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In Search of a Lost Identity: Iranian Women and Their Identity Issues

By Mahsa Izadinia¹

Abstract

Using the data from the lives of two Iranian women, I focus on how context and self impact the process of identity formation. My aim of the present study is to empower and emancipate women by highlighting the significance of knowing who they are and holding on to their dreams, values, and choices especially when the social and family contexts are limiting and oppressive. Elaborating on the concept of identity and its significance for human development, I discuss the life stories of the two Iranian women and their major challenges. I explain how they gradually dissociated from who they were and wanted to be as they readily gave in and underestimated the power of self. I conclude by sharing my own experiences and providing some suggestions for finishing strong.

Key Words: Identity, Iranian Women, Oppression, Role of Context

Introduction

Gee (2000) defines identity as “being recognized as a certain kind of person in a given context” (p. 99). Similarly, Hung, Lim and Jamaludin (2011) consider the process of identity formation as a process of meaning making about one’s self. I believe that, having an identity means owning a voice, daring to dream and take action, and being responsible for who you are and want to become. Conversely, I contend, not having any dreams or simply abandoning them, being imprisoned in a jail of dos and don’ts that others set for us and being trapped in clichéd excuses such as “I have no choice”, “I cannot do anything” or “it is too late for me” negatively shape one’s identity. Erikson (1950, 1968) uses the term “identity diffusion” to represent a state in which the individual lacks a sense of purpose, direction and commitment and experiences self-doubt. Erikson (1963) claims that successful identity formation correlates with psychological wellness. Research also shows that individuals who explore their values and beliefs and develop a greater sense of self-knowledge are better able to consider the values and roles of their profession (Friesen & Besley, 2013). Other scholars contend that people without a clear sense of who they are are at potential risk of several behavioral and personal problems such as low self-esteem and depression (Nurmi, Berzonsky, Tammi, & Kinney, 1997).

According to Hull and Zacher (2007), a person’s identity is re/shaped from moment to moment throughout their life and “in relation to the identities of others—sometimes in concert with them, sometimes in opposition to them, but always in relation to them” (p. 75). Also acknowledging the dialogic nature of identity, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) argue that people develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially

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and culturally constructed worlds” (p.40). Thus, from a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), the process of identity formation does not occur “in individual isolation but rather in a social-community context” (p.163). That is why researchers seek to identify factors that facilitate identity formation and have the greatest positive influence on this process (Kroger, 1993) such as the role of context, feedback and validation received from important others and society at large (Erikson, 1959, 1963), opportunities for self-expression, new experiences, social development, skill acquisition, and self-reflection (Kivel, 1998; Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1990).

Having lived in Iran for most of my life, I was particularly interested in identity formation of Iranian women and the impact of context as well as self on their identities. On the one hand, I knew living in Iran creates tensions and challenges for women at times. I could see that some women in my country would fail to make sense of who they were and what they were capable of doing as a result of living in an undemocratic and oppressive context where they were marginalized and silenced. I could see that there were bright girls who were victimized by baseless and unshakable beliefs held against them which would negatively affect their identities because “who I am is relational, constructed and altered by how I see others and how they see me in our shared experiences and negotiated interactions” (Johnson, 2003, p. 788). Thus, they were led to believe they were intellectually and socially inferior, had no power, and could not be in control of their lives. On the other hand, there were still strong women who were motivated and daring enough to fight against the prevailing oppression and overcome difficulties to achieve their dreams. In other words, there were differences between Iranian women in terms of their perceived identities which would result in differences in the quality of their lives, the decisions they would make, their attitudes and behaviors and generally the kind of people they were. Therefore, I started to observe, participate, interact, analyze, reflect, write, and carefully consider the context of Iran in general and women in particular to see how the context and the self as two key factors shape the person we become. I also wanted to know how Iranian women can develop a stronger sense of who they are despite the limitations of the context they live in. I conducted the present research through my decade-long interactions with my participants, Darya and Shima. I focused on the lives of these two women because although they were from different social and educational backgrounds and ages, they had much in common including the way they reacted to difficulties they encountered in their lives. I studied these women’s challenges and problems, perspectives, the way they acted out their lives in the world and saw the world and compared them with me, one of many woman who are from the same country but resist the patriarchy and never surrender to the attitude that ‘I am a woman so I cannot’. By narrating and analyzing their life stories and comparing them with my own personal experiences, I could better understand the major role of our beliefs, values, attitudes, actions and generally our sense of who we are in shaping the person we become. In this paper, I will highlight the significance of developing a strong sense of identity for achieving our dreams and being the one we desire despite the limiting factors influencing us.

