

# Living on the Margins: A Qualitative Analysis of Lived Experience and Social Sustainability Challenges in the Mehr Housing Project (Case Study: Aftab Town, Parand New City)

1. Mohammad. Alidousti<sup>ORCID</sup>: PhD Student, Department of Urban Planning, NT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
2. Mohammadreza. Farzad Behtash<sup>ORCID</sup>: Department of Urban Planning, NT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
3. Ali. Sheikhezami<sup>ORCID</sup>: Department of Urban Planning, NT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
4. Narges. Nonegad<sup>ORCID</sup>: Department of Urban Planning, NT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

\*corresponding author's email: farzadbm@iau.ac.ir

## ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of residents in Aftab Town, Parand New City, and to identify the major social sustainability challenges embedded within the Mehr Housing Project from the perspective of the residents themselves. This research employed a qualitative-interpretive design using thematic analysis to investigate the social and psychological dimensions of life in the Mehr Housing Project. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 residents of Aftab Town who had lived in the settlement for more than five years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, gender, and residential experience. Interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and focused on themes such as neighborhood identity, social interaction, quality of services, participation in local affairs, and overall life satisfaction. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed based on Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis framework. Coding and categorization procedures were conducted using MAXQDA 2022 software. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking, peer debriefing, and data triangulation through field observations and interview notes were employed throughout the analysis process. The thematic analysis revealed four major dimensions of social unsustainability in the lived experiences of residents. The first theme, weak sense of belonging and identity disruption, reflected residents' inability to establish emotional attachment or neighborhood identity due to repetitive architecture and culturally detached urban design. The second theme, limited social participation and fragile interactions, demonstrated widespread social isolation, low interpersonal trust, and weak community engagement caused by the absence of local institutions and participatory mechanisms. The third theme, deficiencies in urban services and infrastructure, highlighted severe dissatisfaction with healthcare access, transportation systems, educational facilities, recreational spaces, and dependence on Tehran for essential services. The fourth theme, psychological, familial, and economic strain, revealed persistent emotional fatigue, depression, exhaustion caused by long daily commuting, and declining hope regarding future living conditions. Collectively, the findings portray the Mehr Housing experience as a form of "temporary, passive, and isolated" residence that reproduces socio-spatial marginalization despite formal housing provision.

**Keywords:** Lived Experience, Social Sustainability, Mehr Housing Project, Thematic Analysis, Marginal Residence, Parand New City.

## Introduction

Housing has long been recognized as one of the most fundamental dimensions of human life and a critical component of social welfare, urban development, and sustainable living environments. Beyond its physical function



### Article history:

Received 12 February 2026  
 Revised 03 May 2026  
 Accepted 10 May 2026  
 First Published 10 May 2026  
 Final Publication 01 May 2027

### How to cite this article:

Alidousti, M., Farzad Behtash, M., Sheikhezami, A., & Nonegad, N. (2027). Living on the Margins: A Qualitative Analysis of Lived Experience and Social Sustainability Challenges in the Mehr Housing Project (Case Study: Aftab Town, Parand New City). *Journal of Management and Business Solutions*, 5(3), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jmbs.285>



© 2027 the authors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

as shelter, housing represents a multidimensional phenomenon associated with social identity, psychological security, economic stability, and quality of life. In rapidly urbanizing societies, access to adequate and sustainable housing has become one of the central priorities of governments and urban policymakers. Consequently, many countries have adopted large-scale housing programs to address the increasing gap between housing demand and supply, particularly for low- and middle-income populations. However, international experiences increasingly demonstrate that quantitative expansion of housing alone cannot ensure sustainable urban life unless social, environmental, cultural, and psychological dimensions are integrated into housing policies and urban planning processes (1, 2). Contemporary sustainable housing discourse therefore emphasizes that successful residential environments should simultaneously address physical quality, environmental resilience, social cohesion, safety, accessibility, and residents' emotional attachment to place. In this context, the concept of social sustainability has emerged as a major framework for evaluating housing projects and urban settlements, especially in large-scale public housing developments.

