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It is an undeniable fact that education is one of the most important cornerstones of all human societies. The way a society regards raising the next generation is reflected first and foremost in its educational system.

Here I will try to picture a complete religious education. I will discuss the effects of religious education on school curricula, on girl pupils and their rights, and on boys' and girls' relationships. I will examine the imposition of the veil on little girls and adolescents, the rule of sexual apartheid and the way sexual matters and sex education is treated in schools. At the end I will stress and emphasize the necessity of a secular education that ensures the raising of healthy children and youths, and the development of the whole community. My case is the Islamic educational system in Iran.

With the anti-secularist backlash, the rise of political Islam and the efforts to bring god back to people's lives, the last two decades have been some of the darkest in people's lives especially of women and children. Medieval beliefs and customs have found legal expression to suppress people. Words can not do justice to the repression and backwardness of Islamic movements and Islamic governments. For a long time Islam was kept relatively at arm's length from political power but it is now the ideology in power in some countries including Iran in which society has suffered serious setbacks in civil rights - especially women's and children's rights. One of these devastating setbacks is religious (Islamic) education. This system is reflected in school curricula and scientific advancements, in the school milieu, in the way girl pupils are treated and in Islamic teachings regarding women.

School curricula

In some societies indoctrination has been imparted to children to cause pupils to hold certain beliefs and religious values. In the system here the educational authorities attempt to inculcate in the pupils unshakable truths such as the existence of god, that Christianity is the source of truth and so on. In various Middle Eastern countries religion (Islam) has a big impact on education and the school system. As a Middle Eastern country, Iran is a extreme case. In Iran the impact of religion on education is far from trivial. In Iran Islam rules in every aspect of education and school system. Belief in Islam and living according to Islamic values and norms and thoughts are pre-
conditions for survival. Teaching the Koran and learning it is compulsory from the first year in primary schools. Teachers must pass a religious exam to be permitted to teach. This exam includes Islamic rules, prayers, the Koran and Hadith. Islamic propaganda is done systematically. Free thoughts are forbidden and punishable. Superstition has influenced school curricula. This has created a dark and stagnated milieu for children. School pupils are taught that if they do not obey the rules, they will be burned in hell (jahannam).

This has deprived and continues to deprive children from learning and experiencing scientific advancements. It kills their creativity and replaces curiosity and desire for learning with the dark rules and values of 1400 years ago at the time of Mohammed. Religious teaching regarding women is one of the most devastating aspects of the Islamic educational system in Iran. This teaches children that women are inferior to and equal to only half of a man, that women belong to men, that men have the right to punish their wives if they do not obey them and that women are the potential source of corruption in society so hijab should be imposed on them. They are taught that the veil is the legitimate physical border of a woman's existence in society to protect men and the community from any possible moral and social danger and destruction they may cause. They learn that the main duty of women is considered to be taking care of the home and children etc. Teaching that women's oppressed condition and male dominance is something natural, necessary and desirable is an essential theme in school education. Women are pictured only as mothers and housekeepers. In school children learn the traditional male-female gender roles, and that women's segregation and sexual apartheid is a desirable state for women in society.

Sexual Apartheid

Another important aspect of religious education in Iran is the rule of sexual apartheid. In Iran sexual apartheid rules in every area of people's lives including the workplace, libraries, transport, healthcare, education and schools. Girls and boys are separated right from beginning in schools. According to Islamic values, which are the basis of laws in Iran, women are accused of being the source of corrupting the community and the agent of leading men astray. For this "crime" they are controlled and punished from early childhood to the moment of death.

Girl pupils are under enormous pressure in school as well as in the society. The veil (hijab) is imposed on them by force. This deprives them of free movement, the ability to play and happiness and enjoyment in social activities. School authorities spy on girls to see if they wear make up, if they talk about boys or if they have the pictures of artists and so on. Even pupils are intimidated to spy on their parents and report to the school authority about their parent's life style or whether their female relatives offend against Islamic rules at home. This has produced a system of inquisition in schools. The environment is full of repression and control, the control of children's minds and behaviour.

Friendship among girls and boys is forbidden, considered as a sin and punishable. Girls are under strict scrutiny. Their talking, walking, laughing, dress and movement is controlled and monitored carefully. Teachers and principals punish girls physically and psychologically if their veil is not worn properly even while they play.

Takleaf ritual

In Iran the legal age for girls to be married is nine according to Islam. It is a law to celebrate girls' ninth birthday as a day they are considered as mature women. School authorities celebrate this day and hold a ceremony. It is called the Takleaf celebration. On the Takleaf celebration girls have to wear a completely white hijab which covers their bodies completely. A clergyman talks about girls' role in the society and warns them of evil, Fitna (which means ciaos) and western culture. He
reminds girls that their duty is to prevent corruption by wearing proper hijab. From this day onward, girls are banned from playing with boys other than their brothers, who are mahrams. It is forbidden for girls to laugh loudly. They have to pray to god five times a day. They are told that if they do not wear the veil properly or if their hair appears out of the veil, they will be punished in hell and snakes will grow on their heads.

