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From Expectation to Practice: Gender Influences on Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Identities

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ABSTRACT

This study will examine gender-based differences among Iranian English teachers in their work-life perceptions, focusing on social expectations and workplace pressures as explanations for their plight and coping mechanisms for stress. Constructed on concepts of identity and feminist perceptions of action, it questions how males and females define threats to their professional identity and whether gendered coping styles exist. The team employed a qualitative approach and interviewed 11 teachers (six females, five males) who had 5-15 years of experience in the field. The results revealed five central patterns, namely: a division that pits strict versus caring and places people in fixed roles, added pressure and judgment of females just because they are females, devaluation of females skills and leadership, coping as an upbringing process where females tend to follow a shared direction at the expense of men who take an individualist perspective at the workplace and finally, the ongoing balancing process between remaining true to oneself and being a gender role actor at work. Females have to encounter invisible obstacles and emotional labor. Meanwhile, men find it hard to express their emotions and are confused because they are the only breadwinners, which puts them at risk of exhaustion. Such disparities demonstrate the reason why the support ought to be individualized. More intensive training would enable educators to adjust and feel appreciated in the English classrooms in Iran. It also paves the way to more thorough investigations into the nature of teachers outside of the occupation.

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1. Introduction

The process of teaching English in Iran is not only about the methods but also about the social roles people consider themselves to have, as well as gender, work-life, and national beliefs. It is in this combination of cultural forces that the teachers always negotiate between what schools require, what society demands, and what they themselves desire. At the center of such balancing is professional identity, the way individuals view themselves as a teacher, which is changing depending on the environment and interactions (Beijaard et al., 2004, 2023; Varghese et al., 2005). In this case, professional identity is how Iranian English teachers articulate, perform, and reflect on their responsibilities, attitudes, competence, and relationships, shaped by what their gendered workplace permits or prohibits.

There has been a recent surge in research indicating that job identity is not formed in a vacuum; it is strongly shaped by social factors such as gender (Ruan & Toom, 2022; Sunderland, 2000). In Iran, male-dominated norms permeate life at home and on the streets, shaping careers directly and indirectly, notably in the language-teaching profession. Women teachers tend to receive conflicting messages: they constitute most of the English teachers, yet still experience obstacles in the form of respect, leadership, and salaries (Chesnut, 2020; Moroz, 2024; Yan et al., 2020). In the meantime, men in the same profession may experience their own struggles, such as the need to earn higher earnings or being barred from certain schools due to gender-based classroom regulations (Cappelli & Westberg, 2024). All these dichotomous directions demonstrate that gender is not a background and that it actively influences the creation and performance of teaching identities.

Although there is increased interest among more people in the reality of who teachers are in language education, most studies do not examine how male or female influences how teachers in Iran perceive job struggles and how they behave towards them. The majority of the historical literature constructs gender as an incidental fact rather than exploring the nature of gender as something dynamic in the teaching life, with role plays, counterplayed, or altered relative to circumstances (Norton & Toohey, 2011). To top it all, although we are aware that managing stress can help teachers survive (Gu, 2017), there is very little information on whether there are differences between men and women teachers in Iran in how they cope with such stress.

The research is based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and on the feminist concept of gender as performance (Butler, 1990). It seeks to examine the influence of gender on teachers' professional identity in the context of interaction among language, power, and social expectations. Rather than viewing gender as something fixed, it emphasizes

the ways in which Iranian EFL teachers perceive their identity as something dynamic and influenced by social forces, in terms of real-life implications on their sense of self, independence, and teaching practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

Defining one's professional identity is not easy, but social, political, and cultural factors complicate it. For women educated in English in Iran, gender is a significant factor, combined with work demands and profession-specific restrictions. It is essential to unpeel these stratified realities using a sound theory framework.

The Social Identity Theory (SIT), which was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, assists in explaining how individuals can be defined by virtue of being members of particular groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This concept holds that your self-concept may be shaped by knowing not only which social groups you are part of, but also how you feel about them (Emotional) (Everett et al., 2015). In the case of teaching English in Iran, this perspective represents the push-pull between teachers (us) and others, such as schools, administration, students, or the general society (them). According to the theory, people tend to make themselves feel better by making their own group appear superior to those around them.

In Iranian schools, male teachers tend to receive more positive responses than female teachers in mixed classes - this reflects broader cultural attitudes towards gender (Hassaskhah & Zamir, 2013; Navabfard & Rezvani, 2016). To this end, the research indicates that social identity is strongly linked to professional identity, which contributes to the way in which teachers approach the classroom techniques; the more that a teacher is tied to their workplace, the more they are likely to use more profound and reflective teaching strategies (Zarei & Dobakhti, 2024). It implies that the way teachers perceive themselves professionally is not only personal but also constructed in a group, in terms of belonging, which is the primary focus of SIT. This concept further explains why educators struggle indoors when their personal values fail to align with school regulations, as they strive to maintain a positive role and live within the rigid institutional boundaries (Eslamdoost et al., 2019).