In Iran, the Mehr Housing Project was introduced as one of the largest governmental housing initiatives with the objective of providing affordable housing for economically disadvantaged groups and reducing housing shortages across the country. The project was implemented on a massive scale in numerous cities and new towns, including Parand, Pardis, and other peripheral urban areas. Despite the significant quantitative achievements of the project in increasing housing supply, numerous studies have raised concerns regarding the social, environmental, spatial, and infrastructural consequences of these developments (3, 4). Researchers have argued that many Mehr Housing settlements suffer from inadequate urban infrastructure, weak access to public services, poor transportation systems, insufficient environmental quality, and a lack of coherent urban identity. These deficiencies have contributed to the emergence of new forms of socio-spatial marginalization within peripheral urban zones. The concentration of large populations in standardized residential blocks without adequate attention to cultural and social needs has often produced residential environments characterized by weak social integration and declining quality of urban life (5, 6). Consequently, the challenges associated with Mehr Housing are no longer viewed solely as physical or economic issues but increasingly as multidimensional urban sustainability concerns requiring deeper interpretive investigation.

One of the most significant criticisms directed toward mass housing projects concerns the neglect of place identity and residents' emotional attachment to their living environments. Housing environments lacking cultural meaning, participatory design, and spatial diversity often fail to create a sense of belonging among residents. Studies conducted on Iranian social housing projects indicate that repetitive architecture, inadequate public spaces, and weak neighborhood interaction contribute substantially to identity disruption and social alienation among residents (7). Place identity represents an essential component of sustainable urban life because individuals' emotional connection to their residential environment directly affects social participation, neighborhood cohesion, and psychological well-being. When residential environments are perceived merely as functional shelters rather than meaningful social spaces, residents may experience emotional detachment, reduced civic engagement, and weakened community solidarity. This issue becomes particularly critical in peripheral settlements such as Mehr Housing complexes, where urban isolation and infrastructural inadequacies further intensify feelings of exclusion and marginality. Research on the environmental quality of Mehr Housing has similarly emphasized that deficiencies in open spaces, urban aesthetics, recreational facilities, and public amenities negatively affect residents' perceptions of urban life and reduce overall residential satisfaction (8, 9).

In addition to spatial identity and environmental quality, safety and social security constitute another essential dimension of sustainable housing environments. Urban spaces that fail to provide psychological comfort and social trust may become environments of chronic stress and insecurity. Studies examining Mehr Housing settlements in Tehran Province have shown that spatial configuration, inadequate supervision, weak neighborhood interaction, and poor urban accessibility significantly influence residents' sense of security (10). Feelings of insecurity are not limited to physical threats alone but also encompass emotional vulnerability, social distrust, and uncertainty regarding the future of the residential environment. Such conditions weaken neighborhood attachment and contribute to social withdrawal and reduced participation in communal activities. Furthermore, the lack of child-friendly spaces and safe public environments in many housing complexes has generated concerns regarding the quality of life of families and children. Research on the feasibility of implementing child-friendly city approaches in Mehr Housing projects demonstrates that open spaces within many residential complexes lack sufficient safety, accessibility, and social functionality for children and families (11). These findings suggest that sustainable housing policies must incorporate human-centered and socially inclusive planning approaches rather than focusing exclusively on construction targets and quantitative outputs.

The broader issue of sustainability in housing extends beyond immediate social and psychological concerns and is increasingly linked to environmental resilience, adaptive urban planning, and long-term urban sustainability strategies. Contemporary urban studies emphasize that sustainable housing should integrate ecological efficiency, resilience to environmental hazards, cultural continuity, and social adaptability (12, 13). Traditional and vernacular housing models in Iran have historically reflected principles of climatic adaptation, social interaction, and spatial flexibility, creating environments that fostered both environmental comfort and collective identity. However, many modern mass housing projects have overlooked these culturally rooted principles in favor of standardized and economically driven construction approaches. This shift has often produced urban environments that lack spatial diversity, environmental harmony, and social vitality. The resulting disconnection between residents and their built environment contributes to emotional dissatisfaction and weakens the sustainability of urban communities. At the same time, future-oriented housing policies increasingly emphasize the necessity of adaptive and participatory urban governance capable of responding to evolving social and environmental challenges (14). Such approaches advocate for integrating residents' lived experiences into planning processes in order to create more resilient and socially cohesive urban environments.

