditional and religious moral frameworks.

Gender also influenced every stage of the research process. As a man, I had easier access to officials and local male participants, while my interactions with women were often more limited or mediated through a female assistant. These asymmetries limited the range of perspectives available to me and shaped how I interpreted women's voices, forms of agency, and moments of silence. I realized that what I could see and hear was partly structured by my gender and position in the field. This awareness produced unease and a sense of responsibility about how fairly I could represent those whose access to me had already been mediated or constrained. In this sense, positionality shaped not only what I knew, but also how I judged what was ethical to write (Golubchikov 2015).

Looking back at the papers I published from this fieldwork, I now see that the most difficult moments did not occur only during interviews, but later, while I was writing them. As I organized field experiences into arguments and structured them for publication, I often felt hesitation and a growing sense of responsibility about how people and institutions were being represented. The data were partial, participants sometimes censored themselves, and each article required a specific thematic focus. Journal formats imposed practical limits. These conditions shaped what entered the text and what remained outside it.

With some temporal distance, I can now identify several moments in which writing itself generated affective tension. The following cases do not re-analyze the empirical material; rather, they reflect on the dilemmas that emerged when lived encounters were shaped into academic narratives. The first three cases focus mainly on tensions shaped by authoritarian theocratic governance, while the latter three address dilemmas emerging from patriarchal gender relations.

Case 1: silenced allies within the system

After completing fieldwork, the Women, Life, Freedom movement erupted across Iran, marking a significant shift in the political and social landscape. Like many Iranians, I found myself drawn to its democratic aspirations. During fieldwork, I had interviewed several regional officials who were working, within their limited authority, to support

tourism development and gender justice. Yet as my analytical focus turned toward resistance to theocratic biopolitics, my writing increasingly framed the state as the antagonist and Iranian people as agents of change. In one article (Nikjoo et al. 2025b), I used a triangular of tourists, locals, and the state. That framing simplified the political landscape, and within it these officials appeared on the "dark side."

To maintain the analytical focus I had chosen for that paper, and within the practical constraints of journal publication such as word limits, I narrowed the discussion in ways that prevented me from fully addressing the internal contradictions within state institutions. I wanted to show how some individuals acted as pragmatic mediators, remaining in their positions while quietly enabling incremental change within an authoritarian system. In their restrained ways, they functioned as intermediaries rather than simple representatives of repression. However, in order to maintain coherence, I reduced these dynamics significantly. As a result, the published version only partially conveyed their role. This decision left a sense of guilt, because the people I had met were more complex than how they appeared in the published version.

Case 2: the policeman's puality

Another dilemma emerged from an interview with a high-ranking police officer on Hormuz Island. During our recorded conversation, he insisted that only his official remarks be used, including statements defending beach patrols, the enforcement of hijab, and the surveillance of public morality. Unrecorded, however, he expressed disapproval of many Islamic Republic regulations, particularly those restricting personal freedoms. He described moments when he and the officers under his command deliberately overlooked certain violations of Islamic law, choosing empathy over enforcement.

When writing about the state's control of bodies in one of my articles (Nikjoo et al. 2025b), I relied on his formal statements, as he had requested. Analytically and ethically, this decision respected the conditions under which the interview was given and maintained the structure of the argument. Emotionally, however, it created discomfort. I knew that the man behind the uniform was more complex than the institutional role he performed in the text, yet coherence required me to foreground that role. My field notes and memories of our informal exchange returned repeatedly as I wrote. The tension lay between truth and protection, between what could responsibly be written and what needed to remain unsaid.

Case 3: the religious leader of laft

A similar tension shaped my portrayal of a religious leader in Laft village, whom many residents described as a central barrier to women's visibility in local tourism. In my analysis, he appeared as a moral authority maintaining patriarchal boundaries. When I met him, I did not see someone acting out of hostility, but someone who genuinely believed in what he was defending. His views reflected a form of Islamic traditionalism that emphasized stability and moral order rather than explicit oppression.

At the same time, my secular outlook and critical stance toward the Islamic Republic's ideology influenced how I interpreted him. It was difficult not to see him as a symbol

of the broader theocratic patriarchy. While drafting the section on Laft, I struggled to represent him without sliding into either condemnation or justification. He became, in my writing, both shaped by and constrained within a belief system that I personally resisted. This tension between empathy and critique was emotionally exhausting.

Case 4: respect or restriction?

In my comparative study of five villages on Qeshm Island (Nikjoo et al., 2025a), Soheili stood out as the most economically successful in tourism development. Yet behind this success, women's roles remained largely confined to domestic and backstage spheres, such as cooking, producing handicrafts, and serving guests away from public view. Interviews with women from neighboring villages often described Soheili's men as gatekeepers of women's visibility, limiting their participation in public tourism work.