According to Butler's 1990 theory, feminist performance concepts do not treat gender as a given but as a construct constructed over history through talk and repetition within institutions (Foomani, 2024). The everyday gender construction that Iranian EFL teachers

experience occurs in classroom settings, teacher lounge settings, and during conversations with learners or parents. Rather than posing what gender is, the focus is on how it is, in fact, in these schools, being feminine or masculine, and being controlled. Such a situation occurs when female educators are compelled to appear professional and are criticized when leading boys. Other people pretend to be native speakers to sound more authentic, as foreign credentials tend to outperform local knowledge, and they have to balance between language status and gender values (Mansouri, 2021).

And on top of that, there is positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1990; Li, 2023), which examines the process through which individuals define themselves with words. People do not remain in their roles; instead, they adopt, vary, or resist roles such as leader and follower during negotiations. Studies indicate that teachers are more likely to grant boys more approval (Hassaskhah & Zamir, 2013), which increases the unequal gender relations, and new teachers may reverse the situation by asserting control (Ghiasvand et al., 2023). Combined with SIT, which is concerned with belonging and rank, this combination assists in unpacking the way Iranian EFL teachers manage gender-based work identities through actions, talk, and social position.

2.2. Gendered Articulations of Professional Challenges

The systemic issues still remain a serious problem facing Iranian EFL teachers, but these problems may highly dependent on the gender of an individual (Karimvand, 2011; Mashhadlou & Izadpanah, 2021). Despite the fact that both male and female teachers have some issues regarding the curriculum, resources, and student behavior, the issues of fairness, inequity, and the extent of their role as professionals are more prominent among female teachers. These gendered articulations highlight the complexity of the profession itself and the existence of gendered power relations, and presuppose that gender, rather than any other factor, determines the experienced reality of professional risk and threat.

Financial and institutional discrimination can be a gendered challenge. A single study based on narrative inquiry identified 12 challenges to professional identity, six of which were gendered, and all were the most disturbing (Razmjoo & Fazli, 2024). As an example, female teachers said that they were paid less than their male counterparts to do the same job, a direct and humiliating blow to the self-esteem of the former. They outlined significant obstacles to the acquisition of disciplinary power, the inability to be tough with male pupils without facing the charge of being unfair, and being viewed as excessively cruel. Besides, the female

teachers reported structural discrimination by employers, explaining that the pressure to be cheaper will lead employers to pay women less and offer them fewer jobs, creating a cycle of low pay and limited mobility (Razmjoo & Fazli, 2024). The male teachers said they had to endure financial work-related stress resulting from societal pressures to be breadwinners for their families. (Razmjoo & Fazli, 2024). The described institutional bias is also applied to the hiring process; as an example, male teachers reported that they were discriminated against, which prevented them from being hired to teach female students. Male teachers participated in a study by Razmjoo and Fazli and were told that they would only be believed when the institution trusted them. Such a restriction continues to perpetuate the traditional gender segregation in the classroom (Razmjoo & Fazli, 2024). These results make a vivid picture of the two different sets of challenges that lie in gendered societal roles and expectations.

The other issue associated with gender is not discriminating. It alters the way one displays and feels competent and effective. According to research on gender and teaching, male teachers also considered themselves more pedagogically competent than their female colleagues, even though there was no difference in students' academic performance by teachers' gender (Owliaei et al., 2023). Such a difference points to the fact that competence perceptions are not within the teaching but, more likely, the result of bias in the institution or society. Aligned self-efficacy and problem-solving abilities of stated female teachers were found even when there were more systemic pressures (Karimvand, 2011; Qeshimi et al., 2025). The competing demands brought about by institutional policies make competence complex. For example, non-native speakers will be hired in institutions, and within those institutions, they will be expected to meet Western standards of native performance and presentation (Mansouri, 2021). This poses a dilemma for them between attending to the institutional needs of their career and their professional identity. It causes female teachers to feel as if they are performing a twofold role. On the one hand, they do not want to be marginalized based on their local expertise. On the other hand, they are submissive to the execution of a foreign, privileged identity as a means of social legitimacy.

The barriers faced by professionals are still determined by age and experience. The level of perfectionism is also high among younger, early-career teachers, regardless of gender, and the risk of burnout in the profession due to excessive stress is also high (Sadraei et al. 2024). The novice effects, however, can differ by gender. In the case of female teachers, immaturity and inexperience can only worsen the situation, and they are likely to be vulnerable to the institutional abuse and inequity of silence. Conversely, older (male teachers) might enhance the anxiety of underperformance when the institute's expectations of the

young provider stereotypes are added to the salary and post demands and responsibilities. The less experienced and younger teachers employ fewer active coping mechanisms than older, more experienced teachers, suggesting a developmental sequence in responding to professional challenges (Hajmalek & Basiri, 2022). According to their results, the problems that novice teachers encounter are more dynamic than they were during the first days of their work. Lastly, the gender realities are extreme based on the articulated professional challenges by EFL teachers in Iran. Although every teacher has to put up with structural issues within the educational system, the specifics of these issues, be it financial, relational, or ideological, are infused with the gender concept, which results in different storylines of struggle, resistance, and identity loss.

