Forced Girl Marriages:
The Death of One's Reality

Justice For Iran
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For Farzaneh Moradi
Who was forced to marry at the age of 15
Became a mother at the age of 16
Fell in love at the age of 19
Was detained following the murder of her husband at the age of 20
... and faces execution at the age of 26.

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Introduction

Girl marriage in Iran is a not a thing of the past. It is not an occasional event in remote villages and towns. It is not a custom among the nomads, the impoverished or the homeless. Official statistics demonstrate that girl marriages are on the rise. The relevant narratives support this rise and point to its spread among all peoples and parts of the country.

Findings of a recent report by Justice for Iran (JFI) on girl marriages in Iran[1] points to the fact that in 2012, at least 1537 girls below the age of 10 and 29,827 girls between 10 and 14 years of age have been forced to marry. Together, this population is equivalent to a student body large enough to leave 133 primary and middle schools unoccupied due to untimely marriage.

These statistics stem from the fact that under the Islamic Republic there is no set minimum age for marriage. Although according to law the minimum age for girls is set at 13 and for boys at 15, the guardian is entitled to seek a judge's approval to marry off a child at any age, even infancy. In addition, this past October, the Islamic Republic Parliament passed a bill granting guardians the right to marry adopted children following a judge's approval for those below the legal age limit.

To mark the first International Day of the Girl Child on 11 October 2013 and the release of its special report on girl marriages in Iran, JFI created a dedicated Facebook event[2] entitled "No to Girl Marriages" and called for 'encouraging collaboration to stop girl marriages in Iran." This initiative invited all members to post a childhood photo along with a narrative related to their own childhood experience and what might have occurred had they been forced to marry and what must be done to stop the practice of forcing girl children into serving as sexual slaves in the arms of older men.
However, the narratives that flooded the Facebook event went beyond JFI's call. Many of the women wrote about girl children forced into marriage. Some accounts were about their mothers and grandmothers, some about their classmates who once sat next to them at school, and some about their own childhood violently threatened or interrupted by forced marriage.

[1] For the full report please see *Stolen Lives, Empty Classrooms: An overview on Girl Marriages in the Islamic Republic of Iran* available on-line at: http://justiceforiran.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/JFI-Girl-Marriage-in-Iran-EN.pdf
[2] The Facebook page is in Persian languages and is available at: https://www.facebook.com/events/473173642780162/

Along with their childhood photos, more than 150 women shared intimate details of how child marriage had or could have devastated their lives. Another 50 commented or shared images in support of this call for action, including 2 men who courageously spoke of the same fate that threatened their own sister and wife. A staggering 56,512 have joined the event only in the first two days. In addition, 5,478 have announced their support for JFI's call. Many others shared echoed the same messages on their Facebook pages or linked to JFI's "No to Girl Child Marriages" page in order to spread its call.

The following report attempts to gather a selection of excerpts from shared narratives on the aforementioned Facebook event, and discuss and examine the causes and negative effects of such marriages on the lives of girls and women.

On the one hand, the wide range of narratives and accounts point to the extent this phenomenon affects the country both in terms of geographical reach and socioeconomic classes. On the other hand, personal accounts and details put a face to the conditions and causes that lead to such marriages. They also include analysis and consideration for the negative impact of forced marriages on the body and mind of girl children. Last but not least, realities conveyed in the narratives question the underlying assumption, including that forced marriages are exclusive to the disadvantaged and the conservative sectors of the population or those who reside in remote and marginal villages and towns.

Why are girls forced to marry?

Religious, cultural, economic and political problems and legal impediments are often offered as possible explanation for marrying girl children. Over time, these and other attempts increasingly fail to justify such marriages. Majority of the comments on the "No to Girl Marriages" Facebook page point to the fact that many continue to refer to these grounds, as well a range of other reasons, as a means of continuing the practice of girl marriages.

Marriage as a means of social advancement

Zahra Jafari, is one of the commenters who considers custom and tradition as the main justification for the forced early marriage of her middle and high school classmates. She writes: "Many of my classmates married before their 18th birthday and felt no sense of shame, in particular, when they were physically developed enough to look older than their age. I even recall many of my friends competed with each other in order to marry sooner. They had no understanding of the reality of marriage. It was simply an opportunity for social advancement. At the time, high school years were considered the best time to marry and this was widely accepted."

Although it may be expected that such views on marriage belong to past ages, Zahra Jafari has written: "Even now, in that traditional society, girls are married in light of their physical appearance. They never refuse a suitable choice, which in their view is defined by finance and profession."

