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4,000 child marriages registered just in North khorasan province in one year

Iran Human Rights Monitor (24.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GEcY30> - More than 4,000 child marriages of girls between 10 to 19 years of age have been reported in North Khorasan Province, from March 2018 to March 2019.

Ali Zahedinia, the director of Iran's Census Organization in North Khorasan province said that the largest number of marriages has been registered for girls between 15 and 19 years old.

Admitting to just one aspect of this catastrophe he added, "In 1397, the marriages of 1,054 girls between 10 and 14 years old have been registered in North Khorasan province," the state-run IRNA news agency reported on April 20, 2019.

In remarks carried by the state-run ISNA news agency on April 16, 2019, Masihollah Soltani, an official in Zanjan's governorate, announced, "From 36,000 registered marriages for girls under 14 in Iran, 1,400 took place in Zanjan," adding, "Unfortunately, Zanjan ranks among the top provinces with regards to child marriages."

A woman member of the regime's parliament acknowledged in June 2018 that there are 24,000 young widows under 18 years of age in Iran, a consequence of rampant child marriages in the country.

Masoume Aghapour Alishahi, representative of the women's faction at the regime's parliament, considers cultural and economic poverty in villages as the main causes of child marriages in Iran, majority of which end up in divorce. She explains: "Unfortunately, due to the absence of high schools in villages, girls are unable to continue their education beyond the primary level; and are consequently forced by their parents to get married."

In early January, Parvaneh Salahshouri, head of the women's faction in the regime's parliament said that six per cent of Iranian girls get married between 10 and 14.

It came while the bill proposing to increase the marriage age for girls was turned down in December 2018, by the parliamentary Judicial Committee.

"We continue to see child marriages between 9 and 14 years of age... Some 6 per cent of those who get married are girls between 10 and 14," Salahshouri said.

Girl-child marriage, which is one of the examples of violence against women, has been institutionalized by the Iranian regime by setting the legal age of marriage at 13. According to the regime's officials and experts, some 180,000 early marriages take place in Iran every year and comprise 24 per cent of the total number of marriages.

A social expert revealed that at present, 41,000 early marriages under the age of 15 take place in Iran every year.

Only in 2017, the marriages of at least 37,000 Iranian girls between the ages of 10 and 14 have been registered. It has also been reported that there are 24,000 widows under 18, of which 15,000 are under the age of 15.

Another report published in Iranian media in 2017 said that 17% of girls in Iran married under the age of 18. The numbers did not include "temporary marriages", which is a spreading phenomenon in Iran.

Just in the past decade, close to 400,000 girls were forced to marry in Iran despite being under 15 years of age.

Abuse of 11-year-old child bride in Iran sees some lawmakers calling for reforms

Center for Human Rights in Iran (21.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2BXMMYa> - News of an 11-year-old girl in the Iranian city of Ilam being repeatedly raped after being illegally married off to a man four times her age has renewed protests by some members of Parliament against the law that allows child marriage.

The child, referred to by the pseudo name of "Raha" by media outlets, was placed in the care of the State Welfare Organization (SWO) following the intervention of a provincial prosecutor because the marriage had taken place without the approval of a local court as required by civil law.

But thousands of other child brides remain at grave risk in Iran, where there is no minimum marriageable age. For girls under the age of 13 and boys under the age of 15, families and husbands must obtain legal approval for the marriage.

In December 2018, the parliamentary Committee for Judicial and Legal Affairs rejected a bill to ban marriage for girls under the age of 13, prompting widespread condemnation from civil rights advocates.

According to UNICEF, 17 percent of girls in Iran are married before the age of 18 and three percent are married before the age of 15. This number only accounts for registered marriages. In July 2016, Mohammad Kazemi, a member of Parliament's Judicial and Legal Affairs Committee, referenced the "unofficial marriages" that go unregistered in Iran "especially in the border regions and deprived parts of the country."

"Uprooting the child marriage phenomenon requires a multi-dimensional effort in cultural, social and educational fields," a lawyer who focused on rights issues when they were based in Iran told the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI).