2.3. Divergent Coping Strategies and Professional Resilience

When faced with the various difficulties in the Iranian EFL field, teachers regularly utilize a set of coping strategies. However, recent data indicate that the selection and use of coping strategies are becoming more systematic along the lines of gender. Although men and women use a similar range of strategies, the variance in frequency, intensity, and the driving factors concerning the use of a particular strategy suggests differing resource availability, divergence in social expectations, and the use of different strategies concerning the balance of a professional and personal life. Recognition of these issues is important in the development of more effective support mechanisms.

Research shows that there is a difference in how men and women use active versus passive coping mechanisms. A study in Tehran in 2022 that used both qualitative and quantitative approaches showed that active coping mechanisms among female teachers were used much more frequently than those among their male counterparts (Hajmalek & Basiri, 2022). Active coping mechanisms include improving personal skills, seeking professional assistance, reorganizing instructional materials, and trying out different approaches and strategies. Such proactive attempts might stem from experience in a patriarchal environment, where adaptive and skill-building activities are part of coping and survival, as women have to put in greater effort to achieve professional recognition (Hajmalek & Basiri, 2022). The study also found no gender difference in the use of passive strategies, such as emotion-oriented writing and letting things be, suggesting that, while both sexes might avoid the situation, female teachers, more than their male counterparts, actively seek problem resolution (Hajmalek & Basiri, 2022).

Other studies have documented the use of active coping strategies. For instance, Qeshmi et al. (2025) demonstrated that female teachers scored much higher on problem-solving abilities on key educational competencies such as setting a favorable learning climate, working with parents, and listening actively. In these areas, teachers' performances reflect a more robust and sophisticated toolkit in managing not only classroom behavior, but also interpersonal relations at the level of professional resilience. Novice teachers may need more extensive coping training, as Akbari and Eghtesadi (2017) noted, because they primarily use reflexive strategies and peer emotional support, which are more passive coping strategies. Conversely, Estaji and Sadr (2025) observed that the techniques employed by experienced teachers are more extended with even cognitive-avoidance techniques like lesson plan modification, which is a signal of boredom management and engagement maintenance. Findings by Daneshi (2023) display a paradox. Female teachers have higher active coping tendencies and problem-solving abilities, but report less burnout psychologically and less physically, which may indicate that the psychological and coping strategies used are more efficient in stress reduction, or that these teachers have more psychological resilience in reserve.

In its turn, the observation that men have much more reported burnout in general, even though they have lower self-efficacy and problem-solving capabilities, indicates a different type of vulnerability, and possibly one that is related to the high financial and social demands that are imposed on them (Daneshi, 2023; Razmjoo & Fazli, 2024). This makes resilience a complex concept, and it is not only about coping skills being higher, but also about the kind of stress and how it has been caused. There are also gendered patterns of emotional regulation strategies. A single study found that one of the important strategies teachers used to manage emotional demands was cognitive reappraisal, but gender differences were not examined (Sadraei et al., 2024). A different study on coping with boredom found that novice teachers used themes such as engagement and interaction, and self-care, whereas experienced teachers spoke more about variety and innovation, and professional growth, without segregation by gender (Estaji & Sadr, 2025).

In conclusion, the evidence shows that gender is a very strong predictor of coping style in the context of Iranian EFL. Women teachers seem to be more active, problem-oriented, and collaborative, and this is associated with a greater problem-solving capacity and self-efficacy. Male educators under different pressures might have more burnout and might need to depend on less-reported coping strategies. Identifying these trends is the initial stage

towards developing gender-sensitive professional development that instills in every teacher a broad and strong repertoire of coping mechanisms.

This study aims to understand the gendered aspects of professional identity and the coping strategies of Iranian EFL teachers. While research has highlighted the various challenges teachers face in Iran, few have examined inequalities in the articulation and experience of these challenges among male and female teachers in the English language teaching context. This paper, therefore, explores the intersection of gender, identity, and experience by examining the impact of gender on the negotiation of professional identity in an academic discipline and setting where prevailing social norms and institutional prejudices intersect. The study will also seek to learn how male and female teachers articulate and respond differently to the professional challenges and demands of teaching, while considering the systemic inequities in the field. By understanding this, the study will add to the knowledge of the gendered realities of teaching in Iran. Moreover, it will explore how teachers' gendered experiences, particularly the inequitable professional demands, shape the coping mechanisms of professional challenges, in particular, resilience and adaptation. To meet these aims, this research is underpinned by the following questions.