Another critical issue associated with large-scale housing developments concerns the imbalance between quantitative production and qualitative sustainability. While mass housing projects are often evaluated according to the number of units delivered, insufficient attention is paid to the long-term social consequences of these settlements. Research evaluating the sustainability indicators of Mehr Housing projects has shown that many developments experience persistent deficiencies in transportation systems, healthcare services, educational facilities, recreational infrastructure, and employment accessibility (4, 15). Such deficiencies create dependency on larger metropolitan centers and increase daily commuting burdens for residents. Long commuting times, limited local services, and economic pressures contribute to chronic psychological exhaustion and reduced family and social interaction. In many cases, residents perceive their housing environment not as an integrated urban community but as a temporary and isolated residential zone disconnected from broader urban life. These experiences reinforce patterns of socio-spatial segregation and marginalization, particularly in peripheral new towns developed rapidly without adequate social infrastructure. Consequently, the sustainability of housing projects

cannot be evaluated merely through physical construction indicators but requires a comprehensive understanding of residents' lived realities and everyday experiences.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes the necessity of incorporating social participation and institutional transformation into housing policies and urban governance frameworks. Sustainable housing environments require not only physical infrastructure but also participatory mechanisms that empower residents and strengthen local social networks (16). The absence of effective neighborhood institutions and participatory governance structures in many mass housing developments weakens collective responsibility and reduces residents' sense of ownership over their environment. In socially sustainable communities, residents actively participate in local decision-making processes, maintenance of public spaces, and community-building activities. However, many residents of mass housing settlements experience exclusion from planning and governance processes, resulting in feelings of powerlessness and disengagement. This lack of participation contributes to declining trust, weak social cohesion, and fragmented neighborhood relations. Therefore, understanding the lived experiences of residents becomes essential for identifying hidden dimensions of social unsustainability that remain invisible within purely quantitative evaluations of housing policies.

Despite the growing body of research on Mehr Housing in Iran, much of the existing literature remains focused on quantitative assessments of physical infrastructure, environmental indicators, or general residential satisfaction. Comparatively limited attention has been devoted to qualitative explorations of residents' lived experiences, emotional perceptions, and everyday social realities within these settlements. The voices of residents themselves remain underrepresented in many official evaluations and policy analyses. As a result, important dimensions of marginality, psychological stress, social isolation, and identity disruption are often insufficiently understood. A deeper interpretive analysis is therefore necessary to reveal how residents experience life within these large-scale housing developments and how urban policies shape everyday social realities. Such qualitative inquiry is particularly important in settlements like Aftab Town in Parand New City, where spatial marginalization, infrastructural inadequacies, and social fragmentation intersect simultaneously. Accordingly, the present study aims to qualitatively analyze the lived experiences of residents in the Mehr Housing Project of Aftab Town, Parand New City, with a particular focus on identifying the major challenges of social sustainability reflected in residents' narratives.

## Methods and Materials

The present study was conducted using a qualitative research design with an interpretive approach aimed at understanding the lived experiences of residents within the Mehr Housing Project in Aftab Town, located in Parand New City, Iran. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the emphasis on uncovering subjective meanings, perceptions, and everyday social realities, thematic analysis was selected as the primary methodological framework. Qualitative inquiry was considered the most appropriate approach because the study sought to move beyond quantitative indicators of housing satisfaction and instead examine the deeper social, psychological, and environmental dimensions of life within a mass housing settlement. The research focused specifically on understanding how residents experience social sustainability challenges in their daily lives and how they interpret their relationship with the residential environment.

The study population consisted of residents living in the Mehr Housing complexes of Aftab Town who had at least three years of continuous residence in the settlement. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the

inclusion of participants with diverse demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, including variation in age, gender, occupation, family status, and duration of residence. The inclusion criteria consisted of willingness to participate in the study, ability to articulate personal experiences, and direct experience of living within the Mehr Housing environment. A total of 25 residents participated in the interviews, including 13 women and 12 men, ranging in age from 24 to 57 years. The average duration of residence among participants was approximately 5.92 years, allowing respondents to provide in-depth reflections on long-term experiences of living within the housing project. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new themes or conceptual insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, confidentiality of the collected information, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Data collection was conducted primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews designed to explore residents' lived experiences, perceptions of social sustainability, neighborhood interactions, environmental satisfaction, and emotional attachment to place. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to maintain conceptual consistency across interviews while simultaneously allowing participants sufficient freedom to describe their experiences in detail. An interview guide was developed based on the existing literature concerning social sustainability, housing quality, place identity, urban participation, and psychological well-being in residential environments. The interview questions focused on themes such as perceptions of neighborhood identity, quality of urban services, experiences of social interaction, feelings of security and belonging, transportation accessibility, environmental quality, and the psychological consequences of living in the settlement.