The data for this study were derived from non-participant observations, immersion in the participants’ daily lives, and actual interactions with them. To enrich the data and incorporate the participants’ authentic voice into the study, I conducted unstructured interviews with Darya and Shima. I explained the aim of this study to my participants and sought their informed consent for narrating their stories. They understood my intention and agreed to be involved. I have adopted pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Before I start their stories, I will provide a historical sketch of Iran.

Context of the Study

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a theocracy based on Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists was established in Iran. Along with social and economic advancement, the Islamic Revolution brought about violation of human rights including gender inequality (Davoodifard & Jawan, 2011). For instance, no women could leave the country to study, work or live without her husband's or father's permission (Nayyeri, 2013, Moghadam, 2004) nor could they work without permission from their male relatives. They were also required to have Hijab, which means covering their hair and body completely. Those who exposed any part of the body except hands and face were called "Bad hijab". Under the administration of the former president Ahmadinejad there were violent crackdowns on bad hijabs. Women were warned about their Islamic dress and even arrested if they did not conform to the Islamic dress code. The photos below, found on Google Images using the term "morality police Iran", show two girls arrested by the police. The women in black chador are policewomen who caution women on the streets about their dress and take them to police stations to open a file on them so the police can take further serious actions in case they do not observe the dress code in the future.

Figure 1: Photos from Google Images Search of "Morality Police Iran"



In addition to all the restrictions the government imposes on women, Iranian culture is a traditional and religious one that more or less curtails women's freedom and presents a traditional and hackneyed image of women as an approved identity for them. Traditionally, an exemplary and decent woman is defined as someone who devotes her life to raising children and

maintaining household duties. Thus, even today, some people believe a good woman is supposed to marry, be submissive to her husband, not talk a lot, not laugh aloud, walk and behave elegantly, and spend most of her time at home. Any woman who does not follow this old pattern of behavior might not be recognized as a normal person by some people. For instance, if a girl stays single, even if she is successful in her career, she might be looked at as someone different and deserving pity. Families, in turn, play a pivotal role in constructing women's selves. In some Iranian family, women's freedom is in men's hands, be they the father, brothers or husband. The men at times dictate how women should live their lives because they believe they have sole decision-making power and have more intellectual ability. However, fortunately, in Tehran, the capital city, women enjoy more freedom these days than those in other cities of Iran. Many Tehrani girls go to university and work; however, as mentioned above, they should have their father's or husband's permission.

Thus, the societal attitude toward women, reinforced by collective action, is a dismissive and sexist one, to some extent, that marginalizes Iranian women day after day. At times, I observe that women are favorite targets of ridicule for men. I see many postings made about their lack of intelligence and capability and I see many, including women, like them. Admittedly, the purpose of such postings is ostensibly light-hearted, but I contend it still distorts the image of a woman in the long run. By degrading women, making fun of their values, likes, dislikes, and presenting a misleading picture of who they are, Iranian men significantly impact on the self-image formed in women's minds. For instance, the picture below by an anonymous artist, which I recently found on Facebook, conveys a message about the superficiality of women's mind. The title of the picture is "the content of a mature girl's mind!" The big circle at the center of her head is related to her need for earning her husband's loyalty and commitment. The small circles from right to left are related to shopping, eating, suspicion, talking on the phone, buying shoes, and jealousy. The last one on the bottom is cosmetics and the two tiny spots depict her logic and understanding.

Figure 2: Picture by Anonymous Artist



People might just laugh when they look at this picture, but what happens when similar comments are made and shared frequently about women? To me, these apparently harmless humorous ideas about women gradually change to deep-rooted biases held against them. The

gravity of the issue is more fully understood when women are not taken seriously anymore, banned from many activities, and confined to certain places as is currently the case in Iran.

Now the question is what types of identity shape in Iranian women as a result of the oppression and inequalities they experience in their daily life? How significant is the Iranian women's role in creating the person they become? And what happens if they form an identity that is divorced from their dreams, objectives and beliefs? As outlined above, on the one hand, the Iranian government and the society at large more or less demand mindless cultural, ideological, political and religious conformity of women. On the other hand, within some Iranian families men assume full authority and confine women to passive and limited roles. So, what happens if women submit to these pressures and accept an identity which is assigned by others and different from what they prefer to have?

