

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 76 (2022)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Navigating and resisting the compulsory military service in Iran : embodied experiences of non-heterosexual Iranian men

Autor: Naeimi, Mohammad / Kjaran, Jón Ingvar

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1035030>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 26.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Mohammad Naeimi* and Jón Ingvar Kjaran

Navigating and resisting the compulsory military service in Iran: embodied experiences of non-heterosexual Iranian men

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2021-0020>

Received July 8, 2021; accepted November 25, 2021; published online December 24, 2021

Abstract: In the homosocial space of the all male military service, (hetero)masculinity and gender normativity are promoted and bravery and warrior mentality are highly valued. On this basis, policing gender and sexuality is a relevant issue, aiming to reward heteronormativity and hyper masculinity and marginalize non heterosexuality and gender nonconforming performances. In the Iranian context, since the Iran Iraq war (1980–1988), military service has produced a feature of militarized (hetero)masculinities through the cult of martyrdom. It enforces soldiers to stand up against the enemy, be willing to seek martyrdom and sacrifice themselves in order to protect the Islamic Iranian homeland. It is a symbol of entering adulthood and during that time young men are expected to embody the official ideology which revolves around heteronormativity and strict gender norms. In this context, the focus of this paper is the embodied experiences of those young conscripts who do not embody the (hetero)masculine ideal, because they are either non heterosexual or do not fit into the strict regime of gender. Drawing on ethnographic data, and policy documents, this paper shows how the idea of the (hetero)masculine ideal has been translated into practice through the dispositif of the *sarbazi* and how some young Iranian non heterosexual men try to resist conscription while others try to find ways to carve out a liminal heterotopic space during their military service.

Keywords: heteronormativity; Iran; martyrdom; masculinity; military service

*Corresponding author: Mohammad Naeimi, School of Education and Diversity, University of Iceland, Sæmundargata 2, 102 Reykjavík, Iceland, E-mail: mohammad@hi.is

Jón Ingvar Kjaran, School of Education and Diversity, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland, E-mail: jik@hi.is

1 Introduction

The obligatory military service or *sarbazi* in Farsi is either dreaded or embraced by young Iranian men depending on their social class, sexuality and location. With some exemptions, it applies to all Iranian males from the age of 18 to 49, and its duration is, on average, 21 months. During *sarbazi* young men are required to leave their civilian life behind and enter an all male homosocial space in which (hetero) masculinity and gender normativity are promoted and bravery and warrior mentality are highly valued.¹ On this basis, policing gender and sexuality is a relevant issue, aiming to reward heteronormativity and hyper masculinity and marginalize non heterosexuality and gender nonconforming performances. In the Iranian context, since the Iran Iraq war (1980–1988), military service has produced a feature of militarized (hetero)masculinities through the cult of martyrdom.² It enforces soldiers to stand up against the enemy, be willing to seek martyrdom and sacrifice themselves in order to protect the Islamic Iranian homeland (ibid). Thus, entering the military service is seen as a task for young men to accomplish, and a prerequisite for full participation in Iranian society. In other words, to become legitimate and recognized citizens young men have to finish military service. It is a symbol of entering adulthood and during that time young men are expected to embody the official ideology which revolves around heteronormativity, martyrdom and strict gender norms. In this context, the focus of this paper is the embodied experiences of those conscripts who do not embody the (hetero) masculine ideal, because they are either non heterosexual or do not fit into the strict regime of gender. The focus is therefore on how *sarbazi* functions as a disciplinary dispositif, which is a network of power relations and manipulation of gender and sexuality, not only within the institution of the military but in broader society. Drawing on interview data, policy documents and other resources, this paper shows how the idea of the ideal man has been translated into practices through the dispositif of the *sarbazi* and how some young Iranian non heterosexual men try to resist (avoid) conscription while others try to find ways to carve out a liminal heterotopic space during their military service. In contextualizing *sarbazi*, we start by giving a short overview of previous research on the military (military service) with regards to gender and sexuality. This is followed by a discussion on how military conscription came into being during the first years of the Islamic republic and how it became an important institution in sustaining and producing the official ideology of the state. We then move on to theory and, methods and data. Then the findings are presented where the main focus is on

1 Lehtonen 2015.

2 Gözl 2019.

embodied experiences of 10 non heterosexual Iranian men and how they both resist and navigate the heterotopic space of *sarbazi*.

2 Contextualizing *sarbazi* within the discourse of heteronationalism and martyrdom

Research on the institution of the military with regards to the LGBTI population, particularly in the US, has mostly been framed around inclusion and civil rights. The argument has been that gays and lesbians should have the right to serve in the armed forces and it should be seen as acceptance into the national imaginary.³ In the US, studies have focused on the implications and effects of the DADT regulation from the Clinton administration (don't ask don't tell), the changes after it was repealed by Barak Obama, as well as how gays and lesbians are perceived by their peers or the military authorities.⁴ Overall, few studies have taken a critical approach to the institution of the military, both as a site of militarized masculinity and violence against the "terrorist" other.⁵ Jasbir Puar has addressed these issues in her seminal book *Terrorist Assemblages* where she coins the term "homonationalism" to be used as an analytical lens to explore how the inclusion of some gays and lesbians in the US nation state, amongst others the right to be in the military, has served domestic and foreign imperial interests. The workings of homonationalism, therefore, make some members of the LGBT population, willingly or unwillingly, complacent with the aims of the nation state.⁶ Thus, inclusion into the nation state and becoming an acknowledged citizen with rights and responsibilities come with a cost for some but privileges for others. The discourse of homonationalism also cites and draws on the discourse of modernity, whereas some nations are depicted as "progressive" and "civilized" in terms of sexual rights – which today means granting some members of the LGBTI population the right to serve in the military. Framed within the homonationalist discourse, Iran has been depicted as barbaric and uncivilized in terms of how it treats non heterosexuals citizens.⁷ However, at the same time, the Iranian state draws on heteronationalist discourse in othering and marginalizing sexual and gender minorities, as well as depicting the West as morally corrupt. In that sense,

3 Sinclair 2009.

4 Sinclair 2009.

5 Shefer and Mankay 2007.

6 Puar 2007.

7 Ingvar Kjaran 2019.

heteronationalism is the other side of nationalism.⁸ In Iran, through the workings of heteronationalism, infused by religious ideology and persistency of *ummat* (Islamic nation), gays and lesbians are excluded and erased from the official discourse and society in general. This was epitomized by the former Iranian president, M. Ahmadinejad, during his visit to the US in 2007, when he said that there “are no gays in Iran”.⁹ He emphasized that this kind of practice was only to be found in the West. It is therefore within the context of heteronationalism that we draw attention to how *sarbazi* functions in sustaining and reproducing the official ideology of the Iranian state. In other words, the institution of *sarbazi* is not only for the protection of the physical external borders of Iran but also the non physical borders of morality in terms of gender performances and religiosity. Furthermore, *sarbazi* is a site where hegemonic masculinity is reinforced and played out. Connell coined the term hegemonic masculinity, which refers to culturally normative ideals of male behaviors, embodied in social structures and discourse.¹⁰ For hegemonic masculinity to thrive it needs to have followers who do what Connell calls complicity. Thus, within particular institutions of society, the bearers of hegemonic masculinity are often not so numerous. However, the complicit majority reinforces the ideology of hegemonic masculinity in order to secure their privileged position. This can have many manifestations and is dependent on historical and social context. In Iran, hegemonic masculinity is constructed around heterosexuality, martyrdom and religiosity. Furthermore, other characteristics and practices of masculinity are emphasized:

[B]elief in **God**, love of nature, **piety** and chastity, honesty, trustworthiness, thrift and frugality, knowledge, sense of **responsibility** and dependability, **loyalty** and **devotion**, modesty, simplicity, and passion for equality and justice. The model individual is one who has cleansed him/herself of carnal desires and sins, and as such is different from his/her counterpart in the West whose life is aimed at pleasure seeking and fun.¹¹

As can be seen in the quote, the ideal Iranian man should embody various qualities which are depicted as different from those emphasized in the “pleasure seeking” West. These qualities are then reinforced through the institutional processes of *sarbazi* in the construction of the ideal citizen who adheres to the obligations and practices inscribed in the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Religiosity is emphasized in the description and several concepts underline this: God, piety, responsibility, loyalty, and devotion. Furthermore, the ideal man should not only

⁸ Sloomaeckers 2019.

⁹ Whitaker 2007.

¹⁰ Connell 1995; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005.

¹¹ Mehran 1989: 38.

believe in God and pursue the life of devotion and piety, but also be ready to die for his belief and the nation. In that sense, martyrdom is highly valued in Iranian society and plays an important role in the discursive construction of hegemonic masculinity. In Iran, the idea of martyrdom goes beyond the period of the Iran Iraq war (1980–1988). It is an inhabitation of mythical and religious tragedies creating a cult of emotional inwardness and ceremonial lamentation. The mythical tragedy adheres to Siavash's character, as one of the figures of Iran's national epic, who is a pre Islamic hero and a symbol of innocence in Persian literature for over the past millennia.¹² To defend his own chastity and to prove his own innocence against the accusation of making advances on his stepmother, Siavash passed unscathed through fire and admitted a self imposed exile. However, ultimately he was unjustly beheaded in exile by his enemies and it is said that when he was wrongly executed three drops of blood fell down on the ground from which grew an anemone which stands for innocence and virtue betrayed.¹³ On the other hand, the religious tragedy is linked to the post Islamic character of the third Imam of Shiite Abu Abdallah Hoseyn bin Ali. He earned martyrdom as he challenged and refused to pledge allegiance to the rule of Umayyad Caliph Yazid. Thus, he along with his family and companions were martyred by Yazid in the plain of Karbala and on the 10th day of Muharram in 680 CE, known as Ashura.¹⁴ In Iran, during the Ashura, men walk the streets mourning in public the death of Husayn through self flagellation. Thus, the representation of these two events produces a notion of martyrdom that encourages heroic self sacrifice of the true believers once facing tyranny and injustice. During the Iran Iraq war, the notion of martyrdom however was further developed and institutionalized to support the war effort. Young men were handed plastic keys to put around their necks as a symbol of devotion and salvation. They were then placed at the front line and sacrificed in thousands.¹⁵ After the war, the martyrs of the war have been incorporated into various public spaces. Streets are named after them and numerous pictures or murals of martyrs are placed on houses or public buildings. They are celebrated as heroes and ideal examples of bravery and masculinity. The discourse of martyrdom and how it intersects with masculinity is then used by the state to inscribe on its citizen the official ideology in terms of gender and sexuality and what is to be expected of them: to be willing to sacrifice themselves for Islam and the Islamic revolution. Thus, young men are supposed to follow in the steps of past martyrs by doing

¹² Mir Ansari 2012; Khosravi 2008: 49.

¹³ Wellman 2021: 149; Promey 2014.

¹⁴ Promey 2014.

¹⁵ Karsh 2009: 60.

sarbazi for 24 months, which is seen as a time of transitioning from boyhood into manhood. However, we also aim to draw attention to the fact that *sarbazi* is an ambivalent space wherein while non heterosexual bodies encounter otherness and marginalization, they are also able to carve out a liminal space of meaning and self construction. Thus, this paper also contributes to the growing literature on gender, bodies, and space in the Iranian context.¹⁶ In the next section, we have developed the theoretical foundation to show how the military produces docile bodies based on conventional gender and sexual norms, whereas the homosocial space of the military can be seen as an ambivalent space opening up the site of resistance and agency.

3 Theoretical foundation

From a Foucauldian perspective, sexuality in general and homosexuality, in particular, should not be thought of as a “kind of natural given, which power tries to hold in check”.¹⁷ Instead, they should be conceived in a power knowledge oriented network or what he calls *dispositif*. *Dispositif* is an assemblage of discourses or discursive practices that define our social institutions and provide limits for understanding the world and produce regimes of truth that define and frame of our reality. Discourse as a mechanism of power produces a network of power knowledge that is governed by the rules of exclusion of what can or cannot be spoken, acted upon, thought, and tolerated.¹⁸ In the *dispositif*, sexuality and body of the subject are sexualized through discourses and have become the focus of a multitude of institutions, and practices that turn sex into the object of concerns and regulations. In the *dispositif*, discourses operate through two forms of disciplinary power and biopolitics.¹⁹ Disciplinary power operates at the micro level and at the level of single institutions—educational (school and colleges), medical (psychiatric hospitals) and punitive (prisons) institutions—and works through tactics such as surveillance, training and detention. This power concerns each subject in society and produces obeying and docile bodies through the normalization processes. Biopolitics, on the other hand, operates at the macro level and works through the state’s tactics and what Foucault calls governmentality. The biopolitics of the population administrates and politicizes the body of society as a

16 Ozyegin 2016; Shahrokni 2019; Amini and McCormack, 2021.

17 Foucault 1978: 105–106.

18 Foucault 1978: 117.

19 Foucault 1978: 139.

whole by regulating “the propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” to preserve the entire wellbeing fabric of society.²⁰

Foucault takes homosexuality as an example and argues that in the ancient civil codes “sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them”. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past “... type of life, a life form”.²¹ He continues that “we must not forget that psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized ... less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself”.²² A crucial component of Foucault’s assertion about this epistemological and historical shift is the vision that sexual identities are the products of the *dispositif* developed in the discourses that spun out the new disciplines and sciences of the modern period, such as biology, psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Thus, with the proliferation of these scientific discourses, the production of sexuality in terms of the regulation and normalization of the sexual subject as well as pathologization and medicalization of those deemed sexually abnormal such as homosexuality became the object of public concern. A homosexual body in the nineteenth century was scientifically taxonomized as an abnormal form or an abject body needing treatments to be cured, normalized, or excluded from the rest of the respectable and productive population. In one sense, the biopolitical state segregates and preserves productive bodies “while divesting in degenerate abject bodies a process of making live and letting die”²³ in order to maximize the potential productivity of the population in terms of procreation and the highest profit for the biopolitical nation state. However, Foucault emphasizes that the *dispositif* of discourses, which operate through tactics of disciplinary and biopolitical power, are not repressive but productive as they produce subjects who become both objects and modes of power.²⁴ In other words, in the *dispositif* of discourses, subjects are subjugated to be brought or bring themselves into conformity with particular standards but to a certain extent they simultaneously are able to resist and transform the effects of such technologies of power in their own social interaction and for their own benefits. As Foucault argues, resistance is a perpetual component of power and “where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this