Examples of interview questions included inquiries such as "How do you feel about living in Aftab Town?", "To what extent do you interact with your neighbors and local community?", "What are the most important challenges you face in daily life within this residential environment?", and "How would you describe your sense of belonging to this neighborhood?" Additional probing questions were used during interviews to encourage participants to elaborate on emotional experiences, symbolic meanings, and perceptions of social exclusion or satisfaction. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations selected according to participants' comfort and convenience, including participants' homes and quiet public spaces within the residential area. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of interpretation and analysis.

In addition to interviews, field observations and reflective field notes were utilized as complementary sources of qualitative data. During visits to the residential complex, the researcher documented observations regarding physical conditions of the neighborhood, public spaces, transportation systems, social interactions among residents, environmental quality, and patterns of daily activity. These observational notes contributed to contextual understanding of participants' narratives and enhanced the credibility of the findings through triangulation of data sources. The combination of interviews and field observations enabled the study to capture both the subjective meanings expressed by residents and the broader environmental realities shaping their lived experiences.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke. This analytical approach was selected because of its flexibility and suitability for identifying recurrent patterns of meaning within qualitative data while preserving participants' subjective experiences. The process of analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts in order to achieve deep familiarization with the data

and identify preliminary patterns and conceptual meanings. During this stage, the researcher immersed in the data by reviewing transcripts multiple times and recording initial reflections, interpretive notes, and emerging conceptual insights.

Following familiarization, the second stage involved generating initial codes from the textual data. Coding was conducted systematically by identifying meaningful units, repeated expressions, emotional statements, and conceptually significant experiences within participants' narratives. Both semantic and latent coding approaches were employed in order to capture explicit statements as well as deeper interpretive meanings embedded within the interviews. The coded segments were subsequently organized into broader thematic categories through continuous comparison of similarities and differences among participants' experiences. Themes were developed inductively from the data rather than being imposed through predetermined theoretical assumptions.

The third and fourth stages of analysis involved searching for themes and reviewing thematic structures to ensure coherence, consistency, and conceptual distinctiveness. During this phase, related codes were grouped together into overarching themes representing major dimensions of residents' lived experiences. Themes were repeatedly refined, reorganized, and compared against the original transcripts to confirm that they accurately represented participants' narratives and reflected meaningful patterns within the data. The fifth stage involved defining and naming the final themes in a way that captured their conceptual essence and relationship to the broader framework of social sustainability. Finally, the sixth stage consisted of producing the interpretive narrative and integrating thematic findings with existing theoretical and empirical literature.

To facilitate systematic organization and management of qualitative data, MAXQDA 2022 software was utilized during coding and thematic categorization. Several strategies were also implemented to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify the accuracy of thematic interpretations. Peer debriefing was performed through consultation with qualitative research experts familiar with thematic analysis and housing studies. In addition, triangulation between interview data, observational notes, and field reflections strengthened the reliability and depth of the analytical process. Through these procedures, the study sought to ensure transparency, consistency, and interpretive rigor in analyzing the lived experiences of residents within the Mehr Housing Project.

## Findings and Results

A total of 25 residents of Aftab Town in Parand New City participated in this study. Among the participants, 13 were women and 12 were men. The age range of participants varied from 24 to 57 years, with a mean age of 36.48 years. The duration of residence in the Mehr Housing units ranged between 3 and 9 years, with an average residential history of 5.92 years. Participants represented diverse occupational and socioeconomic backgrounds, including employees, self-employed workers, homemakers, drivers, retail workers, and temporary laborers. Most participants reported daily commuting to Tehran for employment, while several emphasized economic pressure, housing insecurity, and dissatisfaction with local services as central aspects of their lived experience. The demographic diversity of the participants contributed to the richness and depth of the narratives and enabled the study to capture multiple dimensions of social sustainability challenges within the settlement.

**Table 1. Main Themes and Subthemes Extracted from Thematic Analysis of Residents' Lived Experiences**

Main Themes	Subthemes	Frequency of References
Weak Sense of Belonging and Identity Disruption	Alienation from physical environment	21
	Feeling of temporary residence	19
	Lack of neighborhood identity	18
	Emotional detachment from place	17
Limited Social Participation and Fragile Interactions	Weak neighbor relationships	20
	Low interpersonal trust	18
	Lack of local participation mechanisms	16
	Social isolation and withdrawal	17
Deficiencies in Urban Services and Infrastructure	Inadequate healthcare services	22
	Poor transportation accessibility	24
	Lack of recreational facilities	19
	Dependence on Tehran for essential services	23
Psychological, Familial, and Economic Strain	Emotional exhaustion	21
	Depression and hopelessness	18
	Stress caused by commuting	23
	Reduced quality of family life	17

