





Sociological Analysis of the Sense of Social Belonging Among Women in the Urban Community of Arak

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to investigate the level of social belonging among women in the urban community of Arak and to examine the factors influencing this belonging.

Methods and Materials: This research employed a descriptive, cross-sectional survey method. The study sample consisted of 418 women from Arak, selected using stratified sampling based on population size. Data collection was conducted through a structured questionnaire, which was validated using content validity and the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) method, as well as Cronbach's alpha to ensure reliability. The questionnaire assessed four main dimensions of social belonging: attachment to symbols and norms, social trust, extreme individualism, and socioeconomic status. Data analysis involved factor analysis and structural equation modeling using Smart PLS software.

Findings: The results revealed that most women in the sample reported moderate levels of social belonging, with 61.6% indicating a moderate sense of belonging, 22.6% a low sense, and 15.8% a high sense. About 42% of women expressed dissatisfaction with urban symbols and norms, while 35% had a positive view of social trust in Arak. Approximately 34% of respondents prioritized personal interests over group interests, indicating a significant presence of extreme individualism. Factor analysis confirmed that social trust, attachment to symbols, and overall social belonging accounted for over 43% of the variance in related variables, and the confirmatory factor analysis validated the proposed model of social belonging among women in Arak.

Conclusion: The study concluded that social belonging is crucial for urban quality of life and is influenced by emotional and social factors such as trust and attachment to the environment. The findings aligned with Durkheim's and Giddens' theories, emphasizing the importance of emotional bonds and the interconnection between social structures and individual actions.

Keywords: Social belonging; sense of belonging to symbols; social trust; extreme individualism; women of Arak.

1. Introduction

The topic of social trust and the sense of belonging is of such importance that it can be argued that the most significant issue of social order is nothing other than social cohesion (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Huntwork, 2024). Without solidarity and a sense of belonging, one cannot be optimistic about the sustainability and stability of social order and security. Undoubtedly, in this context, security and the feeling of security are influenced by various factors; the absence of these factors either slows down or prevents the establishment of security (Fazeli, 2016, 2020). The necessity of studying and researching this issue arises from the fact that actual and potential internal threats in less developed countries often jeopardize the social security of these societies. Therefore, identifying the factors and elements that ensure social security and the sense of safety, as well as social belonging based on social trust, considering the quality of life characteristics of women in Arak, is a fundamental prerequisite for planning to elevate the social level. Fazeli (2016) also considers these two factors as primary contributors to women's presence in the city in his book *The Feminization of the City and mentions in Life is All About Understanding Problems* that a problem does not necessarily mean a difficulty. Rather, it is a condition that the researcher identifies as a gap between what exists and what should be in society (Fazeli, 2016). The art of the researcher is precisely this: to identify the problem earlier and more timely, before it turns into a difficulty and then a harm. Given the importance of these concepts and their interaction, this study will examine the nature of the connection between these variables, specifically the sense of belonging among women in Arak, as a research problem.

What highlights the necessity of this study and is crucial to this research is that women's security and social belonging reflect the value of roles such as motherhood, wifehood, and, sometimes, family headship. Remaining unharmed and protected from any threat or violence, whether physical or psychological, is crucial because it will, in turn, impact future generations. Studies show that security and social belonging among women can significantly enhance the quality of urban life and social dynamism. This issue can be identified through the examination of variables in prior studies. Although a study that includes all three variables could not be found, analysis of similar variables and research that at least involved two variables led us to conclude that social security and belonging can be influenced by the quality of urban life.

Social belonging, in its literal sense, means companionship and solidarity (Cohen, 1996). The feeling of belonging is one of the most important features in forming any group and regulates the relationship between the individual and the group. The sense of social belonging creates a shared belief among group members that their needs will be met through collective actions and objectives (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2008). Researchers have defined the sense of social belonging as one of the qualitative indicators in social classes. Individuals who feel a stronger sense of social belonging in their place of residence exhibit more motivation, effort, and success in dealing with challenges and problems. The sense of social belonging brings with it feelings of security and interest (De Orontiis et al., 2013), and conversely, a sense of security can increase the feeling of social belonging. Findings indicate that individuals who perceive their living environment as secure have a stronger sense of social belonging. The absence of a feeling of security leads residents to avoid public places and events (Giddens, 1997, 2008), which relatively decreases social interaction. Most studies have found that strong social bonds correlate positively with social cohesion (Ritzer, 1995; Roche, 1999).