I worried for my daughter, so I married her off

Welcoming suitors for girl children is a strong possibility when the intended girl is beautiful and her "worried" parents choose to marry her off in order to put an end to their anguish.

An anonymous woman wrote of her sister's marriage: "My older sister was in year 7 when my parents forced her to marry. She was quite beautiful and popular, which worried my parents. Although I was quite young I will never forget her marriage ceremony. She sobbed the whole time and begged my parents to change their minds. The only image I have of her marriage is her violent and regular beatings by her husband and abuse by his family. His beatings even caused her to miscarry her first child. Following these events my father told her to ask for a divorce but my sister did not agree. She worried that her divorce may cast a negative reflection on her sisters' prospects. She was twenty years of age and her sons three years and eighteen months when her husband murdered her in a most tragic manner. My father followed her case for seven years but to no avail because the uncle of the murderer worked in the judiciary."

Yalda Alai recounts the story of a thirteen year old, who was forced to marry out of her family's concern for her possible perversion: "Once a month she came to our home. She did our cleaning. Wearing her Islamic uniform she looked around forty. I knew she had a young daughter. Once, I picked up a few children's books and gave them to her, saying: 'These are for your daughter.' She smiled and said, no thank you. I asked why. She said my daughter has just married, let her focus on her life. Books will distract her. I asked how old she was and she said 13. I asked why she had married so young? Did she not attend school? She said last year one of the students at her school got pregnant and so her father and I felt it was better for her to marry. She will not get anywhere by attending school. University and education and studies are all excuses. They misguide everyone."

Poverty and dysfunctional families

Poverty and dysfunctional family dynamics is one of the main causes of forced early marriages. A teacher who used to teach at a middle school in a small town in north of Iran recounts many bitter memories of her students marrying between 12 and 15 years of age. According to her, many parents lacked basic primary education or financial resources. She wrote about her year 7 student, Sahar, who was petite and weak: "Following the New Year holidays, Sahar returned to school with a make over and in high heels. Her maternal aunt had a son who worked as a taxi driver in south of Tehran. He was a womanizer and had sex with anyone he could. His mother decided he should marry in order to put an end to his promiscuity… Once she burst into tears in the class. Afterwards we spoke about it. Apparently he did not love her and wanted to marry another woman, a widow. He subjected her to perpetual verbal

abuse. Sahar said 'I don't even know the meaning of some of the profanities!' I informed the head teacher and the special education teacher. The head teacher insisted there should be no interference of any type as it is a personal matter and might bear negative consequences. I had no choice but to advise Sahar to share her experiences with her parents. She said: "They are old and ill, you mean I get a divorce? My cousin divorced her drug addict husband and now everyone speaks behind her back. I don't want to torment my parents and subject myself to rumours."

The teacher speaks about "gifted students" who "entered the world of adults and forgot about education" and complains that "I was unable to do anything to assist these children, nothing… time and time again when I used to speak about these cases in the staff room, other teachers would simply say law and Sharia allow it to happen. They don't study, they might as well marry!"

Collaboration among support organizations

Lack of support and even encouragement by teachers and head teacher towards students who were forced to marry, based on the idea that "you finally have to marry" or that "whoever is not a good student should get married" are reflected in many other accounts shared on this Facebook page.

Other social organizations that are expected to support girls who face marriage often remain silent or assist the parents to marry their girl children.

Nasrin Afzali shares an example: "I had a classmate who was a top employee at the Ministry of Health. She recounted that an 18 or 19 year old girl from one of the villages near Tabriz fled to Tehran in order to escape forced marriage and out of naivety sought the assistance of the Ministry of Health, saying she did not want to marry and instead wanted to study and work. Ministry officials (using Security and

police techniques) gained her trust, found her address and informed her father. Her father then took her back and forced her to marry. I asked my friend why they informed her father and he said it is our mandate to return 'runaway girls' to their families in order to prevent the spread of prostitution."

Custom and tradition

Traditional and tribal customs in some parts of the country can also lead to forced girl marriages.

Sama recounts the case of a Kurdish migrant at a women's support centre in Norway: "I was 12 years old when my brother fell in love. I had no idea his fortune would lead to my misfortune. When my family went to ask for the hand of his beloved in marriage, according to Kurdish custom, the girl's family asked that in exchange a girl from our family would be given to them. I was the oldest daughter of the family and against my will I was married to a man who was 13 years older than I was. I had two miscarriages before reaching. I was 15, when I had my daughter. By 17 I had two children. I was used to getting beaten up. Once I was hit so hard in the head that I was in coma for 8 months and blind for 3 years. I still lack perfect eyesight. When I came out of coma my husband sent a message saying return to your father's home. I did and said I want a divorce. My brother took me to a cliff and put a gun to my head and said it is better for you to die rather than divorce. You are shaming the tribe with such nonsense. For the sake of my children I returned to my home, not that I had any other choice." She finally divorced in Norway but her 12-year-old daughter was married off to her cousin according to the same Kurdish custom.