"But the most immediate step has to be the government putting an end to the law that in effect permits physical and psychological violence against young girls," added the source who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The Imam Ali Society (IAS), an Iran-based non-governmental charity that provides support to vulnerable women and children throughout the country, was the first to report the news about Raha being married off to a man who is “almost 50 years old.”

“Raha was saved from becoming a slave under a law that does not prevent and punish child marriages,” tweeted the organization on February 11, 2019 referring to the fact that Raha would not have been removed from the home if her family had obtained the necessary legal approvals.

“Figures show that just in 1395 [the Iranian year ending in March 2017], 1,289 marriages were registered of girls under the age of 14 to men over the age of 30,” said another tweet. “In 112 of those cases, the marriages were under circumstances similar to Raha’s, meaning the men were over the age of 40, and in six cases the men were over the age of 60!”

“Raha was lucky that her compatriots were able to hear her story. But what about the other children who are being traded far from public view?” asked IAS.

IAS group member Zahra Kahram said Raha’s case was accidentally discovered during the implementation of a project aimed at providing medical and psychological checkups to women in a rural part of Ilam Province’s Helilan region.

“The man has seven children from his first wife,” said Kahram. “Raha has not reached puberty and yet he has been having intercourse with her every night. She has suffered much physical and mental harm and cries constantly.”

“When the IAS looked into the marriage, we noticed that Raha had been forced to marry the man six months earlier in exchange for only 15 million tomans [approximately \$3,147 USD] paid to her family because of financial need.”

Later inquiries revealed that the marriage had taken place without fulfilling requirements stipulated in Article 1041 of the Civil Code including getting the father’s consent or the court’s approval for girls getting married before the age 13.

Article 50 of Iran’s Family Protection Law stipulates punishment of six months imprisonment for men who get married without the necessary legal approvals and six months jail time for the child’s father or legal guardian.

It also states that if it is proven that sexual relations caused a girl’s death or “permanent physical disability or illness,” the man would have to pay blood money and receive a fifth- or fourth-degree prison sentence.

According to Islamic law, *Diyah*, known as “blood money” in English, is paid as financial compensation to the victim or heirs of a victim in cases of murder, bodily harm, or property damage

In response to inquiries by the IAS and the SWO, Raha was placed in state care and moved to an SWO safe house. Warrants were also issued for the arrest of her father and the man she was married to. The latter was reportedly arrested on February 11.

Growing condemnation of child marriages

Word of Raha’s case led to renewed condemnation of the unlimited marriageable age in Iran.

Labor and Social Welfare Minister Mohammad Shariatmadari and a number of lawmakers condemned the case and criticized child marriages despite the taboo in Iran of openly criticizing politically sensitive state policies.

The day after Raha's case was reported, Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat Zanjani, a Shia theologian, also issued a fatwa stating that child marriage violates the principles of Islam.

"Getting married to children is an unjust act and because it's unjust it is not legitimate," he said.

There are several ayatollahs in Iran who can issue fatwas and Shia Muslims can choose which of these ayatollahs to follow as their point of reference for religious matters. That means a Shia Muslim could ignore Zanjani's fatwa if a different ayatollah has declared the opposite.

Zahra Saie, a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Social Affairs, also condemned child marriage after hearing about Raha's case.

"The studies we have carried out show that those who marry early have a higher divorce rate and naturally as a result suffer more," said Saie, a member of Parliament's Youth Faction. "Physiologically, the girls are more frail at that age."

She added: "In order to properly raise their children, today's mothers have to be educated and informed. Men and women have to be in a particular physical and mental condition in order for a successful family to take shape. Young girls and boys who get married don't have a full understanding of life. Islamic theology does not restrict marriage at a certain age but if we want successful families we have to see what is the right age for marriage."

Reacting to the prosecutor's decision to remove Raha from the man's home, attorney Ali Mojtahedzade tweeted: "When a public defender, despite legal shortcomings, steps in to deal with a child marriage in Ilam, it is an indication that society has become more sensitive and concerned about these issues regardless of the powerful opponents."

