

## Unveiling Gender Bias in an Iranian Discourse: An Investigation of the Validity of van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis

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Research Paper

IJEAP-2501-2111 DOR: [20.1001.1.24763187.2025.14.1.6.8](https://doi.org/20.1001.1.24763187.2025.14.1.6.8)

Received: 2025-01-18

Accepted: 2025-03-01

Published: 2025-03-30

**Abstract:** Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how social power and dominance are produced and reproduced through text and talk. Despite its importance, quality control in CDA has received insufficient attention. This study aimed to critically analyze an Iranian discourse using van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework to address gender discrimination as a social problem and to assess the validity of findings derived from this approach. The analysis following different stages of the framework uncovered ideological manipulation within the text, reflecting gender bias. To evaluate the quality of the CDA findings, the study applied van Dijk's accessibility criterion. A sample of 100 women participated in this stage. Participants read the text and answered questions, with 35 initially rejecting the notion of gender discrimination in the text. These participants were subsequently presented with detailed analysis steps, findings, and interpretations to reconsider their views. Following this intervention, 63% of this group recognized gender bias in the text, while 37% remained unconvinced. In-depth interviews with the latter group revealed the impact of their values and beliefs on their interpretations, underscoring how personal perspectives influence the reception of critical analysis. The findings highlight the importance of accounting for ideological and cognitive factors in CDA research. This dual focus on critical analysis and validation offers a nuanced understanding of how discourse interacts with societal power structures and individual belief systems.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender Bias, Validity, van Dijk's Socio-cognitive Approach

### Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines language as a social practice intertwined with power, ideology, and social structures (Fairclough, 1989). It explores how discourse reflects and reinforces power dynamics, critically addressing how language perpetuates social inequalities (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 2009). By analyzing texts, CDA seeks to challenge these inequalities and propose alternatives that advocate for social change (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2018). Power and critique are central to CDA, analyzing language use to expose inequalities and the ideological connections between discourse and social practices (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). Ideology, as framed by van Dijk (1998a), encompasses social constructs of identity and relationships, shaping access to resources and informing the framework of this study.

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Recent studies have expanded the scope of CDA to address contemporary challenges. For instance, the rise of Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT has introduced new areas of research and teaching potential, raising concerns related to power and inequality within the remit of critical discourse studies (Zotzmann & O'Regan, 2023). Additionally, CDA has been applied to analyze online media discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how educational issues are presented with the spread of misinformation (Irawan & Suryani, 2023). Furthermore, CDA has been utilized as a tool for search engine research, helping to reveal both visible and invisible aspects of information retrieval systems, thereby making the invisible visible by highlighting the socio-political contexts shaping them and progressing our communication with search systems (Morrison, 2024).

Education and its systems are inherently dynamic rather than static, and they are closely linked to social changes. Consequently, they cannot be isolated from society or the influential factors that impact societal phenomena (Zokaeieh & Tahriri, 2016). This dynamic nature of education aligns with the evolving focus of CDA, which continues to adapt to new contexts and challenges. As CDA addresses the power dynamics and inequalities in emerging technologies and media, it also reflects the broader societal changes that influence educational systems and practices.

### Theoretical Background to the Current Research

A philosophical stance is crucial for effective scientific research, especially for guiding value judgments during validation. This research, which adopts a critical paradigm, is rooted in critical discourse analysis a rapidly developing area of language study within Critical Theory. Critical Theory, influenced by the Frankfurt School and thinkers like Habermas (1981), encourages social critique and transformation.

The critical paradigm focuses on identifying and addressing domination and subjugation while empowering oppressed groups, using established research methods innovatively and developing new approaches (Habermas, 1981). Being "critical" means adopting a stance that is both epistemologically relativist and emancipatory (Alvesson, 2009), prioritizing social change over merely explaining the world, unlike positivists and social constructivists. Critical realism, a key framework for this study, explores diverse power relationships, including those related to gender, race, and ethnicity, aligning with the study's focus on gender discrimination and dominance. It aims to raise awareness of opaque power structures and ingrained societal values, arguing that reasons situated within social and cognitive frameworks can motivate change and action. Semiosis (the use of signs and symbols) plays a crucial role, with language reflecting and shaping social practice, which should be viewed within its broader societal context, necessitating a dialectical approach that links micro-level discourse to macro-level power structures (Fairclough, Jessop, & Sayer, 2010).