1. How do female and male EFL teachers in Iran differently articulate challenges to their professional identity?
2. Are there gendered patterns in the coping strategies employed by EFL teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Research Context

This qualitative study examined the gendered professional identity of EFL teachers in Iran and involved a purposive sample of 11 teachers, specifically the maximum variation sampling strategy, to ensure a diverse range of experiences (Ary et al., 2019). These EFL teachers were invited to participate in the study based on their experience teaching English at multiple levels of education, from high school to university, to gain a more comprehensive perspective on the complex and multifaceted issues of professional identity in a gendered workforce, as noted by Patton (2015). Almost all participants were educated in Iran. As for gender, the sample was also fairly distributed: 6 participants were female, and 5 were male. All had a range of 5 to 15 years of teaching experience, and all had at least a Master's degree in English Language Teaching (ELT) or Applied Linguistics. Having both teaching and

administrative experience was useful in analyzing their professional identity and the tactics they adopt in order to resolve the conflicting identities. All participants were informed of the research's purpose and gave their consent. Data were collected and documented using pseudonyms. Potential participants were informed about the venue, time, and specific relevant details prior to the interviews. It became apparent after a certain point that no additional insights were gained from the educators, which led to the decision to end the interviews. To maintain ethical standards, every participant received a pseudonym, and married participants had their surnames removed. The respondents' demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Respondents

Characteristics	Teachers	
Gender	Male	5
	Female	6
Education	PhD	5
	M.A	6
Teaching Experience	5–15 years	11

3.2. Instrumentation

The researcher aimed to explore participants' perspectives on EFL teachers' professional identity through semi-structured interviews. The researcher utilized online interview platforms such as Microsoft Teams. These interviews were conducted on the basis of open-ended questions (Appendix), which permitted the participants to elaborate on their reflections as well as provide a narrative of their lived experiences. The interviews focused on the primary concerns discussed in the literature review: a) the challenges pertaining to one's professional identity and b) the mechanisms and techniques used to manage and cope with identity challenges. The aim of questions one to five was to enable participants to recount their experiences and to provide their perceptions and narratives on how the social construct of their gender influenced the challenges they faced, as well as the identity they were required to perform in the classroom. This process provided a comparative qualitative data set to answer the first research question. Questions 6-9 were formulated to gain an understanding of the respondents' coping mechanisms, support-seeking behaviors, and the impact of gender

socialization on their resilience and problem-solving, thereby offering specific evidence to the second research question. Given the time restriction, the questions were purposely formulated to elicit as much detail as possible in narrative form while still allowing the researcher to pose further questions. Each of the interviews, which were conducted in English, lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Given that the participants were experienced and qualified EFL teachers, they were fully capable of conversing in English without an interpreter. The participants' views were recorded and transcribed in their original form using a voice recorder to ensure accuracy.

3.3. Procedure

The semi-structured interviews were the data collection technique for this study, chosen as the primary method to understand the experiences participants faced in negotiating their professional identities in a gendered profession. The semi-structured design also provided flexibility for exploring the teachers' personal stories and focused on the most critical issues in gender relationships and professional identity (Ary et al., 2019). The interview questions were reviewed and validated by two L2 research specialists to ensure rigor. Their responses were used to make the queries more pertinent and aligned with the research purpose, thereby enhancing the instrument's content validity. All the interviews were taped, transcribed, and analyzed to achieve accuracy and consistency. Any form of discrepancies, e.g., typographical errors, was resolved in the review process. Also, the transcriptions were cross-verified using a panel of researchers to assess the inter-rater reliability and uniformity in interpreting the data. The thematic analysis of these interviews was then compared to identify common trends and clues about how gender shapes professional identity in the Iranian EFL teaching setting.

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis of the study was performed through a rigorous and multi-cycle thematic analysis process that was informed by the principles and procedures stipulated by Saldana (2013). The approach has been chosen for its systematic and adaptable approach to the recognition, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) in qualitative data. It was an iterative and recursive analysis that entailed a repeated passage between the whole data set, the coded extracts, and the developing themes so that the analysis would be rooted in the lived experience of the participants. The analysis was structured into three major stages. The first

stage was data immersion by reading the interview transcripts several times and closely. Subsequently, a First Cycle coding had been initiated. In this study, a combination of coding was used to represent the richness and diversity of the data (Saldana, 2013). The participants were privileged and honored by having their voices heard with the help of In Vivo Coding (Saldana, 2013, p. 91) and recording their experiences using their words. Such codes as extra emotional labor (Narges), being true to myself (Negar), a delicate line to walk (Lia), and problem-solving independently (Peyman) were created to retain the exact expressions of the participants in their identity negotiations and coping strategies.