The emotional aspect of belonging, as discussed by theorists like Markowsky and Lator, strengthens group cohesion. According to Homans (1972), social belonging directs individuals' social actions, facilitating group sustainability, while any weakening of this belonging undermines social foundations. At the societal level, belonging to the collective "we" of society ensures social stability and vitality. McMillan and Chavis (1986) further elaborate on social belonging through four dimensions: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional bonds. These elements are pivotal for fostering citizens' attachment to their community and urban environment. The attachment to place arises from symbolic and emotional interactions with one's environment, shaped by experiences, cultural meanings, and long-term engagement (Nik Khah & Valipour, 2020).

Parsons' theory emphasizes that social belonging emerges from structured motivations and orientations shaped by societal contexts. He discusses social action variables like attachment versus neutrality and individual versus collective interests (Ritzer, 1997). These variables illustrate how social conditions influence behavior, suggesting that self-interest and individualism may diminish social belonging. Conversely, collective action and societal norms foster social cohesion. Giddens' theory of

structuration highlights the dual relationship between structure and agency, noting that social conditions enable and constrain actions. Social belonging is influenced by economic, social, political, and cultural factors, and these conditions, in turn, shape and are shaped by the collective sense of belonging (Mojtabavi & Naghi, 2023; Nik Khah & Valipour, 2020).

Weber's perspective introduces the concept of subjective meanings in social actions, differentiating between goal-oriented rationality, value-driven actions, emotional reactions, and traditional behaviors. This diversity of motives illustrates how individual intentions shape social structures and interactions. Weber's emphasis on personal meanings connects to belonging by suggesting that individuals' interpretations of their social contexts influence their feelings of attachment and security. Durkheim's work complements this by exploring how collective consciousness, formed by shared beliefs and values, binds individuals to society. He distinguishes between harmful individualism and necessary social cohesion derived from shared moral values (Giddens, 1997, 2008). Durkheim's notion of collective consciousness underscores the emotional and cognitive dimensions of social belonging that create societal commitment (Durkheim, 2007).

Finally, Giddens' concept of "pure relationships" emphasizes trust and emotional bonds as the foundation of social connections. Trust is essential for belonging and loyalty, and a lack of trust in social or political systems erodes social cohesion and diminishes community ties. The interplay between agency and structure reveals that social belonging is both a product of societal influences and an active contributor to societal dynamics. The theoretical framework emphasizes that belonging is shaped by individual and collective experiences, influenced by socio-economic and cultural factors, and reinforced by trust and security in social structures (Giddens, 1997, 2008).

The literature on social belonging and its influencing factors spans various urban and psychological contexts. Mojtabavi and Naghani (2023) examined the physical factors enhancing place attachment, identifying elements like light, color, natural integration, and local materials as critical components that improve place attachment (Mojtabavi & Naghi, 2023). Kamali and Azmati (2020) focused on the correlation between social belonging to a place and social security in Qom, revealing a strong, direct relationship between spatial arrangements, freedom of movement, and neighborhood safety (Kamali & Azmati, 2020). Nik khah, Sarafraz, and Valipour (2020) analyzed

how social factors like residence duration and neighborhood services affect place attachment, showing that social interactions and safety strongly influence attachment levels (Nik Khah & Valipour, 2020).

The objective of this study was to investigate the level of social belonging among women in the urban community of Arak and to examine the factors influencing this belonging.

2. Methods and Materials

This study utilized a survey method, where questionnaires were administered to a sample of respondents selected from the urban female population of Arak. The items and statements related to the study variables were derived from theoretical frameworks and were then measured accordingly. The research design is descriptive, cross-sectional, and employs stratified sampling based on population size in each region of Arak. According to the most recent census data from the National Statistical Center of Iran, the study population consists of 278,524 women, from which a sample size of 418 was calculated using Cochran's formula. The stratified sampling method ensured that samples were proportionately drawn from each area based on the number of women in those regions.