As regards the purpose of study, the critical paradigm is an ideologically oriented inquiry and less focused on methodology than it is on the reason for doing research (Willis, 2007). This paradigm values both quantitative and qualitative data, with research influenced by the values and beliefs of the researcher, leading to subjectivity. Critical inquiry requires reflective interpretation and analysis to reveal false assumptions and ideologies. Additionally, this paradigm emphasizes the importance of context—the interconnectedness of research and practice. In this sense, Critical Theory challenges the removal of meaning from its social context, reinforcing those generalizations must always be grounded in the local context where they emerge (Willis, 2007).

Considering these guiding principles, this research integrates CDA with validation, utilizing van Dijk's (2009a) socio-cognitive framework for a comprehensive analysis. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive approach to CDA emphasizes the connection between cognition, discourse, and society, asserting that discourse includes written, spoken, and non-verbal expressions like gestures and facial expressions. Cognition is shaped by social representations such as personal beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes, with the relationship between societal structures and discourse reflected in collective mental models, highlighting the role of social context in discourse production (van Dijk, 2009a). van Dijk views ideology as a system of socially shared beliefs to be examined within a cognitive framework

(Maalej, 2012). CDA addresses the challenge of linking micro and macro levels of analysis, where micro-level verbal interactions influence discourse and macro-level issues like power and inequality reflect broader societal structures. van Dijk explains that context is subjective, shaped by personal perspectives, emotions, and experiences, not objective reality, and that social structures and contexts influence communication through participants' subjective perceptions (van Dijk, 2009b). For van Dijk (1995), discourse analysis involves ideology analysis, as ideologies are present in both verbal and non-verbal communication, including media like images and films. CDA reveals these hidden ideologies, which shape cognition and contribute to power imbalances and inequality, supporting the study's framework of exploring the link between language and its social context to uncover hidden power dynamics.

### Validity in Critical Discourse Analysis

Quality is assessed differently in quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research uses methods to ensure internal and external validity, while qualitative research employs techniques such as self-description, reflective journal-keeping, respondent validation, prolonged involvement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, and triangulation (Long & Johnson, 2000). Key criteria in qualitative research include validity, trustworthiness, rigor, quality, and credibility.

In CDA studies, assessing the quality of findings is essential. The concept of validity in CDA requires adjustments, as critics question whether CDA studies produce valid results. Traditional methods like representativeness, reliability, and validity are considered (Wodak, 2009). The socio-cognitive approach emphasizes accessibility, ensuring findings are comprehensible to the social groups under investigation. The discourse-historical approach suggests triangulation procedures for validity. van Dijk (2001) underscores the importance of adequacy in CDA, arguing that detailed cognitive and social analysis is necessary for critical adequacy in examining social issues.

### The Issue of Gender Discrimination

A central focus in CDA is on social issues such as gender discrimination (Sunderland, 2004). van Dijk (1991) identifies evidence suggesting that common practices foster various forms of discrimination. According to Sunderland (2004), gender is "an idea or set of ideas, articulated in and as discourse" (p.18), including differences between women and men that are socially or culturally constructed. van Dijk (2008) further asserts that the essentialist differences between men and women, as portrayed in sexist ideologies, form the basis for sexist discrimination against women. In line with the principles of critical realism, the current study opposes the social inequality of gender discrimination, aiming to raise awareness in the dominated group (women) through critical analysis. Throughout this study, the interpretations from Critical Theory, particularly from CDA, play a significant role.

Gender discrimination has been a significant focus within critical discourse analysis research. According to van Dijk (1998b), feminist scholarship stands out as a prominent area within CDA, investigating how texts and communication perpetuate male dominance while also highlighting female resistance. Lazar (2007) further characterizes feminist studies in CDA as an examination of how power dynamics and dominance are constructed and contested through both textual representations and conversational strategies.

Much of the research on discourse and situational parameters has focused on gender rather than factors such as class, ethnicity, or age. Differences between men and women are often interpreted through the lens of male dominance in patriarchal societies. This power imbalance manifests in various ways within male discourse, such as frequent interruptions of women, limitations on their access to communicative events, choice of topics, use of words, and turn-taking (van Dijk, 2008).