Journalist and political activist Reza Bahrami asked: "Those who are against banning child marriage, do they have anything to say about the tragic case of an 11-year-old child marrying a 50-year-old man in Ilam?"

Journalist Hedio Kimiaee commented: "The prosecutor in Ilam has said that families who violate Article 50 of the Family Protection Law will be prosecuted. So that means we do have a law but we are not enforcing it. What is being done for other Rahas who are quietly victimized?"

Legal efforts to ban marriages to girls under the age of 13

Although the Parliamentary Committee for Legal and Judicial Affairs rejected a proposal to confront child marriages, there is still a possibility that it will be debated on the legislative floor.

"The Women's Faction has asked the parliamentary leadership to include this proposal in the legislative process for further review so that we can look into various points of view and get the best results," said lawmaker Zahra Saie.

Masoumeh Ebtekar, Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, also announced that her office is drafting a bill to eliminate Article 1041's provision allowing the marriage of girls under the age of 13 and boys under the age of 15.

Instant verbal divorce rips families apart in Iran's Kurdish region

By Leila Alikarami

Al Monitor (02.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2KJ7NT4> - Rozhan thought that she was in a happy and loving marriage — until her husband divorced her through an archaic Islamic practice that she was scarcely aware of.

Rozhan, 30, lived with her husband, Shaho, 41, and their two small children in Mariwan, a border town in the Kurdish region in western Iran. Last spring, Rozhan told her husband that she was going to visit her sister who lived just a few streets away. Shaho objected, saying casually, "I triple talaq [divorce] you if you go."

"So I declared that I divorced her three times, not fully aware that this was irreversible," said Shaho, who told his story to Al-Monitor on condition his full name not be used.

Triple talaq, or talaq al bid'ah, is a form of divorce under Islam that enables a man to verbally end his marriage. Different Islamic traditions have different practices around this instant and irrevocable form of verbal divorce, and some scholars consider it irreconcilable with the Islamic idea of marriage. In the Kurdish region of Iran, however, it is invoked often. Once it is declared, the couple is expected to cease to live together immediately. Otherwise, they are committing "zina," an illegitimate relationship between a man and a woman who are not married. When Shaho's father, a conservative Shafi'i cleric, heard the story through his son, he ordered them to stop living together.

In the last Iranian year (which ended March 20), there were 175,000 divorce cases in Iran — the highest since 1965. In the Kurdistan province, Mariwan has one of the highest divorce rates.

"There is no exact data about the cases of triple talaq," Golala Watandoost, a lawyer in the Kurdistan province who works on these cases, told Al-Monitor. "But somewhere between 55% and 60% of the divorces [in the region] are a result of triple talaq."

In some schools of Shiite and Sunni Islam, a man can verbally divorce his wife if he declares his desire to do so on three different occasions with witnesses present. The idea is to give the man time to cool off and reconsider the decision and for the couple to reconcile. Triple talaq, which is only practiced in parts of the Sunni Islamic world, involves no waiting period.

Iran's civil divorce laws greatly favor husbands, who have an incontestable right to divorce. Until 2002, men didn't even need to provide a reason for divorce before the court. But despite the legal changes, the situation remains imbalanced. Men can initiate a divorce on almost any grounds, including the wife's sickness, disobedience or refusal to have sex. Women can initiate divorce on more limited grounds, such as insanity, inability to provide for the family, abuse or impotence.

"I love my wife and I want her to be with me, but I can't go and live with her," Shaho told Al-Monitor. "There is too much social pressure on us and we had to separate." For the time being, Rozhan has been given custody of the younger of the two children, aged 2. The older one, 7 years old, lives with Shaho's father.

If a divorced couple wants to remarry, the woman then must marry another man first even if it is for an hour, then ask for a divorce so that she can remarry her ex-husband. This loophole is called "nikah halala," literally "marriage of legitimization."

Some of the repentant divorcees in the Kurdish region have fixed triple talaq through a swift nikah halala. "There are clerics that can fix the triple talaq for you in return for 50,000 tomans [\$11]," Zara, a 40-year-old woman from the small Kurdish town of Paveh, told Al-Monitor. "In the past, the clerics would simply find a man for the woman to marry, spend the night under his roof and then get divorced and return to her first husband."