Descriptive Coding was used on larger portions of the data to identify the fundamental issues in the interviews. These codes included problems with parents, coping with colleagues' help, unequal wages, and scrutiny of appearance. The beliefs, attitudes, and values that supported the participants' statements were noted using Values Coding, such as stereotypes (e.g., women as nurturing) and beliefs (e.g., male authority is more effective). During this stage, analytic memos were produced to challenge, explore, and record the researcher's emerging thoughts, as well as potential relationships among the codes.

During the second stage, the extensive list of First Cycle codes was summarized, synthesized, and re-examined to identify broader patterns and categories (Saldana, 2013, p. 209). Pattern Coding, a code grouping method that first breaks down first-cycle codes into a smaller set of specific codes or groups them, was mainly used in this research (Saldana, 2013, p. 210). Indicatively, groups of First Cycle, such as 'parent complained too soft' (Negar), 'parent wanted male teacher' (Narges), 'student doubted authority' (Toktam), and 'students gravitated to male colleague' (Lia), were lumped into one Second Cycle termed 'Challenges to Female Authority'. Similarly, codes such as expected to be patient, expected to be nurturing, and expected to be firm were placed under the Prescribed Gendered Roles category. Such a process of clumping was introduced to all the codes that can be associated with the two research questions, and this enables the systematic classification of challenges that are identity-based, as well as the coping strategies.

The last step was to synthesize these Second Cycle categories into the essential themes. This was a process of weaving the threads of analysis (Saldana, 2013, p. 248) and examining how the categories interrelated to answer the general research questions. The categories were checked, contrasted, and narrowed to ensure they reflected the information and were not similar to each other. It was this gendered pattern in participants' responses that was the subject of this recursive analysis, which eventually led to the discovery of five primary themes, as reported in the following section.

5. Results

The review of the interview transcripts underscores the importance of Iranian EFL teachers' professional identities and coping mechanisms. Data certainly endorse the premises of your research. Specifically, female teachers contend with a considerable amount of stereotypes, double standards, and critiques of their authority. These issues influence not only the professional outcomes but also the inner selves of the teachers. Five main themes were identified in the analysis.

Theme 1: The Authoritative-Nurturing Dichotomy

This theme determines the most common difficulty expressed by the participants: a strict system of gendered stereotypes that shaped professional expectations. The data shows a clear binary. Female teachers are expected to be nurturing, while male teachers are expected to be authoritative. This stereotype is a primary source of identity negotiation. Female teachers repeatedly used words like "patient," "kind," "caring," and "nurturing" to describe the expectations placed on them. This expectation is often explicitly linked to societal roles, such as motherhood. Conversely, male teachers (Peyman, Milad) stated that they are expected to be "firm," "authoritative," and "handle discipline".

This dichotomy creates immediate professional challenges. Female teachers feel pressure to perform "extra emotional labor" that is not expected of their male colleagues. Male teachers, like Peyman, feel "self-conscious about expressing warmth or empathy", fearing it conflicts with their prescribed role.

*"As a female teacher... I noticed that many parents and even school administrators expected me to be more caring, patient, and emotionally available to students".
"While I do believe in building a strong relationship with learners, sometimes these expectations create extra emotional labor... While my male colleagues were not expected to do the same." (Narges)*

"Yes, I have felt that being a male teacher brings certain expectations. As an example, peers and parents tend to have me be authoritative and firm in the classroom and not as engaged in the emotional or nurturing aspects of student life." (Peyman)

"These expectations seem to stem from the societal role of women, especially as mothers, who are seen as more nurturing in life. The same expectation is placed on female teachers in the workplace." (Samaneh)

"Being a teacher as a male, I am expected to be firm and authoritative. It has made me more aware of the way I act, even when I am inclined toward a less demanding or less formal manner of doing things in the classroom." (Milad)

Theme 2: The Female Teacher's "Double-Bind" and Scrutiny

This theme, which primarily addresses female teachers' experiences (RQ1), highlights a professional "double-bind" in which they cannot win. If they conform to the nurturing stereotype (Theme 1), their authority is called into question. If they defy it by being authoritative, they are penalized for being "unfeminine."

Sara articulates this "conflicting view" most clearly, stating that:

"Female teachers are expected to act motherly and caring. However, when they act this way, they are regarded as less authoritative, less professional, or weak. And if they try to be more authoritative, they are accused of being too firm and less flexible. So I mean that when female teachers try to be firm, it is regarded negatively, but when men act this way, they are regarded as professional." (Sara)

Negar also experienced this conflict when a parent complained she was "too soft", which she linked to the stereotype that "authority" belongs to "male teachers".

"In one instance, a parent made complaints that I was too soft with the students. It had me questioning my professional authority, uh, my, uh. I knew that the remark was partially, uh, since I am a woman, uh, and people tend to equate the power of male teachers. It got me thinking about the way gender stereotypes, uh, can influence, uh, professional respect." (Negar)

This double-bind is reinforced by other forms of scrutiny unique to women. Multiple female participants mentioned that their appearance and dress are closely monitored in a way that their male colleagues' are not.