### Literature Review

To investigate a social issue with a semiotic aspect, the contextual facets must be carefully considered. The issue of gender discrimination in this study is no exception. As van Dijk (2009b) notes, “today, most work on gender and discourse emphasizes the broader situational or contextual dimension of language use and variation” (p. 18). Many discourse studies in sociolinguistics examine the role of gender, often within the broader framework of feminist gender studies (e.g., Clark, 1992; Gibson, Lee, & Crabb, 2016; Kauppinen, 2013; Lakoff, 1975; Siren, 2018; Sriwimon & Jimarkon Zilli, 2017; Tranchese & Zollo, 2013; Yine et al., 2024).

Tranchese and Zollo (2013) demonstrated how media discourse, irrespective of genre, contributes to stereotyped constructions of gender-based violence. For example, they noted how responsibility may be shifted from the perpetrator to the victim’s mother, which minimizes the rapist’s role and renders him almost invisible. Clark (1992, as cited in van Dijk, 2008) showed how violence against women is represented passively in headlines—where male perpetrators are often absent. Henley, Miller, and Beazley (1995, as cited in van Dijk, 2008) corroborated this finding, revealing that such biased accounts reduce readers’ attribution of agency to men. Kauppinen (2013) focused on the discourse of postfeminist self-management in magazines, identifying how neoliberal gender-specific governmentality underpins the portrayal of work and sex, despite an outwardly feminist tone.

Recent studies in computational linguistics further enhance our understanding of gender discrimination, applying automated methods for detecting gender bias in large datasets (Geburu et al., 2024). Moreover, research focusing on newer platforms like TikTok emphasizes how female users often face stigmatization through internet lexicon and the commodification of physical appearance (Yine et al., 2024), reinforcing gender inequality and objectification. CDA is also applied in advertising to highlight how media representations perpetuate gender biases, revealing a deeper structure of gender inequality (Thomas, 2023). Similar to how language policies are often shaped by broader ideological and political discourses, as seen in debates over resisting English imperialism and advocating for linguistic diversity (Aghajanzadeh, 2023), gendered discourse is also embedded in power structures that sustain systemic inequalities. Moreover, recent research suggests that applying van Dijk’s CDA model can enhance critical thinking skills, demonstrating that discourse analysis not only reveals power structures but also equips individuals with the cognitive tools to challenge them (Najarzadegan, Dabaghi, & Eslami-Rasekh, 2018). These studies underscore the evolving nature of gender discourse and the importance of employing diverse analytical approaches to understand and address gender discrimination in contemporary society.

Overall, a significant gap exists in the literature concerning the validation of CDA approaches, as no clear-cut criteria or procedures have been agreed upon by CDA scholars. While some have proposed criteria for ensuring the quality of CDA findings, the procedures for implementing them are often not clearly established. This study aims to address this gap by applying van Dijk’s socio-cognitive framework and his accessibility criterion. The first step is to analyze a text using this approach, assessing the quality and adequacy of the findings.

Van Dijk (2008) stresses that problematizing gender differences and the polarization of women and men should not invalidate the relevance of studying and resisting male domination. Therefore, this study calls for further research in the areas of gender representation and discrimination. Additionally, the secondary aim of the study is to examine the ideological dimensions of the findings related to gender discrimination. This includes identifying how gendered assumptions and power relations, often taken for granted, are discursively produced, maintained, challenged, and negotiated (Lazar, 2007). To address the points discussed, the following research questions are raised:

**Research Question One:** What are the findings of critical discourse analysis based on van Dijk’s (2009b) framework regarding the issue of gender discrimination?

**Research Question Two:** How do the results of van Dijk’s approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) contribute to the interpretations of the social group under study?

## Methodology

### Methodology Discourse Sampling

The current study analyzes a news report published on December 16, 2013, by the Islamic Students News Agency (ISNA), accessible through the Jame Jam Sara website (See Appendix A.). Presented in Persian, the text reflects the cultural and linguistic context of the topic, which centers on gender discrimination in contemporary Iranian society. With a length of approximately 160 words, the report allows for a nuanced exploration of this pressing issue. In selecting this text, the study followed Fairclough's (1989) criteria for discourse selection, focusing on texts that capture moments of social risk and illuminate underlying social processes. The chosen report exemplifies a significant moment, addressing gender discrimination that resonates within the social fabric, which is crucial for understanding how such discrimination is constructed and perpetuated in public discourse.

