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# WHEN TRAGEDY HITS: A CONCISE SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF SEX TRAFFICKING OF YOUNG IRANIAN WOMEN

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I focus predominantly on the cultural context of sex trafficking of young Iranian women into the underground markets of the Persian Gulf region. Neither human trafficking nor sex trade is a modern trait. While these age-old practices have been the subject of protest by the moralists and the liberal feminists alike, the discourse of eradication of human trafficking and the restoration of the abject bodies rarely includes a remedy to revise the local and common gendered belief that allows these informal economies to proliferate.

New trends of sex-trade in the Gulf region have emerged out of a cluster of cultural and social matters, with their roots in political history of the people in the area. A few of the contributing factors that make up the social and political constellation resulting to the thriving market in human and sex trafficking are an accelerating poor economy that results in impoverished living situations for the majority of people in Iran and a failure to educate the public about the potentials and the rights of women.

Although economic misfortune often determines the fate of young women, gender double standards cut across social classes in Iran. Young girls from different regions in the country experience a variety of limitations according to local practices and hegemonic beliefs. Similarly, with respect to treatment of women by men, Iranian oral and textual history is frequently used to legitimize male dominance in contemporary life. Throughout the ages, despite warfare and social unrest, cultural continuity is preserved in the region by keeping stringent rules of conduct. Moreover, much of the popular values are learned through proverbs and legendary stories that get passed on through continuous oral reiterations. Unfortunately, included in the oral culture of the country are stories about women as being lesser to the men. The descriptive teachings of our literary past on how to train a woman into her proper obedient place is neither scarce nor trivial. In short, this article aims to pay closer attention to how a young girl comes to perceive herself and is perceived by others before she is swept up and transported into the underground sex markets abroad.

### Prelude

How does one write about a problem among a people halfway around the world, when the world is sharply divided into camps of opposites where the political atmosphere is highly polarized and the military rhetoric of “belonging to one or the other” seems infinite?<sup>1</sup> “Imagined” or not (Anderson, 1989), national identities and community affiliations run deep in the current discourses about all that relates to life in Iran. As I write the final addendums to this article on human trafficking in Iran, I am surrounded by the language of nationalism and political significance, both in terms of the energy confrontations in the world, and at a historically significant moment when an over-achieving multi-millionaire affords to tour the outer space. Anoushe Ansari, a successful business-woman, a resident of the U.S. and a citizen of the world, unequivocally speaks of her Iranian nationality at a moment of maximum visibility in the public eye—on her travel to space. Subsequently, the possibility (or lack) of wearing the three-color Iranian flag—that powerful icon of political and national affiliation since the ancient times—becomes the topic of endless discussions. While a careful investigation of the political implications and cultural significance of Ansari’s actions deserve consideration beyond the scope of this paper, I have directed my attention to a more relevant problem. Thus, how does one formulate a thoughtful script about human-trafficking practices and attitudes toward sexuality in Iran, avoiding the ambush of a language of anti-nationalism?

Questions such as these have been central in my thought process both during fieldwork in Tehran and with respect to subsequent reflection and writing. One practical approach customary to social sciences is that which relies on formulating comparisons between binary opposites - in this case between the experiences of sex-workers in Iran and its “other”—the U.S. Although the comparative methodology between the seemingly opposites in order to demystify pre-conceptions is bona fide, in order to surpass binary assessment all together, this paper offers instead a wide-ranging perspective on the topic of its inquiry. On one level, this paper considers hierarchies of social statuses and dissimilarities between different groups of Iranian female sex-workers (brought in either by force or by choice) in order to better comprehend the circumstances of their involvement in the commerce. Moreover, the study takes into account a cluster of influential socio-cultural factors that contribute to the development of the practice. Located within a complex web of norms and practices which range from the consequential effects of poverty and addiction, local perceptions of gender and sexuality, and the well-established adaptation of religious meanings, this paper reveals the transference of Iranian girls into Dubai’s sex-market as a cultural construct.

### **The Argument**

Often, the sheer catastrophic scale and details of the global underground sex markets are so extreme that to study them becomes a cumbersome ordeal, layered with political risks and emotional impediments for the researcher. While many commit to eradicating such tragic human experiences, it is crucial to note that before any fundamental changes can take root, the complexities of the socio-political context surrounding this issue need to be considered. One can study Human Trafficking from a variety of perspectives. For example, in terms of the historical development and evolution of the slave-market, criminology of sex-trade, or the socio-economic basis for human trafficking, all will provide relevant and useful analyses and findings on the topic. However, the focus of this paper is on specific social/cultural conditions, in which young Iranian women and children are transported into the underground prostitution circles of the Gulf-states. This article aims to draw scholarly attention to the cultural context surrounding sex trafficking in Iran.

