

Sexual Abuse. Children: Iran

A review of Iranian newspapers and magazines reveals that child sexual abuse is a problem and there is a need for laws protecting victims when sexual abuse happens inside the family. Among constraints that have hindered the preparation of a national plan of action is cultural resistance to addressing the problem because the subject is largely taboo. Often the issue is dealt with more generally under headings such as “violence” and “trauma” (UNICEF 2003). Sexual violence and abuse within the family is rarely reported and children themselves are largely silent on this issue. Laws make reporting by children unlikely. Article 220 of the Iranian penal code recognizes only a light sentence and fine for a father who kills his child in the course of administering “educational” punishment. Early marriage with the permission of the guardian is valid provided that the interests of the ward are duly observed. According to ‘Ulyā-i Zand (2002), this could also potentially be a form of female sexual abuse.

Despite the cultural resistance and the taboo nature of the subject, there has been a recent interest in this issue due to the problem with runaway youths. Investigations show that a large number of girls run away from home because they are mistreated by their parents (Shikhāvand 2003). Many suffer sexual abuse from their father, or brothers, and out of fear of being beaten, they do not dare to speak about it. Many boys between the ages of 11 and 15 are victims of pedophilia, a subject also largely taboo in this society (Shikhāvand 2003).

‘Ulyā-i Zand (2002), a prominent researcher who has done extensive work about prostitution in Iran, found that in a sample of 147 women prostitutes, 22.5 percent of them had been sexually abused as a child by their father, brother, step-father, friend, or neighbors. In the latest report by the Iranian Surgeon General, out of 324 reported cases of child sexual abuse, 237 were females under 15 with ages ranging from 0 to 13 (83 percent were between 11 and 13). ‘Ulyā-i Zand (2002) cites children as “the most innocent victims of sexual assault” in the society. She adds, “speaking about sexual abuse of children is quite hard, but keeping mum on the issue is unjust.” She also claims that studies on 99 percent of underage children who had been sexually

assaulted indicate the phenomenon is more common among “lax and despotic families.” Among those interviewed, mothers had knowledge of the assault in 48 percent of child abuse cases but refused to disclose it for fear of the “despotic father’s” reaction (‘Ulyā-i Zand 2001).

In another important study by Ibrāhīmī-Qavām (1991), 39 girls and 11 boys between ages 10 and 18 who reported sexual abuse to their school officials were compared with 200 adolescents with comparable socioeconomic status who had not suffered from sexual abuse. Out of these 50 adolescents, 18 had been abused by father, 7 by brother, 9 by neighbor, 4 by stranger, 5 by cousin, 1 by brother-in-law, and 4 by someone unknown. The ages at the time of abuse ranged from 4 to 15. The result indicates a significantly higher level of disturbance with respect to anxiety symptoms, social avoidance, fear of negative evaluation, physiological and psychological disturbances, and self esteem among victims of sexual abuse, especially female victims.

These scattered pieces of research indicate that there have been some attempts on the part of female scholars and advocates to discuss the issue in depth with the hope of creating laws to protect children from sexual abuse and breaking the taboo that surrounds it so that children can feel safe to report the abuse.

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