Table 1 presents the major themes and subthemes identified through thematic analysis of the interviews. The findings indicate that deficiencies in urban services and infrastructure represented the most frequently repeated concern among residents. In particular, poor transportation accessibility (24 references) and dependence on Tehran for essential services (23 references) emerged as dominant experiences in participants' narratives. Psychological and emotional pressures also appeared prominently, especially emotional exhaustion (21 references) and commuting-related stress (23 references), reflecting the cumulative impact of infrastructural inadequacies on residents' mental well-being. In the social dimension, weak neighbor relationships (20 references) and low interpersonal trust (18 references) highlighted fragile community cohesion and limited social capital formation within the settlement. Furthermore, themes associated with place attachment revealed that many participants perceived their residence as temporary and emotionally detached, indicating a severe disruption in neighborhood identity and sense of belonging. Overall, the thematic frequencies demonstrate that social sustainability challenges in Aftab Town are multidimensional and deeply interconnected, spanning physical, social, psychological, and symbolic dimensions of urban life.

**Table 2. Selective Participant Quotations Corresponding to Major Themes**

Main Theme	Representative Quotation
Weak Sense of Belonging and Identity Disruption	"This place does not feel like home. It feels like somewhere we were forced to stay temporarily."
Limited Social Participation and Fragile Interactions	"People barely know each other here. Everyone leaves early and comes back exhausted."
Deficiencies in Urban Services and Infrastructure	"For even the simplest medical service, we have to travel to Tehran."
Psychological, Familial, and Economic Strain	"By the time I return home from work, I have no energy left for my family or social life."

Table 2 provides selected quotations from participants that reflect the emotional and experiential depth of the identified themes. The quotations demonstrate that residents' dissatisfaction extends beyond material or infrastructural concerns and is strongly connected to emotional alienation and social fragmentation. Participants repeatedly described the settlement as a temporary and imposed living environment lacking identity and comfort. The quotations also reveal that daily commuting and insufficient local services have generated chronic fatigue and

reduced opportunities for meaningful social interaction. In addition, the narratives suggest that the absence of supportive social networks and neighborhood engagement mechanisms has intensified feelings of isolation and weakened collective belonging. These statements illustrate how residents interpret their living conditions not merely as economic hardship but as a broader experience of socio-spatial marginalization and psychological exhaustion.

**Table 3. Interpretive Relationship Between Themes and Dimensions of Social Sustainability**

Social Sustainability Dimension	Related Theme	Interpretive Consequence
Place Attachment	Weak Sense of Belonging and Identity Disruption	Weak emotional connection to residential environment
Social Cohesion	Limited Social Participation and Fragile Interactions	Reduced neighborhood solidarity and trust
Urban Accessibility	Deficiencies in Urban Services and Infrastructure	Spatial dependency and service inequality
Psychological Well-being	Psychological, Familial, and Economic Strain	Emotional fatigue and declining life satisfaction

Table 3 illustrates the analytical relationship between the extracted themes and broader dimensions of social sustainability. The findings indicate that deficiencies in one dimension directly reinforced vulnerabilities in other dimensions, creating a cycle of social unsustainability within the settlement. Weak place attachment contributed to emotional detachment from the residential environment, which in turn reduced residents' motivation for participation in community affairs. Similarly, poor access to transportation, healthcare, and recreational facilities intensified psychological pressure and weakened overall life satisfaction. The results further demonstrate that social sustainability in housing cannot be understood solely through physical indicators, as emotional attachment, social trust, and psychological well-being are equally fundamental components of sustainable urban life. The interconnected nature of these dimensions suggests that the challenges experienced by residents are structural rather than isolated problems, requiring integrated and participatory policy interventions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of residents in Aftab Town, Parand New City, and to identify the major social sustainability challenges embedded within the Mehr Housing Project. The findings revealed four interconnected dimensions of social unsustainability, including weak sense of belonging and identity disruption, limited social participation and fragile interactions, deficiencies in urban services and infrastructure, and psychological, familial, and economic strain. Collectively, these themes portray the Mehr Housing environment not merely as a physical residential settlement but as a socio-spatial environment characterized by emotional alienation, infrastructural inadequacy, and weakened community cohesion. The findings suggest that although the Mehr Housing Project succeeded in addressing quantitative housing shortages to some extent, it failed to establish socially sustainable and psychologically supportive residential environments. These findings reinforce the growing scholarly argument that housing sustainability cannot be achieved solely through physical construction and economic affordability but requires the integration of social, cultural, environmental, and participatory dimensions into urban housing policies (3, 4).