To achieve a comprehensive analysis, the study began by randomly selecting daily newspapers to identify instances of subtle representations of gender discrimination. From this broader pool, data were purposively selected for their relevance to the study's focus on gender issues and its theoretical framework. This purposive sampling aligns with critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodologies, facilitating a targeted examination of illustrative texts. Additionally, Fairclough (1992) emphasizes the importance of preliminary surveys, research questions, archive accessibility, and participant involvement in data selection. This study considered these factors to ensure that the selected text not only highlighted moments of social risk but also contributed meaningfully to understanding gender discrimination as a social process. By focusing on a text that encapsulates the complexities of the issue, the study seeks to illuminate how language and discourse influence societal attitudes toward gender equality.

Additionally, to ensure quality in discourse sampling, we applied van Dijk's (1993) criterion of relevance, considering the perspective of the dominated group—women, in this case—regarding the social issue. The intentions of the discourse producer are not of primary importance. Rather, the critical factor is how the addressee interprets the discourse. Taking feedback from the target audience enhances the quality of the analysis. For this study, comments from readers on the online news site ([www.Tabnak.ir](http://www.Tabnak.ir)) confirmed that many identified the discourse as representing gender discrimination. Further, the texts were provided to several females to assess if they also recognized gender discrimination in the discourse.

To ensure credibility, sampling was performed both before analysis (for discourse choice quality) and after (for analysis quality). These efforts align with the accessibility and effectiveness criteria for CDA as proposed by van Dijk (1993; 2009a), which are discussed further in the following sections.

### Participant Sampling

In this study, 100 female participants were purposively selected to align with the research objectives related to gender discrimination within Iranian discourse, focusing on key demographic and contextual factors to ensure an accurate representation of the target population. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years, with an average age of approximately 35, allowing for diverse perspectives across different life stages and a comprehensive analysis of age-related influences on perceptions of gender discrimination. All participants were native Persian speakers, ensuring a high level of language proficiency essential for engaging with the discourse and providing meaningful responses. Educational backgrounds varied, with around 30% holding a Bachelor's degree, 40% a Master's degree, and 30% having completed Doctoral studies, which contributed a range of cognitive frameworks and analytical skills that could affect their interpretations. The participants were sampled from various urban and suburban areas in Iran, reflecting a mix of socio-economic backgrounds to

enhance the generalizability of the findings. The study was conducted over a three-month period, during which participants engaged with the text and participated in follow-up discussions, allowing for sufficient reflection and interaction to facilitate a deeper understanding of the discourse and the factors influencing their perceptions.

### Procedure for Conducting the Analysis

A significant portion of van Dijk's practical investigations focuses on issues like stereotypes, ethnic prejudice, power abuse by elites, and the resistance of dominated groups. In this study, women were viewed as resisting elites and authorities who uphold the dominant group. As such, van Dijk's (2009a) socio-cognitive framework was selected for conducting the critical discourse analysis. A relevant text, purposively chosen for its significance to the study, was analyzed according to van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework. The precise phases of this analytical approach are detailed in the results section of the study as outlined by van Dijk (2001, 2009a, 2008).

### Procedure for Quality Control

After analyzing the chosen text, which was selected through purposive sampling aligned with the study's objectives, the results were assessed for their validity. Given that most CDA studies are qualitatively focused, a suitable validation method was applied to meet the aims of this research.

Discourse analysis must be understandable in its interpretation and explanation (Titscher et al., 2000), ensuring the study's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process of data collection, analysis, and explanation must be clear. Additionally, van Dijk (1993) emphasizes evaluating events and their consequences from the perspectives of dominated groups. Since females are considered change agents in this context, this aligns with the criterion of adequacy in CDA, which suggests that analysis success is measured by its relevance and effectiveness (van Dijk, 1993, p. 253).

In line with effectiveness, Wodak and Meyer (2009) propose accessibility as a key criterion in CDA. This means findings should be understandable and accessible to the social groups being studied. Van Dijk also advocates for CDA to be shareable and comprehensible, particularly for dominated groups (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Since the framework drawn upon in the current study is van Dijk's framework, it seems wise to incorporate the quality criterion i.e. accessibility suggested by van Dijk himself. Moreover, according to Maxwell (1996), member checking is the most effective way of eliminating the possibility of misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the "voice." These reasons justify the selection of *accessibility* as the criterion and *member checking/informant feedback* as the most appropriate technique for ensuring quality in the current research.