20 Foucault 1978: 139.

21 Foucault 1978: 43.

22 Foucault 1978: 43.

23 Veronka 2019: 82.

24 Foucault 1978.

resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”.²⁵ Thus, resistance is an undoing of the dispositif of discourses and modes of power. Within the space of such undoing, there is a relatively autonomous personal political ethos that reproduces not social norms and normative ways of being, but a space of agency and transformation and in Allen’s words, “a form of resistance involving the crossing of limits or boundaries through which one is able to attain a certain mode of being”.²⁶ For example, Foucault argues that in the dispositif where the pathological and medical definition of homosexuality was a tool of oppression, since the gay movement it has turned into a means of resistance by which people could say “if we are sick, then why do you condemn us, why do you despise us?”.²⁷ In terms of resistance, Foucault also puts forward the concept of “heterotopia” as a counter site of the ordinary world and as “those singular spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others”.²⁸ In other words, heterotopias are places of otherness whose otherness is established through “a relationship of difference with other sites, such that their presence either provides an unsettling of spatial and social relations or an alternative representation of spatial and social relations”.²⁹ Thus, Foucauldian heterotopias are spaces within which subjects are allowed to challenge and transgress the convention and norms and create a liminal space where, as David Harvey argues, subjects are able to “carve out ... spaces of resistance and freedom ... from an otherwise repressive world” and facilitate “the process of becoming”³⁰ Johnson, however, reminds us that instead of viewing Foucauldian heterotopic space as sites of liberation, they should be understood as experimental laboratory or space³¹ This is in line with Foucault who do not suggest freedom as a ‘thing’ *per se*, but rather see it as a set of acts and practices. We agree with Johnson’s understanding of Foucault’s concept of heterotopias and conceptualize it in the Iranian context.

By drawing on Foucault, Judith Butler elaborates on the construction of gender and sexuality and reworks Foucault’s conceptualization of resistance. She argues that gender is performative and citational, produced and stylized as the result of repetition of certain acts over time in a given culture. She claims that also sex is not a natural essence, rather it is the gender that “designate[s] ... very apparatus of productions whereby the sexes themselves are established”.³² In other words, both

25 Foucault 1978: 95.

26 Allen 2008: 92.

27 Foucault 1997: 168.

28 Foucault 1986: 252.

29 Hetherington 2002: 8.

30 Harvey 1989: 201.

31 Johnson 2006.

32 Butler 1990: 7.

gender and sexuality are mutually produced and regulated through performative practices within what she calls the “heterosexual matrix”, demonstrating relations of coherence among biological sex, gender identity, and heterosexuality in the discursive construction of subjectivity. She asserts that the norms of heterosexuality established the grid of intelligibility that its premise is based on heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Subjects repeatedly perform the hegemonic discourse of cisnormativity and heteronormativity in order to gain recognizability within a particular societal (discursive) context. However, any trouble and break between this coherence of sex, gender and sexuality is considered as non normative and unnatural and the subject within the heterosexual matrix will be unintelligible. In other words, bodies that matter, are recognized within the discourse and are thus read as real and intelligible. Those bodies who do not matter, are rendered as abject whose lives and materiality is understood to be outside of recognizability and legitimate existence. They fail to materialize and remain within the domain of “unspeakability”.³³ Thus, the heterosexual matrix stabilizes the normative structure of heteronormativity in society and defines the realm of intelligibility and unintelligibility within the dispositif of discourses. Butler also elaborates the Foucauldian understanding of resistance which involves both subjectivity “the process of becoming a subject” and subjugation “the process of becoming subordinated by power”.³⁴ On her account, subjectivity and subjugation are inevitably intertwined. In other words, subjectivity is produced through subordination to power. In that sense, power relations and norms are also the conditions of the possibility of agency. However, such an agency is not a full agentic but it is partial as it is subsumed by the duality of subjection and subjugation to norms. Thus, in agreement with Foucault, Butler’s treatment of resistance is a possibility within the dispositif of discourses or what she calls “culturally intelligible” by which she points to the various forms and modalities of resistance that are more inconspicuous and subtle in a given particular culture such as reinvention and resignification of words and labels, or certain bodily performance.³⁵ Following Foucault and Butler, this paper aims to conceptualize militarism and military camps as a dispositif wherein the subject is involved both in the process of subjectification and subjugation. From a Foucauldian perspective, military space is a modern institution aiming to produce militarized docile bodies (soldiers) to internalize the naturalizing masculine heteronormative performances fitted to the script of heterosexual matrix. In the military context, like in other institutions, masculine and heteronormative ideals have been intimately co

33 Butler 1993.

34 Butler 2002: 13–19.

35 Butler 1990: 40.

constructed and intertwined as the core element of the construction of hegemonic masculinity which is heteronormativity.³⁶ In such heteronormative structures, masculinity is actively constructed in relation and in contrast to the notions of femininity as well as homosexuality.³⁷ On this account, homophobia will be enabled to be flourished once the national, religious and ethnic heritage of culture promotes heteronormativity, heterosexuality and masculinity.³⁸ Based on this, homosexuality and gender non conformity threaten such hegemony of patriarchal heteronormativity as they are neither conforming to traditional gender roles nor adhering to reproductive logic. Thus, power relations in the military space subjugate the subject. However, resistance in the military, from Foucault and Butler's point of view, is possible within the same power relation as the subject is able to construct its subjectivity and thus undo the normative system. In the next section, we go through the data collected from the participants regarding their embodied experiences and resistance within the dispositif of *sarbazi*.

4 The study

4.1 Data and the participants

In the first step toward methodological discussion, we state that the nature of the investigation in this paper is exploratory and theoretically inspired and the data is a part of a larger ethnographic dataset and consist of a) semi structured interviews with 10 young men who identify as gay or bisexual (see Table 1); b) official documents (laws, regulations, statements, brochures, websites etc.) on *sarbazi* and the Iranian armed forces. Our participants were selected purposively as being born shortly before or after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Most of them came from middle-class families and lived in the northern part of Tehran. All the participants were accessed mainly through one of the key informants in Tehran. He also arranged for the second author to attend various gay gatherings and parties during his four field trips to Tehran. The second author had also prior to his fieldwork contacted queer Iranian men through dating apps, and other dating sites for gay males. All of the participants agreed to take part in the research and knew that the researcher identified as gay. It was felt that such disclosure was productive in gaining their trust and confidentiality. They were open about their feelings and

36 Sundevall / Persson 2016.

37 Sundevall / Persson 2016.

38 Van Wormer, et al. 2000; Pharr 1988.

Table 1: Participants.