The triangular movement of human trafficking between Iran, Pakistan, and UAE in recent years can be specifically divided in two separate categories and paths. Since the mid 1990's, an increasingly young population of urban females, many of whom came from an emerging class of runaway teens in the Iranian cities, have entered the Iran-UAE body-trade. This trend is also evident in the abundance of official reports, despite attempts to heighten sensitivities on the issue in the region. "In recent years, the rate of smuggling young women and the mandatory migration of the [Iranian] girls to the Gulf States and in some cases to Asian and European countries has risen sharply" (ISNA, 2004). The Tehran-Dubai path is mostly exclusive to urban runaways and young prostitutes. "Iranian girls hold the highest price and have the most appeal in smuggling markets of girls and women in the U.A.E." (Aref News, 2005).

In the year 2000, I had returned briefly to Iran after years of immigration, in order to observe life in Tehran, and to evaluate the possibility for conducting a dissertation research on teenage runaways in the city. By observing their social practices, I had hoped to understand the cultural context and political economy of a sexual morality, which teenage runaways simultaneously provoke and threaten. The conversation I overheard on my time off from fieldwork was intriguing to me, both as it related to the topic of my studies, and in the way the conversationalists boldly discussed in public a topic I had presumed taboo.

On December 2000, after recreation in the crystal waters of the coral reef in the Persian Gulf, I came ashore to the white sands of the "women-only" beaches of Kish Island. As I lay there, with my eyes closed, I overheard a conversation between two young women that perked my ears. The women were discussing a new opportunity to work in the sex-industry in Dubai. One of the women made a proposition to the younger one to take part in a classy escort service ("a service with class," in their words). Their conversation in-

cluded keywords such as “a high-class setting” where “beautiful, young, Iranian girls” could meet “powerful” rich clients in Dubai-city. When the woman expressed hesitation, she was offered instead, to perform sex acts on a live internet-based web site. She was further reassured by the slightly older woman (no more than mid-twenties) that her face would not be shown, to protect her privacy. The exclusivity of both the performers and their clients, as members of a “high class” society were emphasized throughout the conversation. In one instant, the lines of distinctions were drawn to demonstrate exclusivity of this crowd from ordinary prostitutes, “street-workers,” and the “runaways” (Fieldjournal, 2001:114).

It warranted no surprise to me when the reported accounts of the subsequent years suggested that women of this group enter the market with a level of awareness about sex-trade. “Majority of the Iranian girls active in the sex-commerce in the Gulf, not only are aware of their social position and their occupation, they have entered these [the Arab countries of the Gulf] for this purpose, in the first place,” writes Rafiezade an Iranian journalist (IF-ID, 2005). Members of this group often see themselves as belonging to a higher and more prestigious social class in contrast to street-workers, and demonstrate a degree of “middle-class” cultural standards. These women frequently describe their status and legitimize their actions through adaptation of concepts such as “choice,” “autonomy” and “personal freedom” and “financial independence.”

Alternatively, human traffickers frequently use another popular route in order to smuggle women and children from Iran into the sex-markets in Dubai. This second line of movement falls in the category of more traditional smuggling operations, across multiple borders—mostly from the southern provinces adjacent to the Persian Gulf. Recently, a few cases of the abduction of children in an attempt to smuggle them abroad have been reported in papers.<sup>2</sup> However, because of extreme poverty, growing problems of drug addiction and overpopulation in the area, many impoverished families “marry off” their daughters, in exchange for a modest fee. In this vein, a history of patriarchy in which the value of a female is primarily restricted to her sexuality plays an important role in determining the fate of these young girls. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of recorded incidents, where young girls were married off to an external ethnic group such as the Baluch, Pakistani, or Arab men in exchange for money. “Iran is the origin, mediation ground and a site of trafficking of numerous young women and girls for sexual exploitation.” (Special Report by Farzam, 2006).