Negative impact of early marriage on women's lives

Human rights experts at the United Nations state that those girls who are forced to marry at a young age face sexual or domestic slavery among other human rights violations including the right to health, right to education, right to combat discrimination, freedom from physical, or sexual and mental violence. The accounts shared on the "No to Girl Marriages" Facebook page confirm these points.

Missing out on childhood experiences

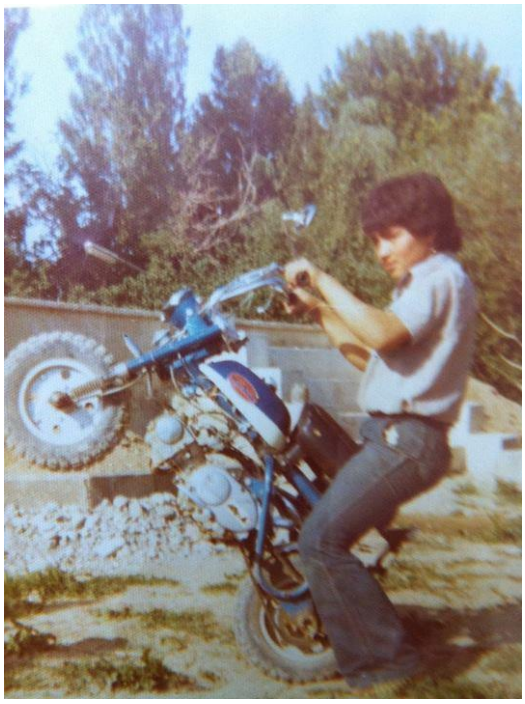
Missing out on childhood fun and joy as a result of forced early marriage is perhaps one of the most important and neglected points to ponder. Its symptoms are clearly visible among those women who due to early marriage, even in the absence of violence or educational deprivation, failed to live a fulfilling and happy life as a child.

Mina Azizi whose mother married at 16, states that after marriage and birth of her child, her mother attended night classes to complete her university education but "had she had the opportunity to do so prior to marriage, she would have been happier and more successful."

She writes: "Although my father encouraged her all along, even when a man truly loves his wife and accompanies her throughout her education I know no amount of love and accompaniment can replace my mother's childhood and youth… although delayed but my mother did tread the path she wanted. However, because she had to shoulder serious and heavy responsibilities too soon, she feels far too old and tired at 44.

Sepideh Pour also shares glimpses from her aunt's life who around 13 or 14 was deprived of education and then married at 16 because she had a boyfriend. At 17 she had her first child and by 29 she was the mother of 3 girls: "her husband is a good man. He is kind. He is gentle. My aunt was quite talented. She finished her high school education. She learnt to sew. She drives. She is independent. But she looks far older than 35. This is not right."

Shadi Amin, however, looks at this phenomenon from a different perspective. She shared a photo of herself riding a motorcycle at 12 and writes: "I was 12 at the time this photo was taken… I used to ride the motorcycle and my feelings of freedom, escape and different experiences with my friends filled me with joy. I was in school. Playing football and chatting with my friends on our street every night formed my experiences of those days. Without any real responsibility, I lived a happy childhood. Had I been forced to marry then, I would not be who I am today. If isolation and suicide had not put an end to my life, I would have been just a housewife or might have been an educated woman who would sigh for her lost dreams everyday. I might have had a wrinkled face and lost my strength. But I am happy with my life… my role in society along with using my talents give me a sense of satisfaction. I was not forced to bear rape in the name of marriage. I was simply lucky. But many 12 year olds were and are not…"



Kissing school benches goodbye

Educational deprivation is one of the first consequences of forced girl marriages. Authorities at girl schools expel those girls whom they come to know have been married. She is left with no choice but to attend night classes along with adults. A situation less than conducive to the mental wellbeing of a young girl, resulting in further deprivation of educational opportunities.

Zeinab Peighambarzadeh who studied in Qom, wrote about her middle school classmates who ended up in adult education classes because of marriage: "Marriage forced them into the world of adults, a world that greatly reduced the quality of their educational opportunities and limited their education and employment to the city of Qom." Even then, many are denied this last opportunity to attend adult classes and are instead admonished to busy their days with caring for their husband and children.