Name	Sexuality/gender	Age	Location	Sarbazi
Ali Reza	Gay/cisgender	20s	Tehran	Not yet
Ardalan	Gay/cisgender	30s	Tehran	Yes
Basiar	Gay/cisgender	20s	Tehran	No
Farhod	Gay/cisgender	20s	Tehran	No
Merdad	Bisexual/cisgender	30s	Tehran	No
Mika	Gay/genderqueer	20s	Tehran	Yes
Morteza	Gay/cisgender	20s	Tehran	No
Nima	Gay/cisgender	30s	Tehran	Yes
Sina	Gay/cisgender	20s	Tehran	No
Surena	Gay/cisgender	30s	Tehran	No

wanted to contribute to the research by providing accounts of how they experienced a queer way of life in Iran.

The second author conducted all interviews during his field trip to Iran in 2015 and 2016. The interviews were mostly conducted in English as the second author does not speak Farsi. Most of the participants had an academic degree or were studying and thus had a good knowledge of English. For those who did not speak English fluently, the interview was conducted in Farsi with the help of key informants, friends, or boyfriends (partners) of the interviewee. In order to protect the participants, pseudonyms were used and the meetings were mostly in public places, for example in parks or cafes. Moreover, the participants were assured that the interview data would be used only by the researchers. All except one agreed to have his interview recorded. The interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim. Where the interview was conducted in Farsi, key informants helped the second author to write it up and clarify nuances. Then the first author read through the transcripts and checked the translation for accuracy. In the interviews variety of topics were covered regarding gay livability and strategies employed. In this paper, the focus is on the *sarbazi* and how the participants either avoided conscription or experienced it.

4.2 Analysis

The interview data was divided into themes by drawing on thematic analysis.³⁹ The themes were identified on the basis of repetitions, practices, looks, and gender performances the participants said they used as strategies to either navigate the

³⁹ Braun and Clarke 2006.

heterotopic space of the *sarbazi* or to resist it by seeking exemption. Furthermore, the aim was to draw attention to how the participants positioned themselves within the discourse. After an initial analysis conducted by the second author, both authors discussed the themes, strategies and different subject positions. The focus was particularly on how different views and stories of practices, looks, and bodily performances could be interpreted as strategies and discursive positioning. In analyzing the documents a mixture of Foucauldian and critical discourse analysis was employed.⁴⁰ Foucault's critical discourse analysis is socio historical and argues that it is in a discourse that power and knowledge join together.⁴¹ That is to say, discourses are a body of linguistic and non linguistic instruments that hold the truth, define individuals' relationships, regulate and control both the body of individuals, as well as the social body.⁴² Foucault also puts forward that discourses as tools of power are used to police and punish certain bodies in order to maintain the social order and exert control on human agency. Drawing upon Foucault, Fairclough presents ideology and ideological effects as a "major concern for critical discourse analysis". He argues that ideologies are representations of aspects of the world that contribute to "establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation".⁴³

4.3 Ethics and positionality

The participants were briefed on the research and asked to give informed consent. They were assured of confidentiality and advised about their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, special measures were taken to guarantee the safety of the participants by meeting them discreetly and ensuring that nothing they said could be traced back to them. With regards to our positionality then the second author identifies as gay and cisgender and comes from a small island community in the global north. He has been to Iran many times for fieldwork in the past few years. Being gay and coming outside of Iran often made it easier to establish rapport and trust during the interview process. The first author is an Iranian who was born and grew up in Iran and identifies as gay and cisgender and now lives in Western Europe. In analyzing the data we combined our perspectives and orientations, offering an insider and an outsider view, from the global south and global north. By doing so we have tried to mitigate

40 Fairclough 2010.

41 Foucault 1981: 65.

42 Foucault 1978.

43 Fairclough 2003: 9.

cultural biases, a unidirectional interpretation of the data in terms of gender and sexuality, and fallacies of interpretation pertaining to the global north/south binary framework.

As with all ethnographic studies, this study has its limitations, especially with regards to the selection of participants and field of the study (mostly taking place in Tehran). This, however, should not reduce the quality of the study, as both authors have tried to contextualize the data and offer a nuanced analysis of the interviews. We are therefore aware of the limitations of our study and there is no attempt made to generalize about the topic. We thus understand that the experiences of our participants are one of many in contributing to a richer understanding of the embodied experiences of queer Iranian men by giving some insights into how the *sarbazi* is experienced and navigated.

5 *Sarbazi* as the site for the official ideology

Military service in Iran came into being and was constituted during the nineteenth century and under the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925).⁴⁴ However, it was during the first Pahlavi, Reza Shah (1925–1941) that a national army based on universal military service was constituted. Reza Shah was “antagonistic toward clergy” and aimed to build up a modern nation state along with a modern national identity through the adoption of the “material advances of the west” and “a break down of the traditional power of religion and a growing tendency toward secularism”.⁴⁵ In order to do so, at the early stages of his monarchy, he picked up a discourse of secular nationalism as the official culture and ideology of the state. In this regard, a modern form of army and military service were constituted as institutions that predate the creation of the modern nation state and forcibly protect the national territory as well as the official ideology from hostile and foreign ideology and community.⁴⁶ Thus, in Iran, like many others, the official ideology of the state and military service are inextricably linked. After the 1979 revolution, the ideology of the state, in contrast to the Pahlavi, adhered to the devotion to the values of Shia Islam. In this context, the Islamic state established its own system of oversight over the military. This system of control assigned “clerical commissars to the arm forces and created an Ideological Political Directorate to indoctrinate the armed forces in the ideology of the revolution”.⁴⁷ The process of the ideologization of the army and

44 Balslev 2019.

45 Banani 1984: 44–45.

46 Cronin 1998.

47 Eisenstadt 2011.

military service is inscribed and legalized in the Iranian Islamic constitution. Article 3 of the Islamic Constitution states that all resources should be available to strengthen the national defense and make the military service into professional service through universal military training in order to secure the independence of the Islamic territory and its Islamic system.⁴⁸ Article 144 goes beyond the specialization of the military and insists on its responsibility toward maintaining and promoting the Shite doctrine and keeping the fight against the enemy of God. This article asserts that the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran “must be an Islamic army attached to the values of the Islamic ideology and committed to the People. It must also accept and hire in its service those deserving individuals who are both true believers to the goal of the Islamic revolution and a devotee to the way of its realization”.⁴⁹ These two articles are in line with the scheme of biopolitics within which training of a soldier in the military service is essential in the administration of the regulatory regime. Because the soldier’s attire, attitudes and actions are evidence for the state’s successful efforts to discipline human life for its biopolitical purposes. Moreover, not only individuals but also society as a whole are motivated to be in fulfillment of the ideology of the biopolitical state. For example, article 151 puts forward and claims that the state is responsible to provide for “all citizens” a program of military training and facilities by which everyone will be always able to engage in the armed defenses of the country’s territories and Islamic ideology.⁵⁰ However, in the Iranian Islamic constitution, all citizens are defined as Iranian males 18–49 years of age who are legally eligible for conscription.⁵¹ By such definition, non heterosexuals are exempt and excluded from military service because as already mentioned the cultural and official heteronationalist discourse operates within the heterosexual matrix along with the interrelated workings of masculinity and “martyrdom seeking attitude”⁵² by which an ideal man, who is heterosexual and gender conforming, is eligible to save and maintain the persistency of *ummat* (Islamic nation) and Iranian Islamic identity.