The study variables were categorized into four main dimensions: sense of belonging to symbols, norms, and values; social trust; extreme individualism; and socioeconomic status. The sense of belonging was assessed using questions like "I feel good when I see urban symbols in Arak, such as Shohada Square" and "I believe that urban symbols in Arak reflect the cultural and historical characteristics of this city," rated on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Social trust was measured with questions such as "I believe people trust each other adequately" and "I have many friends whom I can trust completely," also using a five-point Likert scale. Extreme individualism was assessed with items like "I always prioritize my needs above all" and "I think people have become very selfish," using the same Likert scale. Socioeconomic status was measured through questions about education, occupation, family income, and parents' education and occupation, using closed categorical questions.

The questionnaire's validity was ensured through content validity. Expert opinions from advisors and consultants confirmed the face validity of the items, and the development of the survey instrument involved five main steps. First, theoretical studies on social belonging and urban

life quality were reviewed to create a comprehensive model. Second, items were categorized, and dimensions were delineated. Third, redundant or overlapping items were reduced to maintain conceptual coverage. Fourth, the questionnaire was finalized and reviewed by academic experts to ensure the content appropriately covered the intended concepts. Finally, the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was calculated using feedback from 10 experts who rated each item on a three-point scale. Results indicated acceptable CVR values for all variables, with the sense of belonging to symbols achieving a CVR of 0.74, social trust 0.65, extreme individualism 0.80, and socioeconomic status 0.64.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to ensure the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The results showed high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.83 for the sense of belonging to symbols, 0.92 for social trust, 0.91 for extreme individualism, and a robust score for socioeconomic status. These reliability coefficients indicate that the instrument is highly reliable for measuring the constructs in question and suitable for capturing the study variables accurately.

Table 1

Distribution of Respondents Based on Social Belonging Scores

Value	Percentage
Very Strong	20.46
Strong	19.01
Average	17.89
Weak	22.34
Very Weak	20.3
Total	100

Table 1 shows that the overall evaluation of social belonging indicated that approximately 43% of the participants assessed their social belonging as weak, while about 40% rated it as strong. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, with a value of 0.665, and Bartlett's test of sphericity (chi-square = 1562.628, $p < 0.001$), confirmed the

3. Findings and Results

The results showed that the majority of women in the sample reported monthly household expenses ranging from 8 to 15 million Tomans, indicating that over 50% of the families had a moderate income level within this range. Fathers' occupations were predominantly in administrative or freelance sectors, comprising more than half of the sample. Most respondents indicated that their parents' education level was secondary, and a significant number of mothers were homemakers. The sample population predominantly resided in middle-class urban areas. To measure social class affiliation, 11 questions were used, with responses categorized into four options. The scores ranged from 11 for the lowest class to 44 for the highest class, with the sample distributed into five classes based on these scores: Class 1 (11-17), Class 2 (17-23), Class 3 (23-29), Class 4 (29-35), and Class 5 (35-44). Most respondents were in the third social and economic class, with the lowest number in the first class.

appropriateness of factor analysis for this study. These statistics suggest that the identified factors explain more than 66% of the variation in social belonging among women in Arak, with Bartlett's test further supporting the significance of this result.

Table 2

Results of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's Test

Test	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	0.665
Chi-Square	1562.628
Degrees of Freedom	66
Confidence Level	0.000

Shared variance coefficients indicated that some variables might not fit well with the factor analysis model,

but the KMO results showed that the extracted communalities were acceptable.

Table 3

Variable Dimension Matrix

Dimensions	Factor 1	Factor 2
Sense of Belonging to Symbols, Norms, and Values	0.016	0.011
Social Trust	0.612	0.123
Extreme Individualism	0.214	0.315
Socioeconomic Status	0.341	0.324

The dimension matrix showed that variables such as social trust, sense of belonging to symbols, and extreme individualism had higher loadings compared to socioeconomic status. Overall, the indicators of social belonging among women in Arak loaded onto a separate factor, with their factor loadings being relatively lower than other indicators, indicating a lack of strong relationships among the dimensions. However, there was a moderate correlation between different dimensions of social belonging

and other variables, with none of the factors showing negative factor loadings.