However, my interviews with some men in Soheili, particularly the owner of a well-known restaurant, revealed a more complicated picture. He spoke warmly of his wife and emphasized that business decisions were made in consultation with her. When I asked about women's public visibility, he explained that men sought to protect their wives' honor by limiting interactions with unfamiliar men. His words reflected a deeply internalized notion of respect intertwined with control. Within this moral framework, dignity was associated with separation. As I wrote about this case, I felt torn between acknowledging what seemed like genuine affection and critiquing the patriarchal logic that framed restriction as protection. This tension between empathy and critique became a recurring difficulty in my engagement with traditional gender norms.

Case 5: unheard voices and selective visibility

In examining women's empowerment across the same five villages (Nikjoo et al. 2025a), I primarily focused on women who were publicly visible and whom I initially understood as having successfully challenged gender restrictions. By this I mean women who managed tourism enterprises or had become recognized leaders in their communities. Their stories embodied resistance and transformation, aligning with both my own secular values and the emancipatory focus of the research. For me, and for many locals, these women symbolized courage and social change.

At the same time, I was aware of the voices I could not fully access. Many women who upheld traditional values, or who felt uncomfortable speaking with a male researcher, remained distant or silent. While I also interviewed women with conservative perspectives, the data leaned toward the more visible, progressive figures. During analysis, I recognized how my positionality and the social constraints of gendered dynamics of access had shaped what entered the dataset. The resulting publications highlighted agents of change, while women who found dignity in continuity appeared marginal. I came to understand that many of them did not reject empowerment, but interpreted it through moral frameworks of family, modesty, and security. Still, my interpretive stance that was shaped by my own ideological distance from traditionalism, left me uneasy. The affective dilemma here was not about agreement or disagreement,

but about the moral burden of representation on whose stories were amplified, and whose remained unheard.

Case 6: portraying men as barriers

Another tension emerged in how I portrayed local men. Many of the men I interviewed expressed traditional views on gender roles and opposed women's public visibility in tourism, which positioned them analytically as obstacles to gender equality. At the same time, they acted within inherited cultural systems that reward conformity and discourage deviation. Their restrictive practices were often justified through moral expectations reinforced by both men and women. Writing about women's agency therefore risked reproducing a familiar binary that frames men as barriers and women as agents of change. Although this framing was empirically grounded, it simplified the diversity among men and obscured those who quietly supported women's initiatives. Each time I wrote "local men," I felt uneasy, recalling the faces of those who resisted dominant norms or expressed ambivalence toward restrictive practices.

Writing and moral tension

Through these cases, I have tried to show that researchers are affectively vulnerable, especially during writing. Steadman (2023) suggests that vulnerability can even grow after fieldwork, when memories of the past and thoughts about future consequences shape how we interpret what happened. While affective tensions can arise in many research contexts, authoritarian and patriarchal settings according to Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al. (2025) can intensify them.

Some of these tensions were directly related to my position as an outsider male researcher in traditional and patriarchal communities. I knew that my gender limited what I could hear and that some important women's voices were inaccessible to me. When writing, I often felt uneasy about these unwanted absences in my material. Even when I interviewed women who held traditional views, and reflected some of their perspectives in the findings, my interpretive stance and my inclination toward secular and progressive values led me to foreground voices that aligned with gender transformation. In the discussion sections, I often proudly took a progressive position. At the same time, I was aware that I was the one deciding which perspectives were amplified and which faded into the background.

It felt as if I were moderating a panel discussion and giving more space to the side I personally agreed with. I acknowledged my reflexivity in the papers and framed my approach through critical realism, arguing that I aimed to expose structural constraints that shaped women's internalized traditional views. Yet acknowledging reflexivity did not eliminate discomfort. I knew that my standpoint caused I highlighted some views and unintentionally marginalized others.

Being a male researcher writing about gender justice in a patriarchal system was exciting but mentally demanding. I knew that I could not fully understand women's lived experiences in the way women themselves do. Edwards and Goussios (2021) properly note that misunderstanding or misrepresenting people can cause harm, especially when

they have no chance to respond. At the same time, I felt a complicated sympathy toward some of the men who held traditional views. I had grown up in similar cultural settings. I understood the moral logic behind their positions, even when I disagreed with them in my analysis. Writing against their views, especially when they had treated me with respect, produced a sense of moral tension. I stand by what I wrote, but I do not know how comfortable I would feel reading some of those passages aloud in front of them.

Similar feelings surfaced when writing about the policeman, the religious leader, and certain government officials. I tried to explain complexity and avoid simple condemnation, but the themes and arguments of my papers positioned them closer to the authoritarian side of the system many Iranians resist. I may never see them again, and they may never read my work in English. Still, writing about real people carries weight.

We researchers observe, hear, select, frame, and interpret. We highlight some voices and inevitably reduce others. Formal research ethics may minimize harm, but they do not remove the affective and moral dilemmas embedded in representation itself. On paper, academic writing looks firm and coherent. But it is built from moments of doubt, tension, and difficult choices.

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