On this account, the military service since the establishment of the Islamic state has been used as a dispositif or an ideological official institution within which the “ideal man would either be martyred, thus providing for his family the honor of this status and the support of the state, or would return to enjoy the status of a righteous veteran and govern his family as an honorable father/husband”.⁵³

48 WIPO 1989.

49 WIPO 1989.

50 WIPO 1989.

51 WIPO 1989.

52 Khosravi 2008: 53.

53 Motlagh 2016: 197.

Thus, the dispositif of the military service defines the realm of intelligibility and unintelligibility within which the legitimate position of the subject is constituted through the matrix of heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and promotion of martyrdom. Outside of this matrix and within such a heteronormative hierarchy of power relations queer individuals are subordinated and placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. Furthermore, since queer people often challenge the heteronormative system, they cannot be included in the realm of intelligibility. They should therefore be silenced or excluded from military service. For doing so, one available strategy is the different options for exemptions from the military service such as being the only son of the family, the sole caretaker of parents/siblings, or having demonstrable exceptional scholastic achievements.⁵⁴ Eligible conscripts can also apply for an exemption on some other grounds, such as disability or mental/physical illnesses. For gay identifying Iranians, the available option to apply for an exemption from compulsory military service is applying for Medical Exemption from the Draft, approved by the president's cabinet on May 11, 2014. The exemption of trans individuals and homosexuals from the military service is mentioned under the regulations of the medical exemption chapter 5: titled "psychiatric diseases" that covers mental and psychological conditions such as schizoaffective disorder, delusional disorder, and certain intellectual and developmental disabilities. Under these regulations, homosexuals and gender nonconforming individuals are juxtaposed to these mental and psychological conditions.⁵⁵ For example, section 12 of chapter 5 states that "Gender Identity Disorder (TS) that is certified by the LMO [Legal Medicine Organization] and confirmed by the Armed Service's medical centers [is grounds for] for permanent exemption".⁵⁶ These regulations particularly article 7 address and represent homosexuality as "perversions that violate the social and military code of conduct". Under this article, after six months of deferment and upon confirmation by the Armed Service's medical centers, [the applicant is eligible] for the permanent exemption.⁵⁷ However, the process of getting that kind of an exemption card or *kart moafiat az sarbazi* (in Farsi) entails undergoing numerous physical and psychological tests and exams and providing intimate information regarding one's personal life.

6Rang, the Iranian lesbian and transgender network, states that "not only the new protocol is more time consuming, but it is also degrading and violates the basic human rights of the individual applicants. The process forces the individual applicants to declare having same sex relations and reveals intimate details of their

54 Medical Exemption Regulation 2014: 21.

55 Medical Exemption Regulation 2014: 43.

56 Medical Exemption Regulation 2014: 45.

57 Medical Exemption Regulation 2014: 44.

sexual lives”.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Iran country report published in June 2018 states that dismissal from military service due to sexual orientation maybe become the basis for later discrimination. The same report also notes that “men whose homosexuality or transgenderism has been established (through an intrusive medical examination) are exempted from military service and given the designation mentally ill on their military card, which can lead to later difficulties when seeking employment”.⁵⁹ In fact, non heterosexual men who opt for this kind of exemption, have to accept their pathological subject position, being categorized as mentally “ill” – “sick” – by the military authorities. This kind of categorization, as well as having to confess their sexual identity, opens them up for more intensified surveillance, official stigmatization, and discrimination.⁶⁰ However, avoiding *sarbazi* should also be framed within the narrative of resistance in the sense that by doing so one is in Foucauldian ethical terms true to one’s self which means rejecting the ideology of the state and the official masculine gender and sexual script which is heterosexuality and cisnormativity or gender binarism. In this paper, we have discussed and developed the issue of exemption from military service as a liminal space. We now turn to the lived experiences of Iranian gay identifying men and how they experience the *sarbazi* and exemption process.

6 Embodied experiences of *sarbazi*

By drawing on official documents pertinent to education system, we have discussed somewhere else⁶¹ to show how, through schooling students in Iran, a linear pathway is presented by which emphasis is placed on establishing a family and adhere to the dominant gender regime. In textbooks and in the curricula this linear pathway is by highlighting the institution of marriage which symbolizes the transition from childhood to adulthood. The same applies to martyrdom and to be ready to sacrifice oneself for the collective good. This is further inscribed into public spaces through images of past martyrs and revolutionary slogans of sacrifice, piety, bravery, and obligations. Thus, to become a real man and transition from boyhood to manhood, boys and young men need to embrace these obligations and position themselves on the discourse of hegemonic masculinity. For non heterosexual men, this might be difficult and even impossible to do. For our

58 6Rang 2016.

59 Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) 2018.

60 Human Rights Watch 2010: 23; Reaching Out Winnipeg 2013.

61 Naeimi and Kjaran 2021.

participants, the sole thought of having to serve in the armed forces, or entering into a heterosexual marriage, often caused them stress and anxiety. Thus, most of them tried to employ some social strategies, either to avoid undertaking these social obligations or to find some ways to make them more bearable. In other words, adjusting their non heterosexual identity and same sex desires in order to meet these social obligations, which are often discursively constructed as a test of manhood – male rites of passage. The focus here is on *sarbazi* and exemption from it as a heterotopic space which draws attention to the policing and disciplinary power of the official ideology in terms of gender and sexuality. By exploring how *sarbazi* is experienced, resisted and navigated by those who do not officially “fit” into its heteromale grids allows us to demonstrate both the disciplinary nature and instability of such spaces. In other words, spaces as being both discursive and material, are made, remade and unmade. As such, they change over time, depending on the context and whom they inhabit as we now turn to.

6.1 The army

Mika, who identifies as gay and gender queer, felt the pressure from family members to enter the military service. They thought that the military would make him tougher and he would become a “real man”:

We are all actors. I did my military service and I tried to be masculine. I tried to act as a man [laughing]. At home I am not worried that I attract some attention from my family or when I go out because it is so hard not be recognized as gay man. But in the army, I tried.

Mika invokes here a common theme about being an actor that often came up in the narrative of our participants. For them, “acting” generally means having two lives: The “heteronormative” life pursued within the family and in society in general and the “gay” life which is then experienced with friends, partners or during parties. However, for Mika, identifying as gay and gender queer, keeping these two lives apart was not was easy. He would somehow be spotted immediately as not fully fitting into the grids of the heterosexual matrix. During his military service, he tried to act as a “real man” but was never able to hide his true identity and some of his fellow conscripts soon noticed that he was somehow different from the others and began to approach him:

[During that time] some people tried to get close to me. I tried to scare them away somehow. I dated some guys in the military, but it did not work out. They were not actually gay but only needed some [sex]. You know in the masculine society like the military ... men like me are sex objects. It is something that is real [laughter]. But now I am getting older and I learn to be myself no matter what. This was my past and what happens next, I don't know. There are limits of course.