To ensure quality in this study, we first presented the news text to all the participants, who were asked questions about it. Questions were written under the text to understand the readers' perceptions and interpretations about the text. We then selected participants who disagreed that the text contained gender discrimination. Subsequently, we shared the analysis and interpretations of the text with them, asking for their feedback and responses in written form. This process aimed to identify any contradictions between our interpretations and those of the participants (Patton, 2001), strengthening the credibility of the findings. We also asked if the critical analysis influenced their perspectives on the ideological nature of the text. A change in their views would indicate the quality of the CDA framework.

### Data Analysis

To make sure of the quality of our CDA findings, the results of gathering interpretations of participants were analyzed following the procedures of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The process of analyzing the data through grounded theory involved three steps. In the first phase of *open coding*, all the data were segmented into paragraphs and the main ideas of each paragraph were noted as the codes. Then, during *axial coding*, the interconnected codes were regarded as being under

the same subcategory. Finally, in the third phase of *selective coding*, a core category was identified based on the interlinked subcategories which guided us to write the grounded theory. The findings were cross-checked with the results of our own analysis to ascertain the validity of the CDA approach in the analysis of the Persian text.

## Results and Discussions

### Research Question 1

The current study analyzes gender discrimination through critical discourse analysis (CDA), employing van Dijk's (2009a) socio-cognitive framework. CDA's multidisciplinary nature was considered, with theoretical support drawn from various fields. Below are the stages of the analysis, incorporating van Dijk's (2004) ideological discursive strategies.

#### *Step 1: Topics: Semantic Macrostructures/ Global Meanings*

Van Dijk (2009a) suggests starting critical analysis with the identification of semantic macrostructures, which capture the global meanings or themes of the text. These topics are often controlled by powerful speakers and shape discourse structures, influencing recipients. The analysis began by identifying key topics, such as the title, theme, and genre of the text. The title of the article, "The principal of estate agency union of Tehran province warned about women working in estate agency offices..." expresses the central topic. From the text, the following macro-propositions were inferred:

- M1: Advocacy for limiting women's roles in estate agency positions.
- M2: Conditional allowance for women to own estate agencies, but not to work as agents.
- M3: Imposition of restrictions on the responsibilities women can hold within estate agencies.

#### *Step 2: Local Meanings*

The analysis then focused on local meanings, such as word choices, propositions, and relations between ideas. These meanings are influenced by context models and institutional goals. As in the selected discourse, a key word, "only," in the second line of the news report emphasizes the restriction of women's roles to secretaries or office founders, not agents, highlighting male-female discrimination. The word "warned" reflects the speaker's authority and ideological stance.

In van Dijk's (2004) framework, implicature or deducing implicit information is considered an ideological discourse structure. Presupposition also emerges through the coherence and relational dynamics of propositions. For instance, the phrase "that previously was also emphasized by the land office" presupposes ongoing emphasis, significant importance, and consensus among various offices regarding the issue. While women are permitted to obtain work licenses, they are excluded from serving as agents within offices. Notably, 800 out of 1200 estate agency license holders are women, indicating their right to hold such licenses. However, their roles are restricted compared to men, who face no such limitations in their agency duties. This unequal representation is attributed to strategies of negative portrayal of women and positive portrayal of men, known as "negative other" and "positive us" representation. This reflects the ideological structure of disclaimer, where a seemingly positive assertion is subsequently negated, as illustrated by the use of 'but' in the concluding sentences of the text (van Dijk, 2004).

#### *Step 3: Local and Global Formal Subtle Structures*

Beyond global and local meanings, this stage analyzes formal structures, both global and local. These structures include text organization, interaction features, and syntactic relations, such as word

ordering, pronominal usage, active/passive voice, and nominalizations. These features often reflect the pragmatic aspects of communication, rather than expressing deep underlying meanings.

In terms of global subtle structures, the text fits the news genre and formal style. On the local level, despite using active voice throughout, the exact agents are vaguely mentioned. This *vagueness* is used as an ideological strategy (van Dijk, 2004), highlighting the process over the agent. This is also in line with Chomsky's (1970) linguistic transformation of nominalization in his transformational theory. In this transformational model, the interest shifts from the agent and causer to the process and action. For instance, in the phrase of *with pointing out the prohibition of employment and working of women in agency offices as estate agents*, the human actor who has prohibited the action is deleted and irrecoverable and the focus is on the action itself. Furthermore, omitting the agent in not asserting *who exactly in land office has emphasized the point* is observable. Additionally, the speaker uses solidarity with other offices to support his point, stating that this issue was "previously also emphasized by the land office," a strategy designed to create consensus and ideological solidarity. This tactic, linked to local ordering, expresses agreement with the position of other offices and reinforces the claim indirectly.

