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850,000 young Iranian girls, as young as 9, married

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A new report on Iran is revealing that an estimated 850,000 young girls there are married – some of them as young as 9 or 10 years old and some of them married off to an “elderly man” in payment of a debt.

The report was compiled by Y. Mansharof, a research fellow, and A. Savyon, director of the Iranian Media Project. Both are with the Middle East Media Research Institute.

They explain there has been an increasingly intense public debate about a number of social issues inside Iran.

“One such issue is the phenomenon of marriages involving children, including children under age 10 – especially arranged marriages of girls to adult men, or even to elderly men,” they wrote.

“Under Iranian law, girls may marry at 13 and boys at 15, and children under 10 may marry with the approval of their guardian and the court. According to official statistics, about one million children, even under age 10, are married. The statistics also show that 85 percent of these one million married children are girls – meaning that most of them are married to grown men.”

They noted that public figures such as sociologists inside the regime are warning that the number of children marrying is rising, and that that creates both health and social risks.

“According to one sociologist, arranging marriages for children, especially girls, is common among poor and uneducated urban families that seek a way out of dire financial straits; he adds that the girls themselves are severely damaged both physically and psychologically,” the report said.

Officials of the Islamic government, however, are not alarmed.

“Regime spokesmen have denied the extent of the phenomenon, and have also shrugged off the matter, saying that child marriage is legal and that preventing it is against Islamic law.”

Farshid Yazdani, who is with the Association for the Defense of Children’s Rights in Iran, warned that in 2006 children marriages were only 2.3 percent of all marriages, but but 2010 that grew to 4.9 percent.

He noted that in 2006, Iran had 25,000 children ages 10-15 who already were divorced.

Islamist law specifies that girls reach maturity at age 9.

“In an attempt to explain the increase in child marriages in Iran, Amanollah Gharai-Moghadam, who heads the Sociology Association of Iran, pointed at the economic difficulties afflicting Iranian society. He said that in Tehran province many destitute families accept any marriage proposal for their daughters regardless of the girls’ ages – and regardless of their rights – so as to reduce the family’s expenses,” the report said.

“In some cases, poor families are forced to sell their daughters; in others they are forced to marry off their sons and daughters after the children conduct relations that are forbidden ... and in still others, the girl is given to an elderly man in lieu of payment of a debt,” he stated.

There’s no shortage of criticism inside Iran of the practice, the MEMRI researchers found.

The Iranian cultural and scientific website Iranvij.ir noted that young girls “lack the required physical maturity for pregnancy.”

“In an article published on a website identified with Iranian human rights activists operating outside Iran, Iranian human rights activist Ali Tayefi warned that ‘the early marriage of an immature girl who is not physically ready [for sexual relations], particularly with men of advanced age, has many health consequences [for her]. Studies have indicated that there is a close link between maternal age and maternal mortality [during pregnancy]. In early marriage and pregnancy, at ages 10 through 14, there are five times more deaths, for mothers and also for infants, compared to women aged 20-24. AIDS is another risk of early marriage; this is because, contrary to what parents think, early marriage does not [necessarily] ensure wellbeing for their daughters – husbands carry STDs contracted during relations they had with other women,’” the report said.

Change in the law and practice, however, isn’t easy.

When a panel discussion was held recently on the damage from child marriages, members called for changes, but “they also underlined that the Islamic factor is an obstacle to legislative and cultural change.”

“Sociologist Gharai-Moghadam said that the existing law, which sets 13 for girls and 15 for boys as the minimal age for marriage, is not sufficient because it does not address the custom widespread in various parts of the country to arrange marriages for children under the age of 10. He said, ‘The law in itself is good, but we must also consider this custom in society, because unfortunately in some cities, marriage under the age of 10 is considered customary.’ He also said, ‘According to a study carried out in 33 cities across [Iran], in Bushehr, Sistan-Baluchistan, Lorestan, Khuzestan provinces, and in several cities in the east and north of the country, child marriage is very common,’” the report said.

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