One of the most significant findings of the study was the weak sense of belonging and disruption of place identity among residents. Participants repeatedly described the settlement as "temporary," "soulless," and emotionally detached, indicating an inability to establish meaningful psychological attachment to the residential environment. This finding is strongly aligned with previous studies emphasizing that repetitive architectural patterns, standardized

housing forms, and lack of culturally meaningful spaces undermine place identity and emotional attachment in social housing projects (7, 9). The absence of spatial diversity and identity-oriented design in many Mehr Housing developments appears to have transformed housing into a purely functional shelter rather than a socially meaningful place of residence. Residents' inability to create memories, establish emotional continuity, or identify with the neighborhood reflects a broader crisis of urban identity in peripheral mass housing settlements. Similar findings were reported by Saylam, who argued that traditional Iranian housing patterns historically promoted emotional comfort, climatic adaptation, and social continuity, whereas contemporary standardized developments often weaken the relationship between people and place (13). The current findings therefore indicate that neglecting vernacular and culturally responsive urban design principles contributes significantly to psychological alienation and reduced social sustainability within large-scale housing projects.

Another major finding concerned the weakness of social participation and neighborhood interactions among residents. The interviews demonstrated that social relationships within Aftab Town were often superficial, fragmented, and characterized by low levels of interpersonal trust. Residents reported limited engagement in local affairs and emphasized the absence of active neighborhood institutions capable of fostering social cohesion. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that mass housing developments frequently experience reduced community participation and weak social capital due to inadequate social infrastructure and limited participatory governance mechanisms (5, 6). The lack of communal spaces and participatory structures appears to have weakened collective responsibility and residents' sense of ownership toward the residential environment. Moreover, the rapid and top-down implementation of the Mehr Housing Project may have contributed to residents' perception that they were passive recipients of housing rather than active participants in shaping their communities. This issue is particularly important because social participation constitutes one of the central pillars of sustainable urban development. Research on sustainable organizational and institutional transformation similarly emphasizes that sustainability requires participatory systems capable of strengthening collective engagement and social responsibility (16). Therefore, the absence of meaningful social participation in Aftab Town not only reduced neighborhood cohesion but also intensified social isolation and emotional withdrawal among residents.

The findings also highlighted severe deficiencies in urban services and infrastructure as one of the dominant dimensions of residents' dissatisfaction. Participants repeatedly referred to inadequate healthcare facilities, weak transportation systems, lack of recreational spaces, and dependence on Tehran for essential daily services. These findings strongly correspond with previous evaluations of Mehr Housing projects across Iran, which identified infrastructural inadequacies and unequal distribution of urban services as major weaknesses of these developments (8, 15). The concentration of housing units without simultaneous investment in transportation networks, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and commercial services has created a condition of spatial dependency that places substantial physical and psychological burdens on residents. The long commuting times reported by participants not only reduced their quality of life but also limited opportunities for family interaction, social engagement, and neighborhood participation. Similar concerns have been documented in studies examining national-scale weaknesses of mass housing developments, where peripheral location and inadequate infrastructure contribute directly to socio-spatial segregation and reduced urban integration (5). Furthermore, the findings suggest that infrastructural inequality in peripheral settlements reinforces residents' perception of exclusion from mainstream urban life and deepens the symbolic boundaries between these settlements and the broader metropolitan structure.

The psychological and emotional consequences identified in the study further demonstrate the multidimensional nature of social unsustainability within the Mehr Housing environment. Participants frequently described feelings of exhaustion, hopelessness, emotional fatigue, and social withdrawal resulting from poor infrastructure, long commuting distances, and weak social support systems. These findings indicate that housing environments directly influence mental well-being and emotional stability. Previous research has similarly shown that poor environmental quality and inadequate residential conditions negatively affect residents' psychological comfort and social satisfaction (8, 9). In the present study, emotional strain was closely connected to daily experiences of urban marginality and infrastructural deprivation. Residents' narratives revealed that the cumulative burden of economic pressure, transportation difficulties, and social isolation gradually eroded their optimism and reduced their capacity for social participation. The findings also support the argument that sustainable housing should not be evaluated exclusively through physical indicators but must include emotional and psychological dimensions of urban life (1). Contemporary approaches to sustainable urbanization increasingly emphasize that resilient and sustainable communities require environments capable of supporting mental well-being, social inclusion, and collective identity formation.