Shadi Sadr writes about her grandmother, who was one of the first graduates of girls' primary schools but after completing year 6 she was married to a man ten years her senior. While she was preoccupied with the most important decision of her life, whether to become a teacher or a midwife, others decided her fate for her."

Grandmothers whose tears bid their schoolbooks farewell were not the last generation of girls who were sacrificed at the whim of their elders. This is a story that is still being written. Many of the accounts shared on this Facebook page contain details pertaining to educational deprivation throughout many lives of many girls from different generations, and from years old and recent.

Physical and emotional harm

Physical and emotional harm to girls who are still attracted to playing house with their dolls is another category of negative consequences, which in the name of shame and modesty, are often ignored. But the number of girls whose underdeveloped bodies has been damaged by their violent husband on their wedding night, or who have developed phobias and complexes, is far from negligible.

Mercedeh writes about an underage bride who on her wedding night ends up at the hospital emergency "because of the groom's violent mistreatment of her underdeveloped body during intercourse…"

Fatemeh Rahimi also writes about her stepmother, who during her childhood was married to a man twenty years her senior: "My stepmother bitterly recalls her wedding day and the way those present wept along with her. She always talks about her fear of men and her hatred towards her husband. (She has instilled the same fear in me, as I was a young girl when she married my father after my mother's death.) There is much pain in her soul and I have sensed it."

Lesbians who were forced to marry

There are those girls who are not supposed to marry a man at all, who if given a chance, would have never entered into wedlock with a member of the opposite sex, but instead would have chosen a woman to share their life with.

Farnaz who is a homosexual wrote: "Life as a 12 year old for me and those like me is often filled with uncertainties and undiscovered realities. For years I did not know the real me and was immersed in my dreams. Had I been forced to I would have certainly married at 16 or 14 or even 12. A girl whose mind is overcome with thoughts of marriage with a man and motherhood does not know any better. A girl who did not behave as others did, whose thoughts on marriage included wishing there was no man or sex or living under the same roof with a husband. I speak for girls who thought the same but were forced to marry a man, who are now middle aged and are strangers to their own selves, those who do not know why they hate their husband, who are used to but not in touch with their life!!!"

She writes: "As I grew older I came to know my true self based on my wants and learnt to say no to the rest. I found my independence, a path I tread alone. There even came a time when I mustered enough strength to introduce my partner to my family and courageously told them I will never marry a man, I am in love with a woman."

However, many of the girl children who were forced to marry young never had the opportunity or the strength to say they wanted a female partner.

Suicide as an end to oppression

The 11-year-old Zahra whose account was shared by Maryam Hosseinkhah is among those whose life was interrupted by suicide: "Zahra was only 11 years old,

and wanted to study. She wanted to become a journalist and defend 'less fortunate girls' but she did not attain any of her wishes. Her father wanted her to marry a 35 year old. She was alone and helpless. When she resisted she was beaten up, more than the usual that is. When she could no longer take it, she ended her life by taking brass beads. A few days earlier, when her mother was released from prison, she came to know of her daughter's impending marriage and called the grandfather to beg for Zahra's life. She promised to take Zahra and cover all her expenses. But the grandfather did not listen and said sooner or later a girl must end up in her husband's home. It had already been a few months that Zahra's mother, Leila, had paid back her debts and was hoping to end her term and start her life with Zahra in September. She rented two small rooms in a basement of a provincial home and worked as a seamstress to earn a living for herself and her two-year-old boy born while in custody. Then her neighbours called to tell her Zahra's body was at the hospital. She began to worry about her 6-year-old daughter who was with her for one more year before by law her father would have her full custody and control over her marriage. Leila worried she would have the same fate as Zahra did and Leila had no way to save her."

Early marriage is not limited to an era, place or population

Forced girl marriages are usually accompanied by clichés and stereotypes. Some think it is a custom from decades ago. Some consider it a practice in villages and remote towns. Some see it as a result of poverty. However, an examination of statistics on forced marriage in various parts of Iran as well as personal accounts, point to a much more widespread phenomenon. It shows that in addition to the poor, the traditional and the uneducated, forced child marriage is a reality among many other classes and populations. The following accounts demonstrate this fact:

Forced early marriage among different classes

Azam Taheri: "We had a female professor who lectured on social psychology. Once she opened up and spoke with great sadness saying, my mother is just nine years older than I am. She was 8 when she married and had her twins soon after. None of the students could believe their ears, especially since she belonged to an upper class family."