Omission is also a key strategy. Vital information, such as the justification for restricting women's roles, is left out, minimizing scrutiny. Huckins (1997) notes that omission is a powerful form of backgrounding—what is not included in the text often does not even register in the reader's mind, making it difficult to question or challenge.

#### **Step 4: Relating Text and Context: Context Models**

Discourse and society are linked through context models (van Dijk, 2009a), which mediate between social structures and mental processes. Social categories like gender, race, and class can't directly influence discourse, thus context models help represent these structures. Context is described as:

1. Subjective and unique participant constructs,
2. Mental models controlling discourse,
3. Dynamic and schematically organized.

These models manage discourse production and comprehension. Contexts are influenced by elements such as setting, participants, goals, ideologies, and the ongoing social action, as proposed by van Dijk (2008). Discourse adapts to the social environment for appropriateness, defining genres, styles, and social relations.

In this analysis, the global context involves employment in estate agencies in Iran, where cultural and religious factors influence gender roles. The local context is the internet, with a news report published on December 16, 2013, by Jame Jam Sara via ISNA. The communicative roles include the estate agency union principal and land office, as well as male and female workers. The power dynamic is notable, with male and female employees being governed by decisions from the union, which holds authority over occupations. Mental models represent personal knowledge about the situation, informed by past experiences and evaluative beliefs. To ensure the validity of our interpretations and to understand the mental models of participants, interviews were conducted with 20 women, the dominated group in this case.

#### **The interviews revealed the following key themes:**

- News readers lacked prior knowledge of the issue.
- They believed the news highlighted constraints on women's jobs.
- They read the news to find the gender-based distinctions regarding employment.
- They thought that dangers for women as estate agents might also apply to women managing agencies.

- They were particularly interested in the number of women holding agency licenses.
- They believed these constraints should have been considered before granting women estate agency licenses.
- They felt the reasons for these decisions weren't specified, though some issues with women as estate agents were implied.

The communicative action in the text is the publication of an article detailing women's job limitations in estate agencies. It involves speech acts of informing and warning.

Van Dijk (2001) distinguishes between analyzing context at the levels of interaction and social groups. At the local level, the discourse is shaped by social representations of the context and the participation of social actors. Social situations, actions, and actors play a critical role in CDA. In this case, the *action* is asserting job constraints for women agents from an ideological standpoint, warning against women working as agents, and explaining distinctions between male and female employees regarding their work duties. *Actors* are part of social situations and include the estate agency union as the author of the article, with a focus on women working as estate agents. The actors also include authorities such as the estate agency union and the land office, with female employees as those expected to follow the rules.

To support this analysis, Smith's (1987) standpoint theory is useful, suggesting that knowledge is shaped by one's position in society. Smith's theory reformulates sociology by considering gender's impact on how we understand the world. Furthermore, Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration argues that both macro-level sources (*social structures*) and micro-level activity (*human agency*) are interrelated and help shape societal changes. In this case, the discourse produced by the estate agency union and land office reflects gendered power relations that affect women's professional roles and contribute to institutionalized discrimination.

Social psychological research by Glick and Fiske (2007) notes that gender relations in society foster stereotypes and ideologies that affect workplace behavior, supporting the idea that women's roles are socially constructed through these shared norms. Eagly's (1987) social role theory further suggests that traditional gender roles contribute to stereotypes about men and women's abilities and roles, reinforcing inequality.

Social representations, including knowledge, attitudes, norms, and ideologies, are expressed in discourse through mental models that help individuals form their worldviews. Manipulation, a form of cognitive control in discourse (van Dijk, 2006), influences how mental models are shaped, leading to biased representations such as ideologies. Manipulation can affect discourse both directly, through explicit claims, and indirectly, by influencing the way information is framed. For example, the news article explicitly states that "women cannot be estate agents but can have men agents in their offices," directly presenting a gender bias. Indirectly, it suggests that the authority's decision stems from a gendered perspective that legitimizes discrimination. This manipulation, fueled by authority, frames gender roles in the workplace in a way that can justify exclusionary practices.