Talking about sexual matters is treated as a serious crime and sex education is unacceptable. Any relationship among boys and girls is banned. In such a milieu it is a big sin to talk about male/female bodily organs and sex education. Everything related to male/female relations is considered to be secretive, sinful and full of humiliation.

Children are normally keen to learn and experience, know about the world, learn about their bodies and their bodily functions. They want to know where babies come from and about the opposite sex. All these normal and necessary curiosities are answered by frightening tales about evil and hell. This system brings about nothing but backwardness and hypocrisy.

The veil and the rights of girls under 16

Putting the veil on the heads and bodies of little girls and adolescents has a devastating impact on their minds and lives. Putting the veil on the heads of children and adolescents who have not come of age should be prohibited by law, because it is the imposition of certain clothing of the child by the followers of a certain religious sect. In order to defend the civil rights of the child and this imposition should be prohibited by law. The child has no religion, tradition and prejudices. She has not joined any religious sect. She is a new human being who by accident and irrespective of her will has been born into a family with a specific religion, tradition, and prejudices. It is indeed the task of society to neutralize the negative effects of this blind lottery. Society is duty-bound to provide fair and equal living conditions for the children, their growth and development, and their active participation in social life. Anybody who should try to block the normal social life of a child, exactly like those who would want to physically violate a child according to their own culture, religion or personal or collective complexes should be confronted with the firm barrier of the law and the serious reaction of society. No nine-year-old girl chooses to be married, sexually mutilated, serve as housemaid and cook for the male members of the family, and be deprived of exercise, education, and play. The child grows up in the family and society according to established customs, traditions and regulations, and automatically learns to accept these ideas and customs as the norms of life. It is not their choice and indeed to speak of the child herself choosing the Islamic veil by is a ridiculous joke.

Secular education

Children should be protected against the transgressions of religion and religious sects on their rights. It is an offence to prevent children from enjoying their social and civil rights such as a secular education, amusement and participation in social activities specific to children. Islamic education in Iran as well as other countries under Islamic rule is systematic child abuse.

Society is duty-bound to defend the rights of children. We should demand that standards which have turned into norms as a result of the enlightenment and just struggles of numerous human beings in the West be rules and norms in education in countries under Islamic rule.

Society has the duty to protect children and persons under 16 from all forms of material and spiritual manipulation by religion and religious institutions. Society should guarantee both freedom of religion and atheism, and this is vital where children are taught that Jews, Bahaees and followers of other religions are somehow criminals and should not enjoy the rights of Muslims. A
complete separation of religion from the state guarantees this separation and protects children from manipulation by religions.

In my view any struggle against Islamic child abuse in the educational system will have to confront state Islam and bring about the separation of religion from the state. This is a pre requisite for a humane society that fulfils the needs and potential of children. Only a strong modernist, secularist and egalitarian social movement will be able to get rid of this religious child abuse. Islamic educational system in Iran is indeed a systematic child abuse.

The complete separation of religion from education, the prohibition of teaching religious subjects and dogmas of religious interpretation of subjects in schools and educational establishments, the abolition of any law, regulation or ritual that breaches the principle of secular non-religious education are the essential and necessary measures to ensure children rights, the health of the next generation and development of society.

Adapted from a speech given at the 5th symposium of the Arab Cultural Centre in London in July 29, 2000 and also at a seminar held by Save the Children in Stockholm in October 5 2001.

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About the author

Azam Kamguian is an Iranian writer and women's rights activist. She was born in 1958 and started her political activities as a socialist in 1976. She was a medical student at Pahlavi University in Shiraz until arrested and imprisoned for a year for organizing student protests. The second time she was imprisoned for political activities was after the Islamic Republic of Iran took power. Azam was released from prison in 1983 - her real political identity undiscovered. Lest this be discovered, placing her life in real danger, Azam fled to Kurdistan, a free region at that time, and continued the struggle. She lived there for eight years until the beginning of 1990s, when she left Kurdistan for America.

Azam Kamguian has been writing since 1979. She has written several books including "Islam, Women, Challenges and Perspectives", "Feminism, Socialism and Human Nature", "Women's Liberation and Political Processes in the Middle East and "On Religion". Currently she is working on two new books: on Iranian women's movement for equality, and on religion and atheism.

Azam's numerous articles and interviews on women, religion and social issues have been published in various Persian as well as English, Swedish, Finish, Danish, French, Turkish and Arabic journals and magazines. she is the member of the editorial of two women magazines in Arabic and Persian languages: Al - Nesa and Medusa.

Azam kamguian is the chair and the spokesperson for Committee to Defend Women's Rights in the Middle East, and also a member of the management committee of the Middle Eastern Centre for Women's Studies.

Throughout her activities, Azam has organised several campaigns in the defence of women's rights in the Middle East and have advocated Middle Eastern women's rights in various international and national conferences and seminars.

Currently, she lives and works in London.