Forced early marriage is not borne out of poverty

Zainab Peighambarzadeh: "Last academic year one of our female classmates from a rich traditional family complained of perpetual intestinal pain. Soon we came to know this was a result of separation from her former spouse. She had been married at 15, and had experienced an unwanted pregnancy. When her husband asked her to have an abortion she and her family resisted and she was divorced instead. She and her husband's family were fighting over the custody of her son who was growing older and by law would be given to her husband. Now at 17 she and her family spent most of her time in the hospital dealing with her condition. Her mother took care of her baby boy so that she could study. Her cousin was also in year three of primary school when she was married that winter."

Force early marriage is not a thing of the past

Najmeh Vahedi: "Maybe I am far from my grandmother's generation who married at 16 and gave birth to one child after another, perpetually nursing and caring for children. A woman who well into her 70's never experienced childhood, teen years or youth. She simply complains about everything. I may also be far from her daughters who 'were given to their husbands' at the same age and without their consent. But I am not far from the third generation. In 2011 one of her grandchildren 'was given in marriage.' The paternal aunt of her 13-year-old grandchild 15-yeartold the mother of a 37-year-old man 'why don't you have her marry your son?' The 13 year old spoke of her 15-year-old classmate who has two children. In 2004, Zahra, my high school friend married at 16! In 2010 a relative with a graduate degree told the rest of his educated relatives to find him an 'underage girl.' However, while they were gracious enough not to find him a teenager, he did marry a 19-year-old. Between the years 2006 and 2010 at least 17 of my classmates between 18 and 22 years of age were married, plus many more attending our university. I am not far from any of them!"

Women who speak of their own experiences

In addition to the above accounts there are also those women who speak of their own experiences.

Leila Sehat, a women's rights activist who is studying towards her graduate degree in mathematics at New York University, is among those women who were married as a child. Below the photo she shared on the Facebook page she writes: "I was 9 when this photo was taken. My world was nothing but my dolls that came to life with every story and amused me for hours. Early forced marriage involving boys and girls is one of the most primitive signs of traditional people. Societies where official statistics include child marriages must be branded as primitive. Both its people and its government which claims to represent them. This silent marker conveys the sufferings of muted children who are lost in the midst of a world overwhelmed by chaos among adults. A suffering that weighs heavier on the shoulders of girls, as they are more affected than boys. I was married at 16 and became a mother at 17, a heavy responsibility I had no preparation for."

Sima Hosseinzadeh, another women's rights defender and graduate of cultural studies at Allameh Tabatabi University in Tehran who is pursuing her doctorate at a Canadian university shares a similar experience. She writes about life as a year 10 student: "On a beautiful spring afternoon I reached home from school where my uncle was eager to see me. My Arabic teacher had considered me for his brother and my uncle had agreed to the marriage without my knowledge and was there to simply inform my family and I. We talked for about two hours! I kept saying "no" and my uncle kept insisting. I had no way out and no words to express, just tears, pleas and begging to let me study and attend university, not knowing decisions had already been made. Plans were in place for the following night to settle the details of the wedding. I spent the whole night crying and twisting under my blanket. No one was there to help me. None of the girls in our family had been able to finish high school. According to the traditional and male-dominated system of the past all needed to pass through the marriage production machine while they were fresh and young in order to care for their family and home.

Naturally, the next day I was not given the right to attend school and instead, had to prepare for that night. I lost the ability to talk. I was desperate. One hour before the guests were to arrive my uncle called and said 'the boy's grandfather has suffered a stroke and was in a coma. They sent their apologies and will come on another occasion. You lucked out!' Yes, I was truly lucky and 'another occasion' never came. A week later they were busy with the funeral arrangements and never came to our home. I know it was a miracle that helped me escape the ordeal that could entirely change my fate."

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Girl marriages take hold of new victims everyday. There are few who do not know of girls married at a young age. The accounts briefly shared in this report, most prominently point to the wide range of population in social and geographical areas affected by this phenomenon. These first hand accounts question those assumptions that attempt to justify girl marriages as "a non-Iranian problem " or "an occurrence in villages and remotes towns" and points to the economic, cultural and religious causes of this challenge. Lack of legal and social protection for girl children affected by early marriage is another issue made obvious by these accounts. In effect, girl children who are among the poorest and the weakest in society must singlehandedly face abuses in an early marriage and struggle with manifold deprivations throughout their lives. Lack of an opportunity to live a healthy childhood, lack of educational opportunities or education alongside one's peers, physical injuries due to sex, labour at a young age, subjection to domestic violence, running away from one's home to escape forced marriage and even suicide are some of the many challenges.

Publicising, discourse and critical examination of this phenomenon may not save today's generation of girl children, but it may challenge and awaken those who continue to support girl marriages.