Here Mika narrates that some of his fellow conscripts in the military spotted him and began to approach him to engage in sex. He explains this by saying that “men like me are sex object”, particularly within the all male space of the military. What Mika is referring to with the phrase “men like me” is that some men are perceived as “feminine” because they do not fit into the strict gender regimes of Iranian society. They are seen as “women” and “passive”. Non heterosexuality is inscribed on their bodies and within the Iranian gay community they are labeled as “gay looking”. However, adopting the “gay look”, which means applying to make up and dress well, can also be understood as a performative act to draw attention towards oneself in order to increase the chances in the game of sex. As Mika indicates in the narrative, he became sought after and found lovers in the military. Some of them even kept him under their protection because they really liked him. Mika emphasized in our conversation that these men did not identify as “gay” and that the gender segregated space of the military created the conditions whereas he became a sex object. However, the classical “deprivation” hypothesis, by which the strict gender segregation and lack of female intimacy have caused “straight” men to turn to other men to satisfy their sexual needs, does not fully explain this kind of contextualized homosexuality and gender hierarchies, at least not in the Middle Eastern context. These have deeper cultural roots whereas the strict binary categories of homo/heterosexuality do not fully apply there, not even today in a globalized world of hybrid identities. Furthermore, it can be argued that within the Iranian context, the discourse about the “gay look” and the passive “effeminate” man (boy), draws on the cultural memory of same sex desire, manifested for example in classical Persian poems, in which mature men praise love to beardless and smooth young men, who are often depicted as sweet and effeminate. Thus, to be read as gay, because of performing his gender outside of the dominant gender regimes, Mika found ways to navigate the space of the *sarbazi* and turned his time there into a positive experience. He felt desired and did not encounter any problems. However, there are “limits”, as he mentions, referring to the fact that he is not recognized as a person in Iran, still getting gaze from men who perceive him as effeminate and sex object.

Nima also draws attention to the heterotopic space of the army in terms of sexuality and gender, and how he was perceived as “gay looking” before he joined:

I went to the army. It is different and depends on your class. I am from a higher class. I don't have a problem in the army. I was very gay looking before I went to the army. In the army, I learned to be a man behave manly and I lost my gay looking. I have sex in the army but only with one soldier. He was on security watch and during the night I had a romantic time with him in the seat of a military jeep. He was straight and engaged with a woman. He was so horny,

As Mika, he engaged in sex with a fellow soldier who identified as straight. Furthermore, he did not have any problems during the military service. What is also interesting in his narrative, in contrast to Mika, Nima draws attention to his social status. He connects it to being treated well during *sarbazi*. In fact, Iranian society is highly segregated, not only in terms of gender but also with regards to social class, location and race. Those coming from the “higher classes” not only have the financial means to ease their existence and acquire both material and cultural wealth, but also a network of friends and family members in high positions. In the case of Nima, coming from a rich family and living in the fancy neighborhoods of North Tehran, he probably had some connections in the military through family members or was able to pay bribes if necessary to get easier postings during *sarbazi*. This was not the case of Mika, whom the second author met in a gay party in the southern part of Tehran, mostly inhabited by working class families. Thus, when sexuality and social class intersect, this creates two different worlds in present day Iran whereas some have more opportunities than others. Nevertheless, irrespective of social class and economic means, both Mika and Nima are oppressed by the rigid gender regime and were considered to be “gay looking”. Thus, in order to “correct” their feminine traits and practices, they were pressured by their families to serve in the military. In that sense, *sarbazi* can be understood as a site of schooling gender performances in line with hegemonic masculinity. They both refer to this and indicate that they somehow became more masculine during that time, although at the same time engaging in same sex with fellow soldiers.

Seeing the obligatory military service as an opportunity could also be noted in Ali Reza’s narrative, in which he perceives it as a solution to the marriage imperative, at least for the time being. Moreover, the same as Mika and Nima, he does not seem to have a choice, other than entering the military service. In the following excerpt from a chat the second author had with him at a gay party in northern Tehran, he expresses his thoughts about the military service:

Ali Reza: I am finishing my studies, master degree, and I want to go to military service after that because here in Iran, you must do that. I know this will be very hard for me.

Second author: The military?

Ali Reza: Yes, but we can tell the authorities that we are gay and then we get an exemption from the military service. I don’t want that. It is bad for my future when I want to work because I will have this on my file forever. I will have some problems finding a job.

Second author: They have a code on the exemption card that says that you are sick?

Ali Reza: Yes a special code that says I am sick, meaning I am gay.

Second author: But you don’t want to do that?

Ali Reza: No I don’t want that because I will not find a good job in Iran after that. They will maybe check the code.

Second author: Are you afraid to enter military service?

Ali Reza: Yes because I love soldiers in uniform. I don't know, what can I do (laughter)?

Second author: Many soldiers will be in uniform there.

Ali Reza: Yes. I don't like to use guns. I am afraid of guns. But I have to do that in the military.

Second author: So you just have to finish it.

Ali Reza: Yes.

Similar to Mika, Ali Reza tries to see something positive about his conscription in the near future “soldiers in uniforms,” which he joyfully fetishizes. However, it is clear from his narrative that he has no other choice than to undertake the conscription, both in terms of future job opportunities and also to delay his marriage. Applying for the exemption card is thus not an option, as he does not want to run the risk of being stigmatized. Some of our other participants opted for the exemption card as we now turn to.

6.2 Exemption

As we discussed previously there are few exemptions allowed from *sarbazi*. This was particularly the case in the first decade of the Islamic Republic and during the Iran Iraq war. Shahram Khosravi narrates how in order for him to avoid military service and possible injuries or death, he had to take on an arduous journey from Iran to Europe.⁶² Although a lot of things have changed in Iran since Khosravi took on his journey it is still a difficult task to apply for and get the exemption card. It is a journey that will affect one's life and involves various bureaucratic processes in which the gaze of the state apparatus is turned on one's body and mind. For some, it is easy to undertake as Afshin reveals: “I just went to the psychologist and told him about my orientations and have the exemption card.” For others it can be a bit difficult as Pouria talks about:

We have some exemptions [from military service] of which one of them is proof that you are homosexual. [This] means that you have some kind of mental disorder. Military doctors will test and evaluate you psychologically, and after that, they interview you again to decide whether you are really gay or not. Actually, most of these doctors are not knowledgeable enough. They just know that there are feminine boys and that these feminine boys are homosexuals. If you are not feminine enough they will not categorize you as homosexual. So most people who go there will act feminine even if they are not. They are wearing certain clothes to make them look feminine. I got this kind of an exemption card easily, but my boyfriend face[d] some problems because they sa[id] that he acts like a “normal” guy, and that he can correct his way of being by undertaking some therapy. Then he can return to leading [a] “normal” life as a heterosexual. But I talked to his mother and I asked her to come

62 Khosravi 2010.

to the military medical office and to tell them that her son was like this, that when he was boy he played with dolls, he did these “girlish” things. She came there and she said all these things and after that, they gave him the exemption card.