"When we try to assert authority, it's perceived as going against the expected feminine role". "In terms of appearance, there is also more scrutiny on how we dress." (Samaneh)

"I had to be constantly aware of how I presented myself, not just professionally, but also in a way that I aligned with cultural expectations." (Narges)

Theme 3: Devaluation of Female Competence and Authority

This theme elaborates on the manifestation of the stereotypes and double-binds (Themes 1 and 2) in the form of direct, material confrontation with female teachers on their professional identity. Parents, students, and colleagues actively undermine their authority and their ability. The participants claimed that students tend to challenge the authority of a female teacher or even be attracted to a male colleague to provide leadership. Parents clearly say they are not in a position to handle a class and that a male teacher would be more efficient and stricter. Such devaluation is also manifested in systemic and institutional forms.

Regarding unequal influence, Samaneh said, "men's opinions are often taken more seriously" and "have more influence." Additionally, Reyhaneh mentioned unequal payment, saying "men were paid more than women," even when the woman taught higher levels. Reyhaneh also referred to unequal roles in her teaching context, stating, "children's classes were given to women because they felt that women were gentler," and Narges stated that leadership roles are "offered more often to men."

"This occurred during a time when a male workmate and I were co-teaching a course, where the students appeared to prefer him as a leader, although I was more organized and prepared to lead. So this made me question whether my gender played a role..." (Lia)

"He said... he believed male teachers are usually Stricter and more effective with boys, and asked if his son could be transferred to... a male instructor... the implication was that, as a female teacher, I was somehow... less authoritative." (Narges)

"I noticed that when I took my husband to the office, because he is male, suddenly my concerns were taken more seriously... his words were still given more weight because of his gender." (Samaneh)

"Once a student doubted my ability to manage the class and a male colleague stepped in quickly. I felt my authority was questioned and I realized gender... stereotypes played a... role." (Toktam)

Theme 4: Gender-Socialized Coping Strategies

This theme directly addresses our second research question. The results indicate definite, gender-based patterns of coping with professional stress and uncertainty among teachers. Communal and emotional-reflective coping strategies were described significantly by female teachers. They "talk to close colleagues", "seek support", and engage in "emotional reflection". Many explicitly linked this to their socialization as women, which "emphasizes emotional expression and connection" and encourages them to "express emotions... and seek... support". They are also more inclined to engage other women, whom they believe appreciate the special challenges women face. Male teachers, on the contrary, mentioned separate and practical problem-solving plans. Peyman and Asef both emphasized "reflect[ing] quietly", "problem-solv[ing] independently", "speak[ing] less", and "avoiding emotional outbursts". They associate this with socialization that influences men to solve problems on their own rather than express their emotions.

"When I face stress, I tend to reflect on the situation deeply and discuss it with close colleagues, usually women. I believe the approach is certainly encouraged by my socialization as a woman, where emotional expression and connection are the key." (Lia)

"I tend to cogitate about the classroom relationships and find effective solutions... I believe that my style is conditioned by the socialization process that teaches men not to share emotions with others but to solve problems alone." (Peyman)

"I also tend to contact trusted colleagues or friends to discuss the issues... I do believe that gender socialization has influenced my taste in part. Being a woman, I was raised in an environment where girls are usually advised to reveal feelings." (Narges)

"As a man, I tend to focus on taking charge of the situation with a calm demeanor, avoiding emotional outbursts." (Asef)

Theme 5: Negotiating Authenticity against Gendered "Performance"

This is the last theme, which summarizes the essence of the professional identity negotiation. Having these strict expectations (Themes 1-3), both genders of teachers are under pressure to portray a gendered role that, in most cases, does not align with their professional identity. This was a "tiring" "juggling act" for participants. Women felt pressure to downplay assertiveness and emphasize warmth. Negar thought it made her question if she was "being true to myself as a teacher". Samaneh thought she had to "suppress my naturally cheerful and playful side". Men felt the opposite pressure: to downplay warmth and emphasize assertiveness. Peyman, for example, "held back expressing empathy or humor". For many, successful negotiation of identity was about finding a balance that integrated these conflicting demands. Peyman, for instance, "learned to integrate both authority and care" to feel "more balanced and authentic". However, this "balance" was clearly an active, conscious, and often draining process of resisting stereotypes to reclaim an authentic identity.

"This made me try to act calm, even... when I wanted to be more... strict, which sometimes made me question if I was being true to myself as a teacher." (Negar)

"I've felt the pressure to downplay assertiveness, as being too strong can be seen as aggressive, and this constant juggling act can sometimes make me feel like I'm not being entirely authentic as a teacher." (Lia)

"I was at times under pressure to undervalue my assertiveness since being too strong or too outspoken will be viewed as negative... Even in such times as I was merely being professional." (Narges)

"I have been under much pressure of having to resist my natural personality traits... This is because I discovered that when I silenced my playful nature, I felt untrue to myself." (Samaneh)

6. Discussion

The results of this research provide strong empirical evidence for the theoretical frameworks and the existing literature on the gendering of professional life among Iranian EFL teachers.