Most recently, the abolitionist movement has focused the world’s attention on the criminology of human trafficking and the abuse of human rights. “Human traffickers prey on the most vulnerable and turn a commercial profit at the expense of innocent lives” (Condoleeza Rice, Secretary of State, USA, 2006). While the inhumane and criminal acts of the sex traffickers in the Persian Gulf area are beginning to receive some attention from the international human rights activists, there is little attempt to improve the attitudes and life-

styles of the families where the flights begin. It is my aim to draw attention, instead, to the socio-cultural context, where it becomes plausible for sex-trafficking to thrive.

Although economic misfortune often determines the fate of young women, gender double standards cut across social classes in Iran. Girls in Iran learn about their inferiority to boys at an early age. For many families in Iran, having a female child is perceived as a burden. On the one hand, gender biases in society limit the possibilities for young women to enter the work force and to engage in a stable income-generating activity, thus demoting her to an inconvenience, as an additional mouth to feed. On the other hand, unless men of kin carefully attend to her as a sexual being, girls potentially create situations that jeopardize family honor. Therefore, her guardian's priority is to teach her how to provide care to her younger siblings, to assist in the matters of domestic life to prepare her for marriage. In other words, modern conceptions of choice, compatibility of the matrimonial pair, and romance are rarely a factor in determining her fate. In most instances, harsh living conditions and economic pressures often result in disposition of the young girls, who are married off quickly, often to considerably older men, in order to avoid social embarrassment and financial hardship.

In this regard, despite the substantial role of poverty in the formation of sex-commerce and human-trafficking, the complexities of cultural values, attitudes, and practices towards sex that have developed in the area deserve serious consideration as well. History of polygamous practices (at least for those who could afford it) and social construction of the Harem, as well as sexual slave-markets in Iran, have contributed to the formation of sexual meanings and the attitudes toward bartering of the body. Additionally, while the remainder of "harem culture" occupies the collective memory of people in Iran, the contemporary norms and social standards distinguish polygamy (as something that can be tolerated, even accepted under special circumstances) in contrast to obtaining sex-partners through slave markets and other similarly non-virtuous practices, like prostitution, deemed as sinful and corrupt. Nonetheless, from ancient times, human traffickers have been pirating bodies and taking them hostage for the purpose of slavery. Able bodies of captured men and women were used in order to build "great civilizations," to satisfy sexual desires of the dominant and the powerful. Much of scholarly research on human sexuality suggests the endurance of the tradition of sex-slavery since antiquated era. "The slave market had been a thriving commerce in the Middle East since Mesopotamian times, [where] young boys and girls captured in war or paid as tribute by their fathers or local rulers were available for purchase on the open market in all major cities" (Croutier, 1989:21).

Tracing back through Iranian textual history, one can find numerous references to *kanizakan* (female sex slaves) and *gholaman* (male slaves), who were brought in from expansionist wars or purchased at trade markets. The practice of taking up *kanizak*<sup>3</sup> into one's household continued ubiquitously

throughout the region and was common practice in post-Islamic era. Although Iranian Islamic heritage celebrates the radical response of the Prophet to slavery<sup>4</sup>, the adoption of female sex-slaves (*kanizak*) did not die off prior to the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran. As recent as 100 years ago, during the reign of the Qajar dynasty, women were frequently adopted into the King's court and prominent wealthy men, to work as domestic servants and to provide sex services to their masters. The recorded historical accounts suggests that majority of these women were captured from impoverished families in far away places—often from African continents—and sold off in slave markets (Nashat, 2004:37-60).

Conversely, within Shiite Islam and the Iranian adaptation of the faith, the institutionalism of temporary marriages or *sigheh* has legitimized marketing and bartering of the body. Sanctified under the rubric of the Prophet's Sunnat (life style and teachings), *sigheh* is strongly defended by many as a socially acceptable methodology for controlling and preventing prostitution. In Iran, while prostitution and the management of sex-trade remained illegal both prior to and after the political revolution of 1979, the ethical double-standard of forbidding the sale of the body by sex-workers while celebrating temporary (as short-term as a few hours) marriages in exchange for money has complicated responses to a growing social phenomenon. As early as 1934, Iran officially signed the 1921 International doctrine to prevent exploitation and bartering of women in or outside the country's geo-political borders (Kar, 1991:140).