Shima

Shima was my next-door neighbor when I lived in a small city in Iran. Although she was older than me, we developed a close bond during the years of our friendship. Shima had six siblings. She dropped out of school early because she had lots of responsibilities at home and found it hard to focus on her studies. She had an old mom and three younger sisters, so she was always busy with daily chores. She was a good tailor and sewed in her free time; however, she believed she was not clever enough to continue at school. Besides, she did not expect to get a job later on because no women in her entire family had ever had a job (It is worth mentioning that at that time gender inequality was even more common especially in small cities like the one where we were living). Therefore, she was resigned to the belief that going to school would be a waste of her time. Coming from a traditional background, she was expected to marry before she turned 20. The mindset prevalent in that city at that time was that the younger girls were, the higher their chances of marrying because, as mentioned, it was assumed that the only role girls could serve was to be housewives and mothers. Therefore, girls were expected to marry early so they could have enough children. Shima was not an exception and she was increasingly preoccupied with the thought of marriage.

Although Shima was a young, beautiful, and sociable girl, she passed all her time at home because she was not allowed to go out. She had to gain her father's permission, or her older brothers' when the father was not around, to leave the house. She had internalized the idea that, as a single girl, she had to obey her father and brothers unquestioningly, and after marriage she had to follow her husband's orders. Thus, she was expected to wait patiently for permission, which was rarely given, for doing many things. The only fun Shima had was to chat with me. I was her only confidant, and she enjoyed sharing her little secrets with me. That was how I knew many things about her, including her love story.

Her love story began when a new family came to live nearby and after a short while became close family friends with Shima's family. Gradually a secret love grew between Shima and the new family's boy, Reza, who soon became a real hero in Shima's world. Most of the talks between Shima and me were focused on Reza. Apparently she spent hours just thinking about him: his looks, his smile, the way he used to talk, and her future life with him. She was sure that she could not find anyone as good as him, and marrying him was her only desire. Reflecting back on those days, she said: "I did not think about anything else in this world except him; he was my only chance and hope". However, Shima knew her father was totally against this marriage because the boy was from a poor family. Although Shima and Reza were from similar

economic backgrounds, Shima's father did not want her to endure the same conditions after marriage. Also, Reza's father had two wives and Shima's father was totally against polygamy and believed this 'evil' to be hereditary. So, Shima had to hide this burning love from her family, especially from her father:

I tried to hide the issue from everyone, my father, my mother, my sisters...I was afraid they would kill me...I loved my father but we were never close to each other; I could never share my feelings with him.

Shima's love for Reza would bring shame on her family because girls in her family were not expected to fall in love. That was considered an utter disgrace. Yet she could not continue to conceal her love. As time went by, Shima's family learnt about this love and, therefore, placed her under extreme pressure to forget her love. Immediately, her father ended all family relationships with Reza's family and grounded Shima. He physically punished her as well. I would see her badly bruised at times, and I could hear her father shouting insults at her and threatening to kill her:

He (her father) was terrifying. Every day, I was thinking that he would shoot me. I was afraid my brothers would go and kill him (Reza)...They had no trust in me. They thought I would do something wrong and they would lose their face but I would never do that.

Shima frequently mentioned that her family would rather kill her than let her run away with Reza. She felt bitterly disappointed with her family because of their baseless distrust of her, and she did not know how she could restore their trust. Shortly after Shima was grounded by her father, Reza left his home and after a few months married another girl, the news of which came as a shock:

My world was entirely destroyed when I learned he had married. All my hopes and dreams were killed. I cried for weeks and kept wondering why he married that soon, why he did not wait for me. I wanted to go and find him but I was not allowed to leave the house. I just wanted to die.

Shima stayed single long after Reza married, but eventually she got married too when no one expected she would. She married someone her father approved of but she did not love. She has two children now while her love is still at the back of her mind.

Darya

I met Darya in the gym during the time I lived in Tehran. She was 26 years old and married. We decided to walk together regularly, which allowed me to talk with her and get to know her better. The more she talked about her husband and her married life, the more I felt convinced that she did not want to be the one she was. Darya was born into an affluent Tehrani family. As a Tehrani girl, she enjoyed some types of freedom, including having a chance to go to university and live on her own for four years. She was the only one in her family who held a university degree, and she often talked about her university years with real excitement. For her, it

was a time when she felt confident and strong partly because she was living away from her family, which allowed her to be independent as a teenage girl. But what was most important for her during that period was the number of suitors she had. As she was a devoted follower of Islamic principles, she was not supposed to date anyone; she had to wait for someone to appear and formally propose to her. However, given the unfavorable economic climate due to the sanctions imposed on Iran during last years of Ahmadinejad's presidency, men often preferred to stay single and have girlfriends. Thus, it was highly unlikely for a girl from a religious background like Darya's to marry. However, there were boys who were keen to marry her at that time. Although she believed that most of her suitors wanted to marry her just for the sake of her family's money, she still was proud about who she was then.