From a psychological standpoint, theories like Eagly's (1987) social role theory and ambivalent sexism theory explain how male dominance and occupational gender segregation foster discriminatory attitudes. These societal views influence hiring decisions and gendered perceptions of jobs. Giddens (1994) observes that in modernity, gender roles are increasingly questioned, with societal shifts challenging traditional social structures. The text's gendered perspective reinforces these societal divisions by embedding gendered ideology into cognitive models that influence both micro and macro-level interactions.

Connell's theory of "hegemonic masculinity" (1995) highlights how male dominance exists not only at the interpersonal level but also in larger public and institutional structures. It underlines how power dynamics in workplaces, media, and education contribute to maintaining gender hierarchies. Adkins (1999) further suggests that the embedded structures in cultural work can exclude women from reflexive roles, reinforcing traditional power structures. Thus, analyzing the text requires

considering both its cognitive and contextual conditions within broader societal frameworks. The gendered ideology within the text reflects power relations at multiple levels, from micro interactions to macro societal structures, demonstrating how societal ideologies shape and are shaped by discourse.

### ***Step 5: Discourse Semantics – Event Models***

Linguistic semantics traditionally focuses on abstract meanings such as concepts, propositions, and their relationships. Discourse coherence, therefore, involves the relationships between propositions and the referents (facts) within those propositions. Discourse is coherent for language users when they can construct a mental model of the situation. Subjective interpretations of events are represented in episodic memory as event models. A discourse is coherent when language users can form such models, which represent events from their perspective. Event models, like context models, include categories such as Setting, Participants, and Actions/Events, but event models focus on semantics rather than pragmatics. While context models are cognitive representations of the situation, event models subjectively represent the events discussed in the discourse. In our analysis, the discourse reflects the opinions of the estate agency union about the limitations placed on women in estate agencies. It influences the readers' mental models, emphasizing gender distinctions in the workplace. The discursive control over these models reflects the biased representation of gender roles, not just the factual circumstances of women's employment.

To sum up, critical discourse analysis of the text using van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework reveals embedded ideological biases related to gender discrimination. This analysis uncovers how gender-based inequalities are presented and maintained in discourse.

### **Research Question 2**

To ensure valid analysis, all the participants were instructed on the study's goals, raising their awareness of the topic. Among 100 participants, 35 felt the text did not suggest gender discrimination. The translated analysis was provided to these participants to ensure quality. Sixty three percent were convinced by the analysis, while 37% still disagreed. To explore this further, interviews were conducted and analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) Grounded Theory approach, involving open, axial, and selective coding, resulting in 6 core categories from 86 codes (See Table 1.).

**Table 1**

*Core Categories Derived from Interviews Analysis through Grounded Theory*

<b>N</b>	<b>Core category</b>	<b>Frequency of codes</b>
<b>1</b>	The text is ideological but it does not lead to gender discrimination.	15
<b>2</b>	Its ideological stance has some social consequences.	18
<b>3</b>	It is not in contrast with our Islamic conventions.	17
<b>4</b>	We respect our religious instructions.	15
<b>5</b>	This job needs manly virtuosity.	9
<b>6</b>	Women's jobs must not indemnify our Islamic and cultural values.	12

The findings reveal significant cognitive dissonance among participants, particularly those who recognized the ideological nature of the text yet did not accept the conclusions regarding gender discrimination. This dissonance may reflect broader societal tensions between personal beliefs and the realities of gender dynamics, highlighting the need for further exploration into the psychological factors that contribute to such dissonance (Festinger, 1957). The strong connection between participants' responses and Islamic teachings underscores the powerful role religion plays in shaping perceptions of gender roles.

The insistence on adhering to religious values may lead to resistance against recognizing gender discrimination, as acknowledging such discrimination could be seen as contradicting deeply held beliefs about gender roles and responsibilities (Esposito, 2016). The second core category

suggests that while participants may not view the text as discriminatory, they acknowledge its potential impact on societal perceptions of gender roles, indicating how media narratives can shape societal norms, especially in conservative contexts (Hall, 1997). The belief that certain jobs require "manly virtuosity" reflects entrenched stereotypes that affect women's professional opportunities and reinforce gender hierarchies within the workplace and society at large (Connell, 2005).