"In the old days in our village, I remember on three separate occasions the village clergy found a crazy person and married three women to him who were subjected to triple talaq by their husbands," Qader, a 61-year-old a farmer from Mariwan, told Al-Monitor via telephone. "Basically, this was a religious trick because the crazy person would be persuaded to divorce the women after sleeping with them for one night."

In most cases, triple talaq is final — often used when men want a quick out, particularly if they want to remarry someone else. In that case, women are left stranded with little recourse and many questions — the division of goods and children — unsettled.

Triple talaq has been a problem in other countries as well, such as Pakistan, Iraq and Bangladesh. Women's movements have led to India first banning, then taking steps to criminalize it as unconstitutional.

Despite the challenges triple talaq presents, Iranian law presently sanctions it and allows Sunnis — as all recognized religious minorities — the right to apply their community's own personal status laws.

But the practice of triple talaq is gradually getting more pushback from women's rights activists, lawyers and human rights defenders who are pushing Tehran to ban it. They claim that there is judicial grounds to do so, as the family status law of recognized religious minorities only has legal authority when it does not go against the public order and does not injure public morals. The activists argue that triple talaq brings extensive harm and chaos to the lives of many women, children and families. Many Sunni Kurdish human rights defenders have begun speaking out on the suffering caused by triple talaq in the last few years.

This bloc also has support among the clergy. Ranking Iranian Sunni cleric Molavi Abdul Hamid called triple talaq "forbidden" and emphasized the need for women to enjoy equality before the law and in society in general.

The issue poses a dilemma for the Iranian authorities, who may come under fire for intervening to stop practices particular to the country's Kurdish Sunni community or may be accused of allowing unfair practices if they do not.

Read more: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/iranian-kurdish-women-suffer-under-triple-talaq.html#ixzz5Kngg4gba>

The Islamic Republic's war on women

The election of Hassan Rouhani gave new momentum to Iran's devout Muslim feminists — but the mullahs aren't having it.

By Ziba Mir-Hosseini

Foreign Policy (29.08.2016) - <http://atfp.co/2cifXj8> - The phone calls started about six weeks ago. Men who didn't introduce themselves, working for Iran's security agencies, rang the country's most prominent women's rights activists and demanded they show up for interrogations. All the activists were told the same thing: "Don't tell anyone we've called you here. Don't speak to the media, don't breathe a word to anyone." But word seeped out, first in Tehran's feminist circles and then among political activists, who traded accounts of interrogations and lines of questioning.

The Iranian government's crackdown on feminists, one of the Islamic Republic's periodic intimidation campaigns against women's rights activists, is still underway. But the present iteration isn't just a push-and-pull struggle between the government and civil society, or between the censors and the country's most prominent women's magazine — it's a proxy battle between the president and the country's hard-liners.

Iran's women's rights activists, both religious and secular, seized the space offered by President Hassan Rouhani's 2013 election to emerge from the underground and engage again in public life. The Revolutionary Guards and the clerical establishment have responded by charging a vast international "feminist conspiracy" to undermine the Islamic Republic, funded by wealthy Western donors, intellectually articulated by feminist academics based abroad, and conducted by foot soldiers inside Iran — and even inside the president's cabinet.

Iran's hard-line clerical and military authorities have always been wary of women's gender activism, whether by secular "feminists" or religious "gender justice" advocates. They seem especially incensed, however, by Iran's homegrown Islamic feminists, who work for gender equality from a faith-based perspective, arguing from progressive readings of the Quran and fiqh, or the Islamic legal tradition, for greater participation in the labor force and better legal safeguards. This "egalitarian Islam" poses a special threat to hard-liners, because it challenges, from within the Islamic tradition, their conservative interpretation of the sacred texts in which they have invested so much since the revolution.