"The freedom to choose one's mate is yet to be recognized and practiced by the public in Iran, especially among families of limited financial resources," writes Mehrangiz Kar, a former judge and an attorney specializing in family law, as well as a long time women's rights advocate in Iran (Kar, 2001:36). However, young girls from different regions in Iran experience a variety of limitations according to local cultures. Some of the earliest distinctions between genders begin with prohibiting young girls at pre-school level from playing in group games and sports, even disallowing their presence outside the house in the extremely traditional families. Many of the local cultures in the southern parts of Iran prohibit their young daughters to leave the house unescorted, even for grocery shopping, since popular belief understands this as a sign of weakness and the absence of authority of the man of the house. When a girl disobeys, her actions are rarely tolerated. In accordance with traditional values of the region, the male of her kin would respond tragically, and violently, in order to save face.

On the other hand, "children become the supporting pillars for the broken and shaky relations [in cases of domestic dispute]—a bait on a hook," writes Farzaneh Milani on the cultural significance of children within the family (Milani, 1992:196). Domestic services of these children are a necessity for many impoverished families. "Above all, woman's procreative power it seems remains insurance for mismatched alliances, with the failure to produce

a child, preferably a boy, a cause for severe anxiety and desperation” (Milani, 1992:196). For families with limited financial resources, male children become additionally valuable as “Nan-avarān” or breadwinners. Young girls continue to simultaneously invoke sentiments of destitution (an additional mouth to feed), and to evoke the romantic notion of a future helping hand in the domestic realm. Prior to marriage, and especially among crowded families, daughters assume their domestic role in cooking and caring for the family at a very young age.

A daughter’s participation in school, also, falls prey to cultural prejudice. Many of the Iranian girls in the south do not continue their education beyond elementary years, as their domestic assistance takes precedence over their education. Moreover, when they fall behind in their studies, the young girls are presumed lacking talent and intelligence. These harsh judgments about a girl’s ability to learn and to excel in school are further utilized to argue the need to marry her off quickly. Despite an increase in women’s participation in schools since the political revolution of 1979, the traditional notions of an ideal woman as someone “Najib” (innocent) and “Mojab” (agreeable) persists across social classes and ethnic groups. Images of the extreme polarization of women are reinforced through literature and culture, either as good mothers and caring wives that emphasizes their domestic service, or as promiscuous and transgressive bodies (i.e. “Lakateh,” “Saliteh,” “Faheshe,” etc.). Numerous examples of such exist in the writings of great Persian cultural icons, from Saadi (the poet), to Amir Kabir (a social reformer), Hedayat (an intellectual pioneer) and beyond.

Similarly, with respect to the treatment of women by men, Iranian oral and textual history is frequently used to legitimize male dominance in contemporary culture. Much of the popular values are learned through proverbs and legendary stories passed on through continuous oral reiterations. Unfortunately, included in the oral culture of Iran are images of women as secondary to men, and descriptive teachings on how to train a woman into her proper obedient place. “There are many examples of women’s lack of wit and wisdom in Iranian literal culture and legendary stories and poetry, which justify and reinforce the absolute authoritative position men assume over her” (Kar, 2001:42-43). Among them, Saadi, a prominent literary figure of the 12th century, and a “Master of Speech,” offers an abundant collection of teachings on how to control a woman into submission:

ببند یی سرا بر ی خرم در  
بلند او از دی بر آ زن بانگ که

...

پارسا فرمانبر خوب زن  
پادشاه را شایرد و مرد کند

“Slam the door shut on a house

From which, the voice of a woman is heard”

...  
 “A good, obedient woman of character  
 Shall transform any ordinary (dervish) man into a king!”

When a man fails to demonstrate his absolute authority over his *Namous* (females of kin/sexual properties), he is harshly assessed in the public eye. In recent years, the metaphor of *zan-zalil* (wretched by women) has found itself a strong hold in public speech. A man who fails to demonstrate his absolute authority over his wife, is characterized by his friends (in the language of amusement, humor and sarcasm) as a miserable man, a *zan-zalil*.