The thematic analysis shows that gender does not represent a peripheral variable, but a central, organizing principle that comes into play to influence the nature of the professional identities of teachers, the challenges which they experience, and the coping strategies they use. The data strongly show that female and male teachers belong to different professional realities, grounded in deeply rooted societal stereotypes that are further developed in the institutional arena of teaching.

The literature review notes that gender is the factor most strongly influencing the lived experiences of professional risk and threat. The results of this study (Themes 1, 2, and 3) substantiate this to a significant degree, illustrating how an omnipresent authoritative-nurturing dichotomy shapes this. This observation is the embodied experience of the so-called gendered power relations documented in the literature. Although the literature indicates that male teachers might be preferred in coed settings (Hassaskhah & Zamir, 2013), the data collected during this study explains the stereotype on the matter: male teachers are supposed to be firm and authoritative (Peyman, Milad), whereas female teachers are expected to be nurturing, patient and caring (Negar, Lia, Narges, Samaneh).

These are the expectations that would compel teachers to perform gender, which is best elucidated through the literature of feminist performativity (Butler, 1990; Foomani, 2024). The information reveals that this is not a hypothetical abstraction but a tiring day-by-day reality. Participants described being calm (Negar), asking themselves how much they were supposed to perform (Lia), and burying their naturally cheerful and playful side to be more serious (Samaneh). This is a direct response to the gendered demands of the institution and society, expressed through this performance.

This acting force forms the female teacher, the so-called double bind (Theme 2), which directly validates the results of Razmjoo and Fazli (2024). According to the literature, female teachers face the challenge of being strict without appearing too harsh. An excellent example of this discord is Sara's testimony: when women are perceived as maternal, they are seen as weak. Still, when they are authoritative, they are accused of being too firm. This was similar to the views expressed by Samaneh, who observed that when female teachers attempt to exercise authority, it is seen as a rebellion against the supposed role of a woman. This paradoxical situation is complicated by the high level of scrutiny of female teachers' appearances, as confirmed by the current study (Sara, Narges, Samaneh) and the literature (Razmjoo & Fazli, 2024).

This, therefore, means that the professional identity of female teachers is constantly questioned by diminishing their competency and authority (Theme 3). This is in line with the

literature that male teachers can be rated as more competent by themselves (Owliaei et al., 2023). The results of this study provide an overall picture: participants reported that students flock to male students who are perceived as leaders (Lia), and parents specifically asked male teachers because they felt they were stricter and more effective (Narges). The powerful example of positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1990; Li, 2023) at work is the strong anecdote of Samaneh, whose concerns are taken more seriously only when her husband, a non-educator, is present. That encounter nullified her professional ingroup (according to SIT) and re-inscribed her in a subordinate, gendered (female) outgroup role by her workmates. This devaluation is institutional as well, which validates the literature on divergent coping by providing a first-hand account of being paid less than a male coworker with less experience (Theme 4), thereby substantiating and elucidating gender-socialized coping efforts. The literature raises the possible paradox that it discovers that female teachers engage more in active coping (Hajmalek & Basiri, 2022), but also reports that novice teachers (with a significant number of them being female) turn to peer emotional support that is characterized as a passive one (Akbari & Eghtesadi, 2017).

This tension is solved in this study (Theme 4). The female participants' preference for talking to close colleagues is not a passive action, as they strongly prefer it (Negar, Lia, Narges, Samaneh). Instead, it is a dynamic and emotion-focused coping. This is consistent with the original effort of coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping are used to differentiate between problem-focused (handling the problem) and emotion-focused (handling the feelings caused by the problem) approaches. Because of the "extra emotional labor" (Theme 1) and the "double-bind" (Theme 2) that female teachers specifically experience, this collectivized, emotion-centered approach is an active and needed way to build resilience. This is why the literature reports that female teachers have greater problem-solving skills (Qeshmi et al., 2025); their problem-solving process first reflects on the problem, followed by a practical solution, as Narges clearly described.

On the other hand, the strategy of the male participants fits well with a problem-based model. They talked about fitting quietly, finding practical solutions (Peyman), and avoiding emotional outbursts (Asef). Peyman directly attributed this to socialization that promotes problem-solving among men while preventing them from expressing their emotions. Yet, such dependence on individual problem-solving strategies, with a socialization towards being stoic, could unwillingly alienate male teachers. The men are not connected to the critical peer support as women are because they do not need to use communal networks to process the extra emotional workload of the job (unlike their female colleagues). Such isolation is

probably a contributor to the significantly greater levels of burnout documented among men in the literature (Daneshi, 2023; Razmjoo & Fazli, 2024), suggesting that men's resilience tactics, being pragmatically oriented, might be more costly in terms of their psychological impact.

