

Sex Slave Jihad

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A measure of Islamic fundamentalists' success in controlling society is the depth and totality with which they suppress the freedom and rights of women. In Iran for 25 years, the ruling mullahs have enforced humiliating and sadistic rules and punishments on women and girls, enslaving them in a gender apartheid system of segregation, forced veiling, second-class status, lashing, and stoning to death.

Joining a global trend, the fundamentalists have added another way to dehumanize women and girls: buying and selling them for prostitution. Exact numbers of victims are impossible to obtain, but according to an official source in Tehran, there has been a 635 percent increase in the number of teenage girls in prostitution. The magnitude of this statistic conveys how rapidly this form of abuse has grown. In Tehran, there are an estimated 84,000 women and girls in prostitution, many of them are on the streets, others are in the 250 brothels that reportedly operate in the city. The trade is also international: thousands of Iranian women and girls have been sold into sexual slavery abroad.

The head of Iran's Interpol bureau believes that the sex slave trade is one of the most profitable activities in Iran today. This criminal trade is not conducted outside the knowledge and participation of the ruling fundamentalists. Government officials themselves are involved in buying, selling, and sexually abusing women and girls.

Many of the girls come from impoverished rural areas. Drug addiction is epidemic throughout Iran, and some addicted parents sell their children to support their habits. High unemployment 28 percent for youth 15-29 years of age and 43 percent for women 15-20 years of age is a serious factor in driving restless youth to accept risky offers for work. Slave traders take advantage of any opportunity in which women and children are vulnerable. For example, following the recent earthquake in Bam, orphaned girls have been kidnapped and taken to a known slave market in Tehran where Iranian and foreign traders meet.

Popular destinations for victims of the slave trade are the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf. According to the head of the Tehran province judiciary, traffickers target girls between 13 and 17, although there are reports of some girls as young as 8 and 10, to send to Arab countries. One ring was discovered after an 18 year-old girl escaped from a basement where a group of girls were held before being sent to Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. The number of Iranian women and girls who are deported from Persian Gulf countries indicates the magnitude of the trade. Upon their return to Iran, the Islamic fundamentalists blame the victims, and often physically punish and imprison them. The women are examined to determine if they have engaged in "immoral activity." Based on the findings, officials can ban them from leaving the country again.

Police have uncovered a number of prostitution and slavery rings operating from Tehran that have sold girls to France, Britain, Turkey as well. One network based in Turkey bought smuggled Iranian women and girls, gave them fake passports, and transported them to European and Persian Gulf countries. In one case, a 16-year-old girl was smuggled to Turkey, and then sold to a 58-year-old European national for \$20,000.

In the northeastern Iranian province of Khorasan, local police report that girls are being sold to Pakistani men as sex-slaves. The Pakistani men marry the girls, ranging in age from 12 to 20, and then sell them to brothels called "Kharabat" in Pakistan. One network was caught contacting poor families around Mashad and offering to marry girls. The girls were then taken through Afghanistan to Pakistan where they were sold to brothels. In the southeastern border province of Sistan Baluchestan, thousands of Iranian girls reportedly have been sold to Afghani men. Their final destinations are unknown.

One factor contributing to the increase in prostitution and the sex slave trade is the number of teen girls who are running away from home. The girls are rebelling against fundamentalist imposed restrictions on their freedom, domestic abuse, and parental drug addictions. Unfortunately, in their flight to freedom, the girls find more abuse and exploitation. Ninety percent of girls who run away from home will end up in prostitution. As a result of runaways, in Tehran alone there are an estimated 25,000 street children, most of them girls. Pimps prey upon street children, runaways, and vulnerable high school girls in city parks. In one case, a woman was discovered selling Iranian girls to men in Persian Gulf countries; for four years, she had hunted down runaway girls and sold them. She even sold her own daughter for US\$11,000.

Given the totalitarian rule in Iran, most organized activities are known to the authorities. The exposure of sex slave networks in Iran has shown that many mullahs and officials are involved in the sexual exploitation and trade of women and girls. Women report that in order to have a judge approve a divorce they have to have sex with him. Women who are arrested for prostitution say they must have sex with the arresting officer. There are reports of police locating young women for sex for

the wealthy and powerful mullahs.

In cities, shelters have been set-up to provide assistance for runaways. Officials who run these shelters are often corrupt; they run prostitution rings using the girls from the shelter. For example in Karaj, the former head of a Revolutionary Tribunal and seven other senior officials were arrested in connection with a prostitution ring that used 12 to 18 year old girls from a shelter called the Center of Islamic Orientation.

Other instances of corruption abound. There was a judge in Karaj who was involved in a network that identified young girls to be sold abroad. And in Qom, the center for religious training in Iran, when a prostitution ring was broken up, some of the people arrested were from government agencies, including the Department of Justice.

The ruling fundamentalists have differing opinions on their official position on the sex trade: deny and hide it or recognize and accommodate it. In 2002, a BBC journalist was deported for taking photographs of prostitutes. Officials told her: "We are deporting you ... because you have taken pictures of prostitutes. This is not a true reflection of life in our Islamic Republic. We don't have prostitutes." Yet, earlier the same year, officials of the Social Department of the Interior Ministry suggested legalizing prostitution as a way to manage it and control the spread of HIV. They proposed setting-up brothels, called "morality houses," and using the traditional religious custom of temporary marriage, in which a couple can marry for a short period of time, even an hour, to facilitate prostitution. Islamic fundamentalists' ideology and practices are adaptable when it comes to controlling and using women.

Some may think a thriving sex trade in a theocracy with clerics acting as pimps is a contradiction in a country founded and ruled by Islamic fundamentalists. In fact, this is not a contradiction. First, exploitation and repression of women are closely associated. Both exist where women, individually or collectively, are denied freedom and rights. Second, the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran are not simply conservative Muslims. Islamic fundamentalism is a political movement with a political ideology that considers women inherently inferior in intellectual and moral capacity. Fundamentalists hate women's minds and bodies. Selling women and girls for prostitution is just the dehumanizing complement to forcing women and girls to cover their bodies and hair with the veil.

In a religious dictatorship like Iran, one cannot appeal to the rule of law for justice for women and girls. Women and girls have no guarantees of freedom and rights, and no expectation of respect or dignity from the Islamic fundamentalists. Only the end of the Iranian regime will free women and girls from all the forms of slavery they suffer.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the Iranian human rights and pro-democracy activists who contributed information for this article. If any readers have information on prostitution and the sex slave trade in Iran, please contact her at dhughes@uri.edu