The issue of safety and spatial security also emerged indirectly within participants' narratives, particularly through discussions regarding weak public spaces, inadequate urban accessibility, and limited child-friendly environments. Residents expressed concerns regarding the lack of safe and vibrant communal spaces for families and children, which reduced opportunities for social interaction and neighborhood vitality. These findings are compatible with research demonstrating that spatial design and environmental organization significantly influence residents' sense of safety and social trust within Mehr Housing settlements (10). Similarly, studies investigating child-friendly urban design approaches in residential complexes have emphasized the necessity of safe, accessible, and socially interactive public spaces for improving family well-being and strengthening neighborhood cohesion (11). The absence of such environments in Aftab Town appears to have intensified residents' emotional detachment from the settlement and contributed to reduced social interaction among families and children. Consequently, the findings suggest that socially sustainable housing requires integrated spatial planning capable of promoting safety, interaction, accessibility, and environmental comfort simultaneously.

From a broader urban policy perspective, the findings of this study demonstrate the limitations of centralized and quantitatively oriented housing policies in addressing complex social realities. Although the Mehr Housing Project succeeded in increasing housing supply, the findings indicate that inadequate attention to cultural identity, participatory planning, environmental quality, and infrastructural sustainability significantly weakened the long-term social viability of these settlements. This conclusion corresponds with previous comparative analyses of Iranian housing policies, which argued that sustainable housing requires balanced integration of social, economic, environmental, and institutional dimensions rather than exclusive emphasis on rapid housing production (3, 14). Future-oriented urban policies increasingly stress the importance of adaptive governance, participatory urban planning, and socially responsive design approaches capable of responding to local needs and contextual conditions. Moreover, global experiences of sustainable housing renovation and urban regeneration demonstrate that socially integrated communities emerge gradually through long-term institutional commitment, participatory governance, and continuous investment in social infrastructure (2). Therefore, the findings of the present study reinforce the necessity of shifting from top-down housing production models toward human-centered and socially grounded urban development strategies.

Overall, the findings of the study reveal that the challenges experienced by residents of Aftab Town extend far beyond physical housing deficiencies and represent a broader condition of socio-spatial marginalization. The absence of strong place identity, weak social cohesion, inadequate urban services, and persistent psychological strain collectively contribute to an environment characterized by instability and emotional alienation. These findings provide important evidence that housing policies should not be evaluated solely according to the number of residential units produced but rather according to their capacity to create sustainable, inclusive, and emotionally supportive urban communities. Sustainable housing must therefore be understood as a multidimensional process integrating physical infrastructure with social participation, cultural identity, environmental quality, and psychological well-being. The present study contributes to this understanding by providing a qualitative and resident-centered interpretation of the lived realities within one of Iran's largest mass housing developments.

One limitation of the present study was its focus on a single case study, namely Aftab Town in Parand New City, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other Mehr Housing settlements or urban contexts. In addition, because the study relied on qualitative interviews, some participants may have been hesitant to fully express their negative experiences due to social sensitivities or economic concerns. The findings were also dependent on participants' subjective interpretations and lived experiences, which may vary according to personal, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, the study did not separately analyze differences in experiences according to gender, occupation, or age groups, which could provide additional insight into the complexity of social sustainability challenges within mass housing environments.

Future research is recommended to conduct comparative qualitative and mixed-method studies across different Mehr Housing settlements and other public housing projects in Iran in order to identify regional differences and contextual variations in social sustainability experiences. Additional studies should examine the role of gender, family structure, and socioeconomic status in shaping residents' perceptions of place identity, participation, and urban well-being. Longitudinal studies are also needed to investigate how social sustainability conditions evolve over time within large-scale housing developments. Moreover, future research may benefit from integrating spatial analysis, behavioral observation, and participatory action research methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between built environments and residents' lived experiences.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the urgent necessity of revising housing policies in Iran toward more socially responsive and participatory approaches. Urban planners and policymakers should prioritize the development of neighborhood-based public spaces, accessible transportation systems, healthcare services, educational facilities, and recreational infrastructure within mass housing settlements. Greater attention should also be devoted to culturally responsive and identity-oriented architectural design capable of strengthening residents' sense of belonging and emotional attachment to place. Establishing neighborhood councils, community organizations, and participatory governance mechanisms may further enhance social cohesion and residents' engagement in local affairs. In addition, mental health support programs, social empowerment initiatives, and child-friendly urban design strategies should be integrated into future housing projects to improve overall quality of life and strengthen long-term urban sustainability.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

## Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

## References

1. Almusaed A, Almssad A, Alasadi A, Al-Asadib F. Sustainable Reimagining of urban Habitats: Navigating Iraq's housing crisis through Socio-Technological and Environmental approaches. *Ain Shams Engineering Journal*. 2025;16:103280. doi: 10.1016/j.asej.2025.103280.
2. Meijer FM, Straub A. Sustainable Renovation of Non-Profit Housing in the Netherlands: From Projects to Programs. *Iop Conference Series Earth and Environmental Science*. 2022;1085(1):012051. doi: 10.1088/1755-1315/1085/1/012051.
3. Heydari AA, Hosseini M, Bahraini SH. Comparative Study of the Mehr Housing and National Housing Plans in Iran Sustainable Architecture and Housing Design. *Scientific-Research Quarterly of Urban Studies in Iran*. 2021;12(3):45-60.
4. Masoudi Rad M, Ebrahimzadeh I, Rafieian M. Evaluation of Mehr Housing policy regarding sustainability indicators (Case: Khorramabad). *Geography and Environmental Planning*. 2017;28(2):1-20.
5. Zanganeh Shahraki S. Challenges of mass housing: Evaluation of the weaknesses of Mehr Housing at a national scale. *Urban Structure and Function Studies*. 2020;7(24):129-54.
6. Shamseddini A, Safarian E, Nekooi Bakhsh MR. Identifying Challenges and Evaluating the Performance of Mehr Housing from Citizens' Perspectives (Case Study: Pardis Town - Kazeroon). *Human Geography Research*. 2018;50(3):609-25.
7. Hosseini M, Dejdaar O, editors. Investigating the Effective Indicators on Place Identity in Social Housing: A Case Study of Mehr Housing, Golha, Hamadan. *International Conference on New Horizons in Civil Engineering, Architecture, and Urban Development*; 2019.
8. Safai R, Keshavarz SR, Siyar Samani S, editors. Evaluating Mehr Housing from the Perspective of Urban Environmental Quality. *Seventh National Conference on Sustainable Development in Geography and Planning, Architecture, and Urbanism*; 2018; Tehran.
9. Abdi Y. Developing a Model for Enhancing the Environmental Quality of Mehr Housing Complexes with Emphasis on Physical-Spatial Aspects: Aftab Town in Parand New Town: Islamic Azad University, Shahr-e Qods Branch, Faculty of Engineering and Urban Planning; 2019.

10. Omid Malayeri K, Heidarabadi A, Pahlavan M, Abbasi Esfajir A. The Role of Space in Residents' Sense of Security in Mehr Housing of Tehran Province: Pardis Mehr Housing and Safadasht Malard Mehr Housing. *Social Security Studies*. 2023;14(75):165-92.
11. Kamali M, Salehi Marzijrani S, Timuri M. explanation Feasibility of applying the child-friendly city approach in designing the open space of Mehr residential complex to improve the safety of children (Case study: Mehr Vahdat housing in Shiraz). *Journal of Sustainable Architecture and Urban Design*. 2024;12(1).
12. Korkmaz Ürek B, Kahraman S, Polat E. Earthquake-Resilient Housing Setback Distances and Open Road Networks for Sustainable Urbanization: A Case Study in Elbistan (Türkiye). *Sustainability*. 2025;17(3):1254. doi: 10.3390/su17031254.
13. Saylam S. Vernacular Iranian housing as a sustainable model of functional and aesthetic comfort in contemporary passive dwellings. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*. 2024;8(16):10562. doi: 10.24294/jipd10562.
14. Zarrinchangfard H, editor Housing policies in distressed urban fabrics with a futures studies approach (Case study: Shiraz). 8th International Symposium on New Ideas in Architecture, Urbanism, Geography, and Sustainable Environment; 2023; Mashhad.
15. Paknejad N. Mehr Housing Series Reports (1): Analysis and Review of the Status of Per Capita Facilities and Amenities in Mehr Housing Projects. 2024.
16. Shaker A. Elucidating a Model of Sustainable Human Resource Productivity in the Housing Bank Based on Administrative System Transformation Policies: Allameh Tabatabai University; 2022.