After graduation she got married even though she was not in love with her husband because she thought there were unbridgeable social and religious gaps between their families. She was forced to marry this man mainly because her father was on the verge of bankruptcy at that time and did not want to be concerned about his daughters' future. In addition, her father asserted "you have gone out together and people have seen you together, you have to marry him now". So, Darya was pushed to marry a man who she believed was not the person he pretended to be. Soon she found that, while he seemed to be respectful of Islamic faith before and early in their marriage, he started criticizing her practice of Islam and imposed his own belief system on her. Another conflict Darya had to contend with was that she had to stay at home and devote her full time to cleaning and cooking. This was devastating for Darya because her husband even disapproved of the occasional time she would spend with her parents:

When I married him, he set some boundaries for me. He told me I could visit my parents. Now he does not tell me directly not to do so or not to work but if I do he stops talking to me and treats me so coldly that I prefer not to go anywhere or say anything to prevent fights between us. He wants me just for himself.

Darya was overweight and this was another constant headache for her. Seeing all the pain and problems she was going through, I suggested we spend more time together. Fortunately, she agreed with the idea and we started going to the park and doing some activities together. We were really enjoying ourselves in the activities we had planned, and she looked more energetic and lively than before, frequently expressing that the activities were doing her good. But unfortunately, this regime did not last long. Her husband, according to Darya, became envious of our relationship and started showing his disapproval. I, the only friend she had, was accused of distracting her from her married life. So she had to keep her distance from me lest this would cause more arguments between them.

Darya was absolutely obedient to her husband because firstly, she did not want to make her life worse by having frequent fights and arguments. Secondly, she firmly believed Muslim women are morally obliged to be submissive to their husbands. Convinced that blind obedience was the only choice she had, she never acted to change her life. Instead she endured the emotional suffering. What was even more disheartening was that she was not receiving any support from her own family. Her father, who was supposed to be on her side, was not at all supportive and pushed her into accepting the situation as it was:

They (her parents) have this traditional belief that a girl must step in her husband's home in a white wedding dress and leave in a white shroud (referring

to the idea that a woman leaves her husband only when she dies). They never support me. If I had their support, I would not have stayed in this marriage this long. But where could I go? Who would support me if I got a divorce?

Her father would usually yell at her about not ruining her life by having too many expectations from her husband. After a violent argument between Darya and her husband, which left slight bruises on her neck, she fled to her parents hoping they would protect her. But her father did not receive her warmly, criticizing her for her 'childish' reactions and reminding her that she did not belong there anymore and could not come back again. Therefore, she returned home dejected and hopeless, believing that this was how she was meant to live.

Darya remains in this predicament. She is filled with fears for her uncertain future, such as being the mother of a child growing up in the midst of conflicts, disagreements and limitations. She has no hopes, dreams or plans for her future except wanting to die:

I am a lonely girl. I never had anyone at my side. I feel as if in my whole life someone or something has come to block my way to success. I have no choice in this world. I have to live this life; let them do whatever they want to my life. I only wish I could go to Mecca for the last time and die there. That is my biggest dream and that is the only way that I can get rid of this life.

At the age of 26, she feels so weary of the life she has. She does not like her husband and does not trust him. She strongly believes her parents and her husband have ruined her life because she was never given the chance to decide for herself.

Discussion

Impact of Social/Family Context on Women's Sense of Identity

As discussed in the literature, identity does not occur in isolation but forms throughout life in relation to the identities of others (Hull & Zacher, 2007). This suggests that who we are is highly influenced by the attitudes, values and expectations of people around us, especially significant others. Feedback and validation received from important others and the society impact on individuals' identity formation (Erikson, 1959, 1963). In a context where women are frequently considered as intellectually and socially inferior and frequently denied freedom and a voice, they develop the self-view that they do not possess any power, and they are weak and are unable to think and decide wisely. They learn to listen, obey, and ingratiate themselves to the will of others. Unfortunately, many Iranian women feel powerless and learn to justify their powerlessness on the grounds that they are merely 'women' and therefore, not in control of their destinies and lives. They come to believe that they always require financial, physical, and emotional support in their lives.