Ultimately, this study confirms that the negotiation of professional identity for these teachers is a constant, tiring "juggling act" (Lia). This is the central conflict of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and meets feminist performativity (Butler, 1990). The participants are caught between their internal, professional self-concept (their "ingroup" as a competent teacher) and the gendered roles the institution and society demand they perform.

The "double performance" of non-native teachers (Mansouri, 2021) cited in the literature is clearly mirrored here as a gendered double performance. Teachers must not only demonstrate their professional competence but also a "correct" gender identity. This pressure to "downplay... assertiveness" (Lia, Narges) or "minimize displays of emotional vulnerability" (Peyman) leads directly to a fractured sense of self, making them question if they are "being true to myself" (Negar) or feeling "not being entirely authentic" (Lia). The "balance" that several participants (Peyman, Samaneh) strive for is, in itself, the act of identity negotiation.

7. Conclusion and implications

This study demonstrates how gender shapes the professional identity of Iranian EFL teachers at profound and enduring levels. Applying the concepts of SIT and feminist interpretations of performance, one will notice that the issues men and women teachers encounter at work are extremely different, shaped by the culture and school systems. Women have a puzzling combination of being expected to lead and remain caring at the same time, being criticized regardless of their actions, and their talents and power are usually ignored. On the other hand, men have difficulty in being perceived as primary breadwinners, suppressing feelings, and even losing specific teaching positions. These gendered experiences not only add up, but they also transform the ways educators perceive themselves, perform their work, or manage work pressures. The most interesting aspect was how coping mechanisms based on gender roles were taught: women were inclined toward collective, emotional, conjectural approaches, and men toward self-sufficient, problem-oriented behavior. It demonstrates that resilience is not a universal characteristic that can be used across the board but rather is influenced by social conventions related to gender and workplace configurations. Balancing reality, trying to

correspond the exterior needs with inner principles became an essential, even tiring, component of who they believed they needed to be, regardless of gender.

This research provides specific results relevant to the particular environment, but it also has some limitations. First of all, the small sample size ($N = 11$), predominantly city or town residents of Iran, complicates the extrapolation of the findings. Teachers in isolated or poorly furnished regions may be confronted with gender issues shaped by local customs and school restrictions, and therefore, the findings may not be suitable for them. In addition, the study included only people with M.A. and PhD degrees and those who were instructed at various levels, which means the views of less-qualified or omitted teachers might have been missed, as the data only included those who are more privileged. Third, interview responses individuals give about themselves, although helpful in gauging personal attitudes, may be influenced by a desire to impress others or by how an individual recalls such information in the future. Finally, the study did not specifically examine the same variables, such as whether an individual is married, has children, was born in a specific income group, or belongs to a particular religion, yet they can influence the manner in which gender manifests when individuals establish their careers.

These boundaries indicate some strong directions of subsequent research. Regarding the first one, a broader study incorporating both statistical data and personal opinions would confirm the prevalence and intensity of these gender tendencies across various sections of the Iranian education system, e.g., private language schools versus public ones, or universities. The same type of project could also rely on real-life observation or daily records to support survey responses and observe how people actually behave at that time. Second, we do need research that considers cross-cutting effects such as gender and class, age, marital status, or language abilities to influence individual perceptions of themselves in the workplace and their stress management. Take teaching: Is there a difference in authority between being an unmarried woman and being a married mom? How about men in poorer families? What is their response to the pressure to help others?

Third, longitudinal studies could trace the manner in which the gender-based identity struggles may evolve through the early career to the later phases, as well as observing how the coping mechanisms evolve or change over time, mainly when new laws or political developments occur in Iran. Fourth, analyzing other cultures could contribute to refining the theory. What are the gender identity patterns among Iranian EFL teachers compared to those of other similar institutions, such as Turkey, Egypt, or Indonesia, where Islam or Global

South realities are the determining factor? These adjacent views can divide local assumptions about gender and teaching from concepts distributed across the globe.

Finally, action-oriented research could examine how gender-specific training initiatives, such as female instructors' support groups or emotional intelligence training among male instructors, can be used to allow educators to be more authentic. The researchers should consider deep learning with practical change, evaluating the impact of these efforts on teachers' mental health, job retention, and classroom confidence. This study demonstrates that gender is not a no-go side note, but it is an active contributor to the work life of EFL teachers in Iran. The sight of this fact implies not only increasing fairness or teacher welfare but also opening the possibilities of transforming language instruction into something more approachable, more human.

Bio-data

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Authors' contributions

Ali Mavaddat Kakhki: Conceptualization; data analysis; original draft preparation.

Sajjad Zahedi Moghaddam: Conceptualization; data collection; review & editing.

Mahla Ghelichi: Data collection; revision & editing

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