The total variance analysis indicated that three variables—social trust, sense of belonging to symbols, and overall social belonging—had eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for over 43% of the variance in the other variables. The extracted square loadings before rotation illustrated the explained variance.

Table 4

Total Variance of Factors

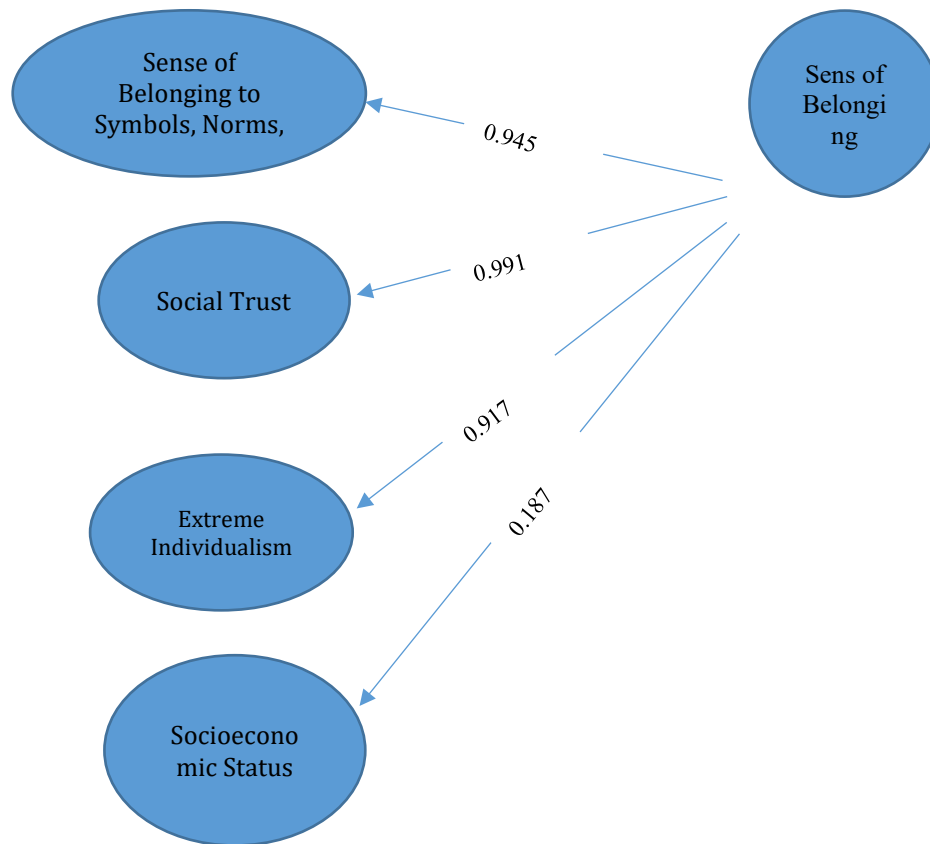
Factor	Eigenvalues	Percentage of Variance	Cumulative Percentage	Extracted Square Loadings	Percentage of Extracted Variance	Cumulative Extracted Percentage	Rotated Loadings	Rotated Variance Percentage	Cumulative Rotated Percentage
Social Trust	3.656	30.468	30.468	3.329	27.739	27.739	1.977	16.476	16.476
Sense of Belonging to Symbols	1.670	13.915	44.383	1.273	10.606	38.346	1.946	16.214	32.690
Social Belonging	1.271	10.590	54.973	0.803	6.688	45.034	1.334	11.114	43.804
Extreme Individualism	1.084	9.036	64.009	0.753					
Socioeconomic Status	0.985	8.206	72.215						

Confirmatory factor analysis using Smart PLS software demonstrated the structural validity of the social belonging model. The t-values for all dimensions and components of social belonging were significant, indicating a strong model fit. The model confirmed that social belonging is composed of four dimensions: sense of belonging to symbols, social

trust, extreme individualism, and socioeconomic status. Composite reliability was calculated to be 0.7281, exceeding the 0.70 threshold, confirming the reliability of the measurement instrument. Thus, the instrument used for measuring social belonging in this research was deemed reliable and valid.