Moreover, the results indicate a potential resistance to gender equality initiatives grounded in cultural and religious frameworks, highlighting the importance of developing culturally sensitive strategies for advocacy that respect religious beliefs while promoting gender equity (Sen, 1999). Engaging community leaders and utilizing religious narratives that support women's rights could facilitate more open discussions about gender discrimination, thereby fostering a more inclusive society. Given the complexity of the participants' responses, further qualitative research is needed to explore the nuances of their beliefs, particularly among different demographics within the Iranian population (Harding, 1987). Despite the strong adherence to traditional roles, the acknowledgment of ideological implications suggests a potential openness to dialogue about gender issues, providing a foundation for educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness about gender equality and challenging existing stereotypes (Freire, 1970).

### Conclusion

This study employed van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework for critical discourse analysis to examine gender discrimination in workplace-related discourse, specifically regarding women's roles in estate agencies in Iran. The findings highlight how gender inequality is embedded in discourse through semantic macrostructures, local meanings, and ideological discursive strategies. Key techniques such as omission, emphasis, and framing were identified as instrumental in perpetuating gender stereotypes and maintaining power imbalances.

Through participant interviews and grounded theory analysis, diverse perspectives emerged, influenced by cultural and religious beliefs deeply rooted in Islamic conventions. While the majority recognized the discourse as ideological and discriminatory, a substantial minority felt it aligned with religious and cultural values, illustrating the nuanced relationship between discourse, societal norms, and individual beliefs.

The study underscores the role of discourse in reinforcing gender roles and ideologies within institutional frameworks. Despite the careful design of the study, several limitations arise from theoretical, analytical, and practical issues that must be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the relationship between the theoretical framework and the analytical steps is not immediately clear, particularly within the context of the current framework. Additionally, the practical interconnections between various steps of analysis are often difficult to discern, especially in the final stages. This lack of clarity hindered the researchers' ability to fully comprehend the framework and effectively implement its techniques for text analysis. Secondly, the quality criterion employed in this study, specifically accessibility, is predominantly socio-psychological rather than a purely empirical scientific measure. This criterion appears to be relative, as it is influenced by the current state of mind of the sample population. Consequently, the findings may be context-dependent, varying based on spatial and temporal factors, which could limit their generalizability. Finally, although the concept of quality was acknowledged to some extent by critical discourse analysts, the validation process, essential for establishing the reliability and credibility of the results, was not thoroughly articulated. This gap in the validation framework complicated the execution of the study and may impact the robustness of the findings.

These limitations underscore the complexities inherent in critical discourse analysis and indicate potential avenues for further inquiry and methodological enhancement. Consequently, future research should investigate alternative approaches to critical discourse analysis and assess how different theoretical frameworks may elucidate analogous discursive phenomena. This exploration could significantly enrich our understanding of gender-based discrimination across diverse cultural

and institutional contexts. Furthermore, it is essential to evaluate whether other critical discourse analysis methodologies, criteria, and procedures might be more suitable for validating findings than the socio-cognitive approach or other discourse analytic frameworks.

### Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants who contributed their time and effort to this study.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

### Funding Details

There is no funding source for the study, and the authors did not receive support from any organization for the present work.

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## Appendix

زمان انتشار خبر: دوشنبه 15 آذر 1392 ساعت 13:18

جام جم سرا به نقل از ایسنا

رئیس اتحادیه مشاوران استان تهران درباره نوع فعالیت بانوان در دفاتر مشاور املاک هشدار داد و گفت: مباشر و مشاور زن نباید در دفاتر مشاور املاک استخدام شوند.

به گزارش جام جم سرا به نقل از ایسنا، حسام عقابایی با اشاره به ممنوع بودن استخدام و فعالیت نیروی زن در دفاتر مشاور املاک به عنوان مشاور و مباشر املاک اظهار کرد: دفاتر مشاور املاک فقط می‌توانند منشی یا کارمند زن استخدام کنند که پیش‌تر هم اداره اماکن بر این موضوع تاکید کرده بود. عقابایی با بیان اینکه بانوان می‌توانند پروانه کسب برای راه اندازی دفاتر املاک دریافت کنند، افزود: در حال حاضر از 1200 مشاور املاک دارای پروانه کسب 800 نفر زن پروانه کسب دارند. وی در این زمینه به مشاوران املاک هشدار داد: زنان نمی‌توانند در دفاتر املاک مشاور یا مباشر باشند اما می‌توانند مباشر مرد داشته باشند و پروانه کسب دریافت کنند.