On a more philosophical level, Iranians often assign a positive value to the notions of patience (*Sabr*) and destiny (*bakht*) as Islamic virtues. When confronted with circumstances of extreme injustices, the language of God’s supreme power and wisdom in choosing one’s *ghesmat*, or as Abu-Lughod calls it, her “divinely decreed lot in life” (Abu-Lughod, 1988:271), is taken on both as a coping mechanism and a point of legitimacy. At the same time, it must be noted that concepts of *ghesmat* (one’s destiny) and its counter-part *masouliat* (religious and social responsibility to confront injustices) are frequently contended in juxtaposition of one another, and their application fluctuates depending upon specific circumstances. In relation to the problem of sex trafficking in southern areas of Iran, the role of education about multiple applications of cultural and spiritual concepts in terms of attitudes toward life in contemporary situations acquires a significant value. While achieving such objectives (to educate the public in order to reverse their cultural attitudes) may seem out of reach, we are reminded by the massive fluctuations that women in Iran have endured in a historically short period of time, since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-09. Writing on the significant shifts in the conception of women as mothers and wives, belonging to the house (“Manzil”), to “managers of the house (Muddabir-i manzil),” Najmabadi points out the role of education and new formulation of traditional values at the time:

The new regulatory practices and concepts defined the acceptable social space for freedom for the modern woman. ... Thus women constituted at once a new individual self through literacy and a new social self through patriotic political activities. As managers of the house, they were beginning to transform “the house” into a social space of citizenship (Najmabadi, 1998:113-114).

### Final Remarks

New trends of sex-trade in the Gulf region have emerged out of a cluster of cultural and social matters, with their roots in the political history of the people in the area. An accelerating poor economy for the majority of people in



Iran, impoverished living situations, and a failure to educate the public about the value and rights of women, are a few of the contributing factors that make up the social/political constellation resulting in the thriving market of human and sex trafficking. In terms of market economy, sex workers and human trafficking circles often expand their activities over areas where the demand for bartering the body is high and an overflow of clientele is assured. In part, the increase in demands for an underground sex-market in Dubai can be attributed to the continuous military presence in the Gulf region due to multiple wars of the last few decades. Such direct correlations between the brothel industry and the presence of military forces in the area, is neither new nor exclusive to the Middle East. However, the increase in trafficking of Iranian girls into Dubai is directly linked to the recent transformation of the city as a geopolitically significant and economically flourishing hub in the Gulf region. Mass-migrations caused by a constellation of political revolutions and war, resurgence of religious fundamentalism, and the return of traditional cultural values towards gender provide a new niche for sex-trade to go underground, and for new money to be poured into its industry. There is a steadfast commerce driving the transport of sex workers through the Dubai-gate and into the International market. “Networks of prostitution transfer runaway girls to the Arabian countries of the Persian Gulf through the aid of powerful venture capitalists and business enterprises, which make large payments necessary to obtain official documentations and visas for these girls” (Intekhab, 2002). To confront the growth of sex-trade, on the one hand, requires a substantial awareness and possible collaborations with the powerful industry that responds to this market.

On the other hand, uncontested local traditions and sexually violent views of women that persist in the region have created a breeding ground for human trafficking and underground sex trade endeavors. A sustainable program to educate the public about new attitudes toward women and sex is the other important course of actions. However, it is equally insufficient to presume that an extensive public educational program alone will eradicate the problem of human-trafficking commerce in the area. For people to participate in educational programs and to adopt a new life style, they need to have alternative methods of generating income. In other words, for people living in poverty, the extent of agency—in terms of control over circumstances of their lives—is constrained and restricted<sup>5</sup>. In short, to understand, critique, and prevent further exploitation of women and children in the smuggling circles of the Persian Gulf, a multi-disciplinary perspective that goes beyond the traditional political economy of the trade is necessary.

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## Notes Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> The political stance of the current administration in the U.S. that is implied here, equally extends over to the ideological rhetoric adopted by the right-wing extremists in the Islamic Republic of Iran, emphasizing a sanction of *belonging to the self*

(khody), as in being an insider, in contrast to standing on the exterior of the politically legitimate space, of belonging to *the other* (gheir-e khody).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the aftermath of the Bam earthquake in 2003, volunteers and official border patrol discovered several trucks, loaded with orphaned children. Later reports determined that the children were abducted to be sold off abroad. (Ghanbarpour. 2003)

<sup>3</sup> With an emphasis on the suffix of “ak” which implies smallness in both the size and age of the person.

<sup>4</sup> The Prophet Mohammad freed up a black slave named Belal Habashi in a politically significant moment of Islamic history. Muslim communities in Iran –in formal religious teachings (sermons) as well as street plays (ta’ziye) - often pride themselves in the Prophet’s attitude towards humanity and freedom.

<sup>5</sup> See analysis offered by Paul Farmer (2001) and Mark Hunter (2002) based on their research on AIDS and HIV-prevention programs and public health models in Africa.