Figure 1

Model with Factor Loadings



4. Discussion and Conclusion

Social belonging, as one of the critical aspects of social well-being, plays a significant role in improving the urban quality of life. This variable refers to the individual's positive connections and interactions with community members and the surrounding environment. Here, the state of social belonging in the city of Arak is analyzed.

Studies indicate that social belonging in Arak is at a moderate level. In a 2019 study by Mir Hosseini et al., the level of social belonging among a sample of Arak residents was examined. The results showed that the majority of individuals (61.6%) had a moderate level of social belonging, while 22.6% had a low level and 15.8% a high level of social belonging.

When examining results related to the sub-variable of belonging to urban symbols and norms, a significant number of women in Arak expressed dissatisfaction, with about 42% reporting dissatisfaction, compared to approximately 28% who were satisfied with the city's symbols and norms. The situation was slightly better concerning social trust, where more than 35% of women viewed the atmosphere of trust in

Arak positively, while around 32% were dissatisfied. Regarding the indicator of extreme individualism, most respondents rated it at a moderate level, with over 34% prioritizing personal interests over group interests. Overall, most women in Arak believed that their level of social belonging was moderate to low, with approximately 39% expressing dissatisfaction with their social belonging to Arak, while around 31% provided a moderate evaluation.

Durkheim described collective consciousness as a set of shared beliefs and feelings among members of a society, forming a specific system with its own life, which can be considered a type of collective spirit. Collective consciousness consists of two elements: the cognitive and perceptual understanding of shared beliefs and feelings, and the emotional component, which reflects social belonging. This behavioral outcome, or readiness to act, can enhance the quality of social life. According to Durkheim, the cognitive element represents knowledge and beliefs, while the emotional element is the sense of social belonging that the individual experiences, leading to practical commitment to societal norms.

Overall, the theoretical foundations of this research showed that emotional attachment and dependency increase social belonging, fostering trust in emotional relationships among people. This leads to enhanced commitment, loyalty, and social security. A lack of trust and social security within the political and social system results in reduced social belonging and security. This idea aligns with Giddens' theory, which emphasizes the dialectical relationship between agency and structure, asserting that every social action contains structure and that structure requires social action. Agency and structure are intertwined and inseparable. Based on this perspective, it can be argued that social belonging and social security are influenced by social, economic, political, and cultural conditions in society. In turn, social belonging and security impact society and its structure, ultimately affecting the quality of urban life positively or negatively.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study had several limitations. First, it focused solely on women in the urban community of Arak, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or geographical locations. Second, the study was cross-sectional, providing a snapshot of social belonging at one point in time rather than capturing how it evolves over time. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants may not have provided fully accurate or objective responses. Lastly, some variables that could impact social belonging, such as cultural or environmental factors, were not examined in detail.

Future research should consider longitudinal studies to explore how social belonging changes over time and is influenced by shifting social, economic, or political conditions. Expanding the study to include both men and other demographic groups across different cities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of social belonging in diverse contexts. Additionally, future research could investigate the impact of specific urban planning initiatives or community-building programs on enhancing social belonging. Exploring qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, could also offer deeper insights into the personal experiences and emotional dimensions of social belonging.

The findings suggest that policymakers and urban planners should prioritize initiatives that foster social trust and emotional attachment to urban environments. For instance, designing inclusive public spaces and preserving

cultural symbols could enhance residents' sense of belonging. Community-based programs that promote social interactions and reduce individualism might improve social cohesion and security. Additionally, integrating strategies to boost trust in local governance and community institutions could strengthen social ties and overall well-being in urban areas. By addressing these factors, urban planners and community leaders can create more cohesive and resilient communities.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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