
Brief:
Children of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Though The Fishermen's focus is limited to orphaned, street, foster, and refugee children, the overall condition of child welfare within the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter referred to as Iran) necessitates our attention. Some of our information is dated but we believe it is still relevant. It is important to note that the following is not a reflection on our views of Islamic values, but simply a presentation of our initial research on Iranian children and the cultural differences NGOs may face when addressing child-related issues.

Since its shift from monarchy to theocratic Islamic republic in 1979, Iran removed many of the laws protecting children while at the same time increasing the ability of adults to commit what we would consider criminal acts upon them without penalty. This is in direct violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which the Islamic Consultative Assembly ratified in 1994, but "reserved the right not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that may be in contravention with domestic laws and Islamic standards." Though overtures have been made by Tehran to improve its abysmal record on children's rights, nothing of any significance has changed – this is especially true when considering orphaned/street children.

Children essentially have no rights in the Islamic Republic, and many die each year from parental child abuse/neglect – largely due to the mother's inability to protect her children both physically and legally from abusive parties (though it is not uncommon for both the mother and father to be directly involved in the abuse of their children). Other prevalent causes for the death include drug overdose, suicide, murder, and a surprising number of state-sponsored executions (51 since 1990 according to Amnesty International – making it the leading country of child executions in the world).

Men can divorce freely and have full custody of their offspring, many of whom are sold for marriage or into forced labor. Even if the father kills his child, he faces no retribution. The mother, however, may be imprisoned for failing to protect her children from harm and/or interfering with the husband's duty to discipline them. Divorced women have virtually no say in the well-being of their children, and since unemployment is rampant (officially 12.9 but realistically above 20%) and largely disproportionate in favor of Iranian males, an unwed mother has very little she is able to offer other than her love. It is not uncommon for parental love to be used against them - children are commonly tortured in front of mothers and fathers to gain confessions.

Females suffer worse conditions than males of equal or older age. For instance, a girl as young as 9 may be sentenced to death for committing a Ghasb crime (crime against God) whereas a boy is immune unless 15 years of age or older. In impoverished areas such as Khorassan and Sistan-Baluchistan, girls as young as 4 are bought and sold for as little as \$4 for use as laborers on farms or in workshops. Girls have absolutely no say in matters of marriage and can be legally wed at the age of 9 (with parental consent), typically to much older men. Additionally, the practice of Sigheh – the purchase of a 24 marriage certificate – has been used by many to raise familial money by wedding a daughter to others, which is a legal and face-saving method for

guardians to prostitute girls (for which the penalty for the girl would typically be death by hanging or stoning). This temporary marriage license also aids in legitimizing sexual relations with very young females and allows men the ability engage in sexual relations with multiple partners, thereby corrupting the Sigheh's original intent.

Recent economic hardship and rampant criminal activity (in addition to a generally abusive environment at home) has resulted in a significant number of runaways in Iran, increasing child prostitution by 635%. In Tehran alone there are an estimated 84,000 female prostitutes (most of which are under 18) – a figure which does not include the thousands who have been trafficked to other countries. These runaway children wind up living in abandoned buildings, automobiles, parks, shipping containers, or on the street itself – even so they are considered luckier than those who remain in the grasp of abusive parents/guardians. According to a 2009 report, 45 Iranian girls run away from home every day to escape abusive parents and poverty, only to engage in prostitution, become unwilling participants in drug gangs (transport or peddling), or forced to beg for money for others. We believe that number to be much higher. Regardless, roughly 60% of all girls who run away from home are raped within the first week, for which *they* can be sentenced to death. The official number of orphaned/street children in Iran is 60,000, but it is suspected to be higher than 200,000 (or which 55% are offspring of Afghan refugees).

Within the legal system there are many children who are awaiting their 18th birthday for execution (in excess of 143 according to a 2012 HRW report). Many others have suffered horrible torture and unreasonable imprisonment. According to the Iranian penal code, a 9 year-old girl can be tried as an adult and punished by flogging or stoning depending upon the crime. Many children are imprisoned without being formally charged and often executed before establishing their identity. According to Amnesty International, executions are often carried out in public and typically utilize an industrial crane for hanging. The child stands on a gallows with his/her hands tied, and is slowly lifted and dangled in front of a crowd. In the 2004 case of Atefeh Rajabi – a 16 year-old orphaned girl who had suffered many years of abuse – religious police arrested her for having sex with unmarried men and was hung from a crude gallows in a very public railway square. She remained a gruesome spectacle for 45 minutes before being laid to rest. Very few of the residents supported the presiding judge's sentence, nor did they find it appropriate for him to personally put the noose over Atefeh's head. As for stoning – again a public event - a girl will be buried up to her chest or neck and will be hit repeatedly by stones “not be too large to kill the convict by one or two throws and at the same time shall not be too small to be called a stone” according to Article 104 of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran.

We have painted a bleak picture of Iranian society and its treatment of children. Aside from governmental policy - which the average citizen does not control - it must be said that the majority of Iranian households are both loving and caring, and even though it may seem that Iranian children have nowhere to turn there are NGOs and individuals quietly offering safe havens and a sympathetic ear to those in need. Though no significant changes may be expected from Tehran, many within Iran are eager to see an end to medieval punishments, gender inequality, economic depression, and religious laws/police. The best we can do as outside NGOs is to continue to provide support to in-country organizations attempting to help these children and assist entities such as the UN so they may pressure for policy revisions within the Islamic Republic, but in the end these are Iranian problems requiring Iranian solutions.