The significant others in Darya's and Shima's lives never taught them to persevere and never inspired them with determination, strength, and hope of attaining their dreams. Instead, Darya repeatedly heard that "you are a woman, what can you do?", "you have no choice", "you do not have anyone else (other than your husband) to protect you". She gradually learned to be as obedient as her mom who never complained about her husband's cheating on her (Darya's father) because she also had nowhere else to go. Similarly, Shima learned that her only dream should be to be a housewife. She learned "education is not necessary for a woman because

finally you will just change babies' diapers". Her parents never paid her any compliments on her abilities, beauty, and dignity and thus she never realized how capable, intelligent and precious she was. Today, Darya and Shima do not believe in their abilities and decision-making power, opting to abide by the rules imposed on them and to put up with unfavorable conditions rather than to think creatively and find solutions to improve their situation. In their interviews, they frequently expressed that they wished they could die so they would not have to deal with their problems, believing they could not change anything.

Impact of Self on Women's Sense of Identity

Berzonsky (1988, 1990) proposes that individuals are different in terms of self-theories they use when they engage in the task of identity formation. For instance, those who use the informational identity style evaluate self-relevant information to actively confront identity issues. Researchers have found that use of an informational style is positively associated with self-reflectiveness, an internal locus of control, and use of problem-focused coping and vigilant decision making (Berzonsky, 1989, 1990, 1993; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996; Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992). However, normative identity style (Berzonsky, 1988) is used by individuals who "deal with identity issues and decisional situations by conforming to the prescriptions and expectations of significant others" (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000, p. 83). Normative individuals demonstrate extremely high levels of agreeableness but low levels of openness and self-reflectiveness, and they usually employ avoidant coping strategies and have a high need for structure (e.g., Berzonsky, 1993; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996; Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Dollinger, 1995).

The two women in this study mainly adopted a normative style in the process of identity formation, characterized by their heavy reliance on the expectations and standards of significant others (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000), such as parents and husband. For instance, Shima always waited to be dictated to without having much of an agenda of her own to follow. In other words, she had a high need for structure. Although she was a grown-up, she would not even dream of claiming her life, acting and deciding freely. Shima never tried to solve any of her problems, she cried over them or waited for someone to come and do something for her, not believing in her agency. She did not have a clear picture of her future other than the vague notion of wanting to marry someone she loved. But she gave up that notion readily, let her father expunge who she wanted to be, and accepted the life her father imposed on her. Darya also followed a normative style and used an avoidant coping strategy when facing difficulties. She displayed an extremely high level of agreeableness by bending to all unreasonable requests made by her husband. Darya limited herself and her world by satisfying her parents' and husband's needs and wants. She had a low level of reflectiveness, frequently mentioning that she wished she had someone who could tell her who she was and what she could do to change things because she did not really know who she was.

"Feeling that one knows oneself facilitates using the self to make sense and make choices, using the self as an important perceptual, motivational and self-regulatory tool" (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012 p. 69). What Oyserman et al. suggest is the significance of self for behavior because the way one thinks about oneself produces action. For instance, having a positive self-view about oneself increases feelings of self-esteem and self-worth (Hoelter, 1986). Self-esteem, defined as having "a good opinion of oneself, and to be generally confident" (White, 1986 p. 59), on the other hand, is closely linked to achievement (Lawrence, 1987). There are studies which show having a high self-esteem leads to high school achievement

(Coopersmith, 1967) and studies which reveal correlation between low achievement of certain groups such as working class and low self-esteem (Miller, 1987). Thus, knowing who we are and what abilities and potentials we have, holding positive self-views and being confident about the person we are empower us to dare to dream, take action and achieve what we want. However, having negative self-views which raises doubts about one's self-worth and causes distress (Hoelter, 1986), represses feelings of perseverance and hope and does not lead to any achievement.

What was largely absent in Shima and Darya was a positive self-view on their part of the persons they were and a deep understanding of who they wanted to be. As the picture of the self was not vivid and complete in their mind, they could not make effective and appropriate decisions and did not take necessary actions to realize their goals. Therefore, active participation of individuals in making meaning of who they are and having positive self-views toward oneself significantly contribute to the formation of a strong sense of identity. Sometimes the contribution of the self to the formation of one's identity is even more important than the family/social context as my personal experiences suggest.