Pouria’s account reveals the particular gender dynamics involving deliberate and conscious gender performativity that is at play in securing exemption from military service.⁶³ He highlights how the homosexual subject only becomes intelligible in the eyes of the state through the embodied and performative inscription of femininity, which negates any trace of masculinity, the latter which also serves as the indicator of a diagnostic basis for ruling out the possibility of being gay. Such gender performances in terms of diagnosing one’s sexuality have also been reported in other Middle Eastern contexts. Oyman Basaran, for example, argues that military authorities in Turkey are directly influenced “by the culturally specific stereotype of homosexuality” in its association with effeminacy as a basis for determining exemption for gay draftees.⁶⁴ In order to secure an exemption, they need to perform their gender in “feminine” ways and are required to declare an affinity for a passive role in sexual relationships. Thus, these state sanctioned practices regarding what counts as a legible category of person and acceptable sexual personhood cannot be easily disentangled from the culturally inscribed norms of performing one’s gender within the grid of a heterosexual matrix.⁶⁵ Applying for and getting the exemption from *sarbazi* forces Iranian non heterosexual men to take up particular subject positions. They also have to become “patients” and are positioned as “sick” as Farhod explains: “On the card, they state that you have some kind of disease, you are sick.” Thus, applying for the exemption cards entails undergoing a medical examination and psychological evaluation. As Pouria describes the state evaluates and decides whether you are “deviant” and “sick” and hence eligible for exemption. For some the process is easy and they both have the financial means, support, and know how to “play” their role during the examination. However, for others as in the case of Pouria’s boyfriend, it can be more difficult and for him to finally get the approval had to perform his sexuality in line with the official gender (sexual) script.

7 Discussion

Drawing upon Foucault’s concept of heterotopias and his understanding of resistance we argue that Iranian non heterosexual men’ practices regarding

63 Butler 1990.

64 Basaran 2014.

65 Butler 1990.

military service including conscription and applying for exemption cards can be seen as resistive and strategic by which they are able to enter a liminal space of being by making heterotopic spaces within the dispositif of *sarbazi*. As already explained, non heterosexual Iranian men need to perform their gender in a feminine way in order to be eligible for the possession of the exemption card. Such executive approach in militarism regarding gender and sexuality touches upon the femininity and passivity in sex, drawing on the cultural memory of same sex desire, manifested in classical Persian literature and poems. As Afary argues, male same sex relations were based on a “status defined homosexuality” whereby men were identified by their “positionality” during sexual intercourse. Because it was assumed that in the gender convention of pre modern Iranian society, in same sex intercourse, one partner was deemed as masculine and another as feminine.⁶⁶ In this traditional understanding of sexuality and gender, the feminine partner was considered as sick and contemptible or he was viewed as an “imperfect man” and someone who suffered from the loss of manliness.⁶⁷ Thus, the modern military state apparatus aims to orbit around and maintain the traditional convention of gender and sexuality to produce and promote “bare life” which is a term that has been used by Italian philosopher Agamben, referring to the very form of life that has been produced and imposed by the predominant or sovereign form of power.⁶⁸ By doing this, Iranian gay identifying men are forced to perform the feminine gender role inscribed in the official culture of the society in order to pursue their bare life and define themselves according to the traditional understanding of gender and sexuality. Moreover, by acquiring the exemption card, gay identifying men also become in the eyes of the biopolitical state what Agamben has termed as “homo sacer”,⁶⁹ untouchable, banned, or stigmatized. In that sense, one’s body is transformed into “bare life” based on the conventional gender roles and simultaneously as being gay is neither recognized nor accepted in society and the official discourse. Being a holder of an exemption card contributes to certain *social death* as “nobody trusts you because you are seen as sick and crazy”, as Sina mentioned in our conversation. This was also mentioned by Ali Reza and one of the main reasons he did not want to apply for the exemption card. He wanted to have some kind of future in Iran, for example in terms of job opportunities. Applying for the exemption card, our participants knew what the consequences could be and what kind of life they would have access to. Nevertheless, they applied, mocked the

66 Afary 2009: 81.

67 Ze’evi 2006: 21, 141.

68 Agamben 1995.

69 Agamben 1995.

system and played their role during the examination process which enabled them to evade *sarbazi* – one of the key sites for the enforcement of official ideology and hegemonic masculinity. In this regard, we argue that by applying for the exemption card, Iranian gay identifying men have created a heterotopic space within the military state apparatus through the adaptation of certain bodily performances as a subtle modality of resistance or a counterstrategy against the tactics of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity for full integration of non heterosexual men into the heterosexual matrix and inscribed cultural intelligibility. In other words, by performing the feminine gender role, Iranian gay men have created a strategic heterotopia whereby whereas pursue their bare life, by never fully being integrated into its institutions and ideological apparatus. This is in line with Butler's conceptualization of agency, arguing that the subject cannot be a full agentic self, rather it is a partial agency because its subjectivity is produced through the duality of subjection and subjugation to norms.⁷⁰

Moreover, we argue that although the systematic and historical exclusion of homosexuals ensures the development of military readiness and encourages masculine camaraderie, the unit cohesion and homosocial space in military institutions simultaneously privilege homosocial relations. Homosociality means “the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex”.⁷¹ Thus, homosocial spaces in militarism open up the possibilities of homoerotic relations and “allows men to play with other men” and “fulfill their desires” but as long as they remain within the “confines of the epistemology of the closet” and do not challenge the heteronormative system.⁷² The creation of such heterotopias orbits around the notion of “the will not know”—a tactic that worked and still works against the enforcement of anti homosexual laws in Muslim societies.⁷³ This tactic denotes that despite strong Shari'a disapproval, same sex desire and love have been implicitly recognized and tolerated as cultural practices as long as those men who desire such relations remain discreet while also respecting certain social conventions. In other words, in Muslim societies such as Iran, same sex relations have been an “open secret”, something neither talked about nor expressed in public.⁷⁴ As such, Mika and Nima used unit cohesion and homosocial space in military institutions in order to resist and fulfill their homoerotic and same sex desires within the heteronormative and masculine construction of *sarbazi*. In that

70 Butler 1990.

71 Lipman-Blumen 1976.

72 Basham 2013.

73 Murray 1997: 14–54.

74 Ingvar Kjaran 2019.

sense, Mika and Nima transformed the spaces within *sarbazi* into the opposite and an alternative site for heteronormative space that can be seen as Foucauldian heterotopias wherein soldiers, who do not embody the (hetero)masculine ideal, because they are either non heterosexual or do not fit into the strict regime of gender, carve out a liminal space of resistance and becoming. Within such heterotopic spatiality, Mika and Nima, who do not fit in the regime of gender, transform and queer the spaces within the limits set by the dominant discourse on gender and sexuality in order to explore different gendered and sexual identities.

8 Conclusions

Drawing upon Foucault's and Butler's theoretical tools in the realm of gender and sexuality, this paper illustrates how military service as a modern institution contributes to the preservation and the promotion of the heterosexual matrix and conventional gender roles in order to produce ideal men. By doing so, it functions as an integral element of the biopolitical state which reproduces and sustains discursive practices of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy. To argue this matter and contextualize it in the Iranian context, we have used the discourses of heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity and martyrdom as analytical tools to show how their interrelated workings produce a military dispositif within which the ideas of an ideal man are constituted. In line with that logic, such a person must be heterosexual, gender conforming, and willing to sacrifice himself for the Islamic Republic of Iran. In fact, this ideal construction of a man is depicted as a counterexample and the opposite of those individuals who do not define themselves within the heterosexual matrix and bipolarity of gender. Thus, such dispositif defines the realm of intelligibility and unintelligibility within which whereas the legitimate position of the subject is constituted through the abovementioned hegemonic discourses, the non legitimate position of the subject is defined outside of this matrix and detached from predominant discourses. Thus, this paper has drawn attention to how the military dispositif attempts to systematically silence or exclude non heterosexual people from military service, either because of their sexual orientations or gender identities which challenge the heteronormative system. By doing so, we have drawn attention to the universal nature of militarism and the military as a space of hegemonic masculine practices, which operate both in the global north and south. At the same time, we have also demonstrated how these practices can be queered and resisted.