That's why hard-liners took special note of Rouhani's appointment of Shahindokht Molaverdi, for whom "egalitarian Islam" has been an intellectual bedrock, as his deputy minister for women's affairs. Trained as a lawyer, the devout Molaverdi was active in the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005, helping expand Iran's network of women's NGOs. She spent the stifling Mahmoud Ahmadinejad years working in civil society. Her views were progressive, but her determination to work within Iran's political system made her highly diplomatic. She always stopped short, for example, of explicitly calling herself a feminist. When she was asked during a U.N. meeting in New York why Iran had not yet joined the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), her answer was nuanced. She said there were certain factions in Iran, as in the United States, strongly opposed to it and suggested there were other ways her government would enhance women's human rights.

Since taking office, Molaverdi's religious leanings have given her a degree of protection that secular feminists lack altogether, but she has confronted hard-line attacks all the same. Conservative news sites objected to her appointment, and hard-liners in the clerical and military establishments accused her of undermining Islamic values by encouraging women to work. They took issue with her collaboration with women's activists, her stance on the 2009 election, and even her master's thesis on violence against women. For the hard-line establishment, she was a clear threat: too grassroots, too effective, too connected. It even rankled that she had managed to become the first woman in Iran to secure a license to run a notary office, the privilege of clerics since the early 20th century.

The conservative establishment's anxiety has also been fueled by Molaverdi's successes in office. Her aim of encouraging women's participation in politics resulted in what hard-liners have called the "gendering" of the last parliamentary election, in February. Last October, a coalition of female activists, with Molaverdi's encouragement, announced at a press meeting the launch of the "Campaign to Change the Masculine Face of Parliament" by inviting more women to stand for election. Iranian reformists had their own separate meetings, demanding, among other things, a 30 percent quota for women. This revival of civil society paid off. Moderates affiliated with Rouhani swept Tehran, taking all 30 of its parliamentary seats, and, of these new legislators, eight were women. Across the country, there was a fourfold rise in the number of female candidates running for the latest Parliament, which led to doubling the number of female deputies.

That election, and Molaverdi's association with it, rankled Iran's hard-liners. They have responded by training their anger on a magazine run by one of her allies, the legendary publisher Shahla Sherkat.

Zanan-e Emrooz is a relaunch of Zanan, a publication that, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, brought women's issues into Iran's national conversation by convening religious and secular women's activists. It ran stories about everything from nose jobs to domestic violence, making the case that gender equality was entirely Islamic. It was a sort of religiously tinged Ms. magazine, an extraordinary publication unlike anything published in the Middle East. And it wasn't just a forum for activists like Molaverdi — it made women's legal and political rights the concern of ordinary women across the country. At least until then-President Ahmadinejad shut it down in 2008, accusing the magazine of "blackening" the country and spreading pessimism.

Zanan-e Emrooz was launched in 2014 in the hopeful wake of Rouhani's election. The first edition featured a group of smiling female veterinarians on the cover with the headline, "We Are Happy With This Choice," leaving it intentionally ambiguous whether that was referring to the veterinarians being content with their career choice, or the women's movement being happy with Rouhani. In her editorial announcing the magazine's rebirth, Sherkat wrote that once again it feels as if there is hope, and that after years of silence, journalists like her think they can have a voice. "We know they'll push back against us, but we have no choice," she wrote. Its cheeky October issue of that year, about the rise of "white marriage," otherwise known as couples just living together, prompted a temporary closure, but it soon resumed its predecessor's signature style of high and low feminist conversation.

February's issue would prove a fateful turning point. It featured an interview with the Iranian-Canadian academic Homa Hoodfar, a highly regarded anthropologist based in Montreal. The interview focused on her latest academic book, *Electoral Politics: Making Quotas Work for Women*, which discussed research on women and elections conducted in various countries and fueled the lively Iranian debate about quotas for women in Parliament.

It was not a debate that hard-liners were inclined to have. Hoodfar traveled to Iran last December and returned to Canada, telling friends that the mood was hopeful and that she was optimistic about progress under Rouhani. But after she returned to Iran in February during the parliamentary election cycle, authorities raided her flat the day before her intended departure. Agents confiscated her passports, laptop, and mobile phone. A string of interrogations culminated in her detention on June 6. A month later, Tehran's prosecutor announced that she, along with three other Iranian dual nationals, had been charged but did not specify the grounds.