A Different Path

It is sad to see basic human rights being repeatedly violated, to see we are not free to live meaningful and fulfilling lives within cultural restraints. It is disheartening to know we are not welcomed in our own country and the doors toward the future are half closed at best. What is even more disappointing is to see we are treated unfairly and we are victimized only because we are women living in Iran. Even little things found in other women's lives in other nations, such as wearing the clothes they like and going to places they want, are far-reaching dreams for us.

As a woman living in Iran, I had the experience of being arrested by the morality police just for wearing a dress I liked while I did not have the right to wear. I still vividly remember that day. I was on my way to attend a class when policewomen arrested me and took me and six other girls they arrested to the police station. There were many girls and women like us there. They had been brought to the station for different reasons; one for wearing a loose scarf and showing her long hair, the other for wearing a white dress, and someone else for having heavy makeup. During the time we were under arrest, I was wondering how many criminals and offenders were free on Tehran's (i.e., the capital city) streets and how many innocent women were arrested just for being bad hijab. After keeping us waiting for hours, the morality police opened a file on each of us, had our mug shots taken and made us promise to conform to the Islamic dress code. Eventually, they contacted our male relatives, husbands or fathers, to come and take us from the police station. I felt like a captive as if I had committed a crime, without common sense and dignity.

I grew up in Iran and learned I should be very strong in order to live the way I wanted: free and independent. I realized I was different and treated differently because I was a woman—supposedly vulnerable, weak and inferior. I realized there were things that I was not supposed to know and think about, jobs I was not expected to do, places I was not allowed to go alone, clothes I could not wear, and many other limitations imposed on me as a woman. I realized it was hard to hold on to my values, choices, life plans and dreams and achieve what I wanted but still it was not impossible. I knew it would be much easier and less challenging for me to totally accept what others wanted from me because then no one would forcefully argue with me and no one would label me as selfish or stubborn. However, I also knew myself and my goals perfectly well and, I was sure my dreams were worthwhile. I knew I did not want to be different from who

I wanted to be. I wanted to realize my goals and I knew I had the power, the potential and all it would take. Therefore, instead of readily accepting the oppressive condition, I kept my dreams alive and overcame the limitations to create the future that I had planned for. It would not matter to me if the feedback I was receiving from people around me was negative, if there were not enough smiling faces around me to support and encourage me, if the short-term results I was obtaining were all disappointing, or if the stiff challenges confronting me were really daunting. While I could have been another example of those women who fail to realize their dreams and constantly regret the decisions they consciously make throughout their lives, I tried to set a better example. Although it took me years and years of hard work and perseverance to finally surmount the obstacles and achieve my goals, all those hindrances and hurdles I struggled with in a way contributed to the composition of my identity. In other words, the more I persisted, the stronger my sense of self-identity grew.

Although the role of context in shaping who we are is beyond the shadow of a doubt, I tend to believe that knowing oneself well and using the self as a “self-regulatory tool” (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012) is very crucial to achieve one’s dreams. Based on my own personal experience, I can conclude that what hugely impacted the choices I made and the path I decided to follow were my deep appreciation of my personal views, objectives and abilities, having a positive self-image, self-motivation and perseverance, and taking effective actions, all of which finally helped me attain my goals.

Conclusion

The stories narrated above show how women might become increasingly distanced from who they are if they let go of their dreams, do not persist with their goals, and blindly accept what others dictate to them. As the stories unfolded, one could see Shima and Darya did not know themselves, were not aware of their limitless potential, and did not pursue any goals. So they succumbed to the barriers they ran into, which made them strangers to themselves and shattered who they could be.

Having a dream entails knowing who we are and who we want to be. If women have no voice, are routinely denied dreaming, and frequently told how to live, they fail to make sense of who they are. They take on an assumed identity, as the characters in this paper did, which distances them from their goals and ambitions. However, although there might be obstacles which disempower and fool us into believing we cannot, we should never deny our absolute power in creating small but significant changes in our lives. We should possess a strong and positive view about the people we are and have absolute confidence in our abilities because when we do not believe we are capable human beings, we cannot expect others to believe in us and value who we are. In other words, we let others marginalize us when we choose to self-marginalize. So, we should not let others kill our dreams and change our personhood; rather we should own a voice, not submissively bend to all the pressure placed on us and “reach high, for stars lie hidden in [our] soul. Dream deep, for every dream precedes the goal” (Pamela Vaull Starr, 1909-1993).

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