References

- Afary, Jenet (2009): *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio (1995): *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Allan, Juile (2008): *Rethinking Inclusion: The Philosophers of Difference in Practice*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Amini, Elham / McCormack, Marc (2021): “Older Iranian Muslim Women’s Experiences of Sex and Sexuality: A Biographical Approach”. *The British Journal of Sociology* 72.2: 300–314.
- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) (2018): *Country Information Report Iran*: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-iran.pdf> (11 December 2018).
- Balslev, Sivan (2019): *Iranian Masculinities: Gender and Sexuality in Late Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Basham, Victoria (2013): *War, Identity and Liberal State: Everyday Experiences of the Geopolitical in the Armed Forces*. New York: Routledge.
- Banani, Amin (1984): *The Modernization of Iran, 1921–1941*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Basaran, Oyman (2014): “‘You are like a virus’ Dangerous bodies and military medical authorities in Turkey”. *Gender & Society* 28.4: 562–582.
- Braun, Virginia / Clarke, Victoria (2006): “Using thematic analysis in psychology”. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2: 77–101.
- Butler, Judith (1990): *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1993): *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (2002): “Bodies and Power, Revisited”. *Radical Philosophy* 114: 13–19.
- Connell, Raewyn (1995): *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Connell, Raewyn / Messerschmidt, James W. (2005): “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept”. *Gender & Society* 19.6: 829–859.
- Conscription and Exemption Regulation in Islamic Republic of Iran (2014): *Medical Exemption Regulation*. Available in Persian at <http://vazifeh.police.ir/?siteid=25&fkeyid=&siteid=25&pageid=4274> (January 18, 2016).
- Cronin, Stephanie (1998): “Conscription and Popular Resistance in Iran, 1925–1941”. *International Review of Social History* 43: 451–471.
- Eisenstadt, Michael (2011): “Iran’s Islamic Revolution: Lessons for the Arab Spring of 2011?”. *Strategic Forum*. National Defense University, 1–12.
- Fairclough, Norman (2003): *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Fairclough, Norman (2010): *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel (1978): *The Will to the Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, Michel (1981): “The Order of Discourse”. In *Untying the Text: a Post-Structural Anthology*. Edited by Young, Robert. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 51–78.
- Foucault, Michel (1986): “Of Other Spaces”. *Diacritics* 16: 22–27.
- Foucault, Michel (1997): *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*. New York: New Press.
- Gölz, Olmo (2019): “Martyrdom and Masculinity in Warring Iran: The Karbala Paradigm, the Heroic, and the Personal Dimensions of War”. *Behemoth a Journal on Civilisation* 12.1: 35–51.

- Harvey, David (1989): *The Conditions of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hetherington, Kevin (2002): *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch (2010): *We Are a Buried Generation: Discrimination and Violence against Sexual Minorities in Iran*. USA: Human Rights Watch.
- Ingvar Kjaran, Jon (2019): *Gay Life Stories: Same-Sex Desires in Post-Revolutionary Iran*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland.
- Johnson, Peter (2006): "Unveiling Foucault's Different Spaces". *History of Human Sciences* 19. 4: 75–90.
- Karsh, Efraim (2009): *The Iran-Iraq War*. New York: Rosen Publishing.
- Khosravi, Shahram (2008): *Young and Defiant in Tehran*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Khosravi, Shahram (2010): *"Illegal" Traveller. An Auto-Ethnography of Borders*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lehtonen, Jukka (2015): "Going to the 'Men's School'? Non-heterosexual and Trans Youth Choosing Military Service in Finland". *Norma: International Journal of Masculinity Studies* 10.2: 117–135.
- Lipman Blumen, Jean (1976): "Toward a Homosocial Theory of Sex Roles: An Explanation of the Sex Segregation of Social Institutions". *Signs* 1.3: 15–31.
- Mehran, Golnar (1989): "Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran". *Iranian Studies* 22.1: 35–50.
- Mir Ansari, Ali (2012): *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Motlagh, Amy (2016): "What Kind of Crisis? Marriage and Masculinity in Contemporary Iranian Cinema". In: *Domestic Tensions, National Anxieties: Global Perspectives on Marriage, Crisis, and Nation*. Edited by Celesio, Kristin & Kholoussy, Hana. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 192–211.
- Murray, Stephen O. (1997): "The Will not to Know, Islamic Accommodations of Male Homosexuality". In: *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*. Edited by Murray, Stephen O. / Roscoe, Will New York: New York University Press, 14–54.
- Naeimi, Mohammad/Ingvar Kjaran, Jon (2021): "Schooling Heteronormative Practices in the Islamic Republic of Iran". *Sex-Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2021.1911797>.
- Ozyegin, Gul (2016): *Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pharr, Suzanne (1988): *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*. California: Chardon Press.
- Promey, Sally M. (2014): *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Puar, Jasbir K. (2007): *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. London: Duke University Press.
- Reaching Out Winnipeg (2013): *Gay Men in Iran's Military Can Seek Exemption*. <https://reachingoutwinnipeg.com/2013/08/13/gay-men-in-irans-military-can-seek-exemption/> (07/1/2021).
- Shahrokni, Nazanin (2019): *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Shefer, Tamar / Mankayi, Nyameka (2007): "The (Hetero)Sexualization of the Military and the Militarization of (Hetero)Sex: Discourses on Male (Hetero)Sexual Practices among a Group of Young Men in the South African Military". *Sexualities* 10.2: 189–207.

- Sinclair, G. Dean (2009): "Homosexuality and the Military: A Review of the Literature". *Journal of Homosexuality* 56: 701–718.
- Slootmaeckers, Koen (2019): "Nationalism as Competing Masculinities: Homophobia as a Technology of Othering for Hetero- and Homonationalism". *Theory and Society* 48: 239–265.
- Sundevall, Fia / Persson, Alma (2016): "LGBT in the Military: Policy Development in Sweden 1944–2014". *Sex Res Soc Policy* 13: 119–129.
- Van Wormer, Katherine et al. (2000): *Social Work with lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals: A Strengths Perspective*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Voronka, Jijian (2019): "Slow Death through Evidence-Based Research". In: *Madness, Violence, and Power: A Critical Collection*. Edited by Daley, Andrea et al. (Toronto Buffalo London: Toronto University Press), 80–96.
- Wellman, Rose (2021): *Feeding Iran: Shi`i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic*. California, University of California Press.
- Whitaker, Brian (2007): *No Homosexuality Here*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/sep/25/nohomosexualityhere> (2021/06/21).
- World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (1989): *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ir/ir001en.pdf>. (2021/6/2).
- Ze'evi, Dror (2006): *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900*. Berkely, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- 6Rang (2016): *Confessing to having same-sex relations is the new norm for military service exemptions in Iran*. 6Rang. <https://6rang.org/english/2261/> (04/6/2021).