Not long after Hoodfar's arrest, articles began trickling out on websites affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. Hoodfar, one piece claimed, was a foreign agent. Another

published a day later featured an elaborate infographic showing the purported financial links between funding bodies in the West and the organs of the “feminist conspiracy” they supported. They alleged that her research was part of a sprawling conspiracy, an international network that with the aid of foreign funding has been seeking to infiltrate Iranian society and government. Not long thereafter, the regime began using Hoodfar and her foreign connections to tarnish influential figures in the Tehran women’s movement. Many of them have received the ominous phone calls ordering them in for questioning.

The connect-the-dots of intrigue eventually lead to the Rouhani government itself. Hard-liners angrily cite his administration’s attempts to suspend Ahmadinejad-era gender policies, such as a ban on women’s studying certain subjects in universities, a reduction in their permissible work hours, and a stricter dress code. The hard-liners claim the Rouhani administration’s efforts are nurtured and led by a conspiratorial network with Molaverdi at its center. Articles on conservative websites affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards enumerate her dangerous intentions and actions. Molaverdi’s aim of enabling women to participate more widely in the economy, her sustainable employment initiatives, “are in line with feminists who want to push women out of the family, into society, straying from the right path.” By “making a model of political women as successful,” she is said to be distorting the honorable, traditional image of the country’s rural women. (No mention is made that Iran has been an urban-majority country since 1979.) An excessive focus on domestic violence, rape, and the violence against women perpetrated by the Islamic State is “disturbing the public mind,” the news site claimed. Ultimately, Molaverdi is seeking to “change women’s lifestyle through changing laws and fine-tuning and reducing the religious, traditional aspects of Islam.”

Perhaps most far-fetched, in the conspiracy theory spun by hard-liners, is that the diaspora-based feminists are the brains — and funds — behind homegrown feminism in Iran. If there is one major fracture in the world of Iranian feminism, both domestically and in the diaspora, it is between mainstream women’s rights activists, who are prepared to work with Islam either out of faith or out of political expediency, and those who are openly hostile to Islam and project an Ayaan Hirsi Ali-esque revulsion for faith. The progression of some women’s rights activists to this extreme anti-religious position reflects their despair at years of intense repression in the name of Islam. For years the state only tolerated the activism of religious women and targeted secularists with special violence; with the crackdown on the Green Movement in 2009, state aggression grew so severe that some of them abandoned the middle ground entirely.

The notion that anti-Islam diaspora feminists could be deeply involved in a plot with academics like Hoodfar, who has been the focus of their criticism for what they see as “pro-Islamic views and scholarship,” is inconceivable. These dissident feminists, who have long severed real ties with the mainstream women’s movement inside the country, are the sort of figures the Iranian regime wishes to hold up as representative of feminism: intentionally disrespectful to religious sensibilities and cosily enmeshed with donor institutions. Their inclusion, women’s activists say, is aimed at blackening the credibility of Molaverdi and others by association.

The last issue of Zanan-e-Emrooz appeared in June. In July, a post appeared on its website announcing that it would not be published again until further notice; the closure was “due to some problems,” but no other reasons were given. Sherkat was among those summoned for regular questioning after Hoodfar’s arrest.

Rouhani’s government, for its part, has made little headway with progressive gender policies, and Molaverdi and her supporters are mostly focused on re-establishing themselves as part of the national conversation. The tough work of correcting Ahmadinejad-era legislation remains. But even given the modesty of their aims, hard-

liners seem determined to squelch their re-emergence. The persecution of innocent figures like Hoodfar looks increasingly like part of a concerted plan by hard-liners to undermine the chances of Rouhani's re-election next year. For now, Rouhani's government has remained quiet about the stealthy harassment of female activists, but as the 2017 presidential election nears, he will need to say something to convince Iran's women that he is still on their side.