

The Tragedy of Young Lives Lost

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I write these lines as a young person born and raised in Iran who is now pursuing a post-graduate degree here in the UK. I am one of the fortunate ones benefiting from a secure family environment and parents who have dedicated their lives to their children. Against all odds, they have tried to instil in us the values of a good human being who does not lie as a matter of course, does not cheat to get ahead or ignore the rights of others in pursuit of wealth. You may be surprised at my use of words but, yes, I mean against all odds. Unfortunately, the society is such that one must lie to survive. We, the majority of the people of Iran in my opinion, lead two lives - one behind closed doors and one in public. We all know that we lie and so trust or indeed lack of it is a major issue.

Our society in Iran is embroiled in so many tragedies of young lives that it is difficult to only comment on one element without looking at it as a whole. Religious ideology disregarding the natural desires of young minds and bodies, economic hardship limiting opportunities for but a privileged few, advancement in technology and flow of images, music and information, prevalence of the culture of violence and finally the rule of lies and deceit as the only means of survival have hand in hand created a society sick with many ills. As young people who are the majority of the population in Iran, we bear the brunt of these ills. Our natural curiosity and aspirations are stifled by dogma and violence. At best we are angry, angry enough to want change and you witnessed us after the 2009 presidential elections. But there is another side, the side of those who are not as fortunate as my siblings or me. It is they who are the true victims of this 'just Islamic society' that we are supposed to be living in.

No one knows the true figure of those who sleep hungry at night in this oil rich country of mine - rich enough for billions of dollars to be embezzled but uncaring enough for social inequality and injustice to prevail. Each ministry or public organisation has its own set of figure to suit their agenda. The Central Bank has one set of figures, the Trade Union another and the Statistical Centre of Iran publishes yet another set of figures. But if you live in Iran you do not need figures and statistics; you feel it with every molecule of your body. You see it with your own eyes. You hear stories. In Tehran, our city of contradictions, one would be standing at a street corner in front a modern high rise and witness the latest Mercedes pull up at the lights and little children run up to it sell chewing gum, flowers or offer to clean its windows even when their noses barely reach the door handle.

For a long while my mind was preoccupied with the question of street children and child labour. I joined several children NGOs and started working with them as a volunteer. Ultimately, I started teaching in one, which reached children in the most deprived part of Tehran. Little ones of eight to eleven attended the morning shift and the twelve to fifteen year old ones the afternoon's. I had one class in the morning and one in the afternoon. I was touched by their beauty and innocence despite their terrible family background and experiences.

Some of these children were street peddlers. At the beginning of the class they would hand in their goods to us and collect it after class to return to 'work'. Others returned to the sweatshops that employed them and the rest rummaged the city rubbish bins for recyclable stuff to sell.

Their home environment was generally dire. In most cases one or both parents were addicted to drugs or they lived with an addict father and a mother prostituting to feed his habit as well pay the bills. The mothers in general were victims of violence either by the men in their lives or the male dominated society. There was little or no attention paid to hygiene. Most of the children had been repeatedly raped and a deep-rooted anger and violence brewed inside them. Sometimes it would be weeks and months before we could crack their defensive shell and get through to them. Like all NGOs our budget was limited but we all tried to make sure that the children were fed at least once during the day. Without this they would not know when the next

meal would be and most suffered from digestive disorder and stomach aches.

I was immersed in their sad world and every day I would come face to face with a new definition for child labour. I met children who were professional thieves - children whose financial need had forced them to abandon school aged ten or eleven to help supplement the family income and job after job with little income had turned into young thieves with an uncertain future awaiting them. They had either a corner of a prison cell to look forward to or dancing at the end of the hangman's noose.

I also met another sort of children, those who were forced to use their bodies. Beautiful girls who aged twelve or thirteen experience their first sexual encounter, violently. An addict father, a brother full of hatred and violence, a husband as old as their grandfather who had bought them or a step-father who resented their every being... and so their lives changed.

Some of these little girls still had what they called a roof over their heads or some sort of a semblance of a family life at home but there were those who had run away from forced marriages or prejudices or simply poverty. They had no one waiting for them. If only they had a tiniest say, the smallest control in their tragic lives. They lived their lives in fear of rape, of gang rape (very common as I discovered later), in fear of being knifed, of being killed by religious zealots or of being arrested and tasting justice at the end of the whips and lashes that awaited them as punishment regardless of their young age.

While I was there I managed to get through to a few; to befriend them and listen to their tales without judgment. Amongst them was a beautiful, intelligent and brave young girl whose life was intertwined with the lives of boys who were criminals and whom I had also got to know. She hated outsiders and was very reluctant to get to know other women. Physically petite, everyone knew her story and so she would not frequent the neighbourhood. I am going to call her Sima – but this is not her real name. She turned sixteen in December 2011.

I had tried to get to know Sima through the boys. They were much easier to get through but she did not want to know. The boys had told me she was pregnant and we were trying to help her. She was petrified of being pregnant, of abortion, of her drug addiction. The fact of her addiction and her young age meant that it was very difficult to get her 'official' help. I spoke to her on the phone on several occasions but she would not agree to meet. Until one day one of the boys called me to say she was in hospital having miscarried and that they could not pay the hospital bills. The hospital would not let her leave until they had been paid. I met the boys and went to the hospital with them. Having paid the bill I was allowed in to help dress her. I was struck by her sense of pride and her sweet child-like face.

I took her to where she said she lived. For whatever reason, it seemed that she trusted me, which made me very happy. I took her to a private gynaecologist to make sure she was alright. She started telling me her life story. Her mother had given birth to her when she was only fourteen and her father had abandoned them soon after. Sima's mother had no family to protect her. She remarried several times with each choice being worse than the last one. She had become an addict and paid no attention to how her young child was being abused. Finally Sima's mother met a man who accepted her but not with a child. Sima was left with one of her many stepfathers who agreed to take her in. Sima called him 'uncle'. But this man had repeatedly sexually abused the eleven-year-old Sima in the past and this provided him with an opportunity to make money out of her young body.

Sima was attending school up to then but was forced to abandon school and got hooked on drugs. The arrangement was for him to provide her with what she needed as long as she was bringing him money and he would feed her habit. He knew if he kept her locked up she would escape so he allowed her out every now and then. It was on one of these journeys that she had met the boys who attended our school.

As she was staying out more and more 'uncle' had become sensitive and increased his demands when she went home. She chose not to stay there and moved in with one of the boys who lived with his unemployed addict father. She told me that she was subject to gang rape on several occasions. Horrifically, on one occasion she had voluntarily subjected herself to this to save the boy she was living with. Sima had got crack from a dealer and had promised to sleep with him in return but had not kept her promise. So, the boy was taken hostage until she went. The dealer wanted to take revenge and teach her and the others a lesson. Her boyfriend was also subject to rape.

After moving in with her boyfriend, his father and the other boys she stayed home and looked after the house while they went out on jobs, stealing. She was still addicted to drugs but her boyfriend looked after her financially as much as he could. She was not free from the attention of the other boys in the house and when her boyfriend was out she was forced into having sex with them; that is until she got pregnant.

None of them had any experience of pregnancy and were not sure what was going on and it was only into Sima's third month that they realised she was pregnant. I heard about the pregnancy after she was into her sixteenth week. In Iran abortion is illegal and can only be carried out under certain conditions. In any event, after four months it would be very difficult even for married women. But we were faced with a young girl, under eighteen years of age who was also a drug addict and had passed the four-month mark. Abortion would have been considered as premeditated murder. To add to the problems with every passing day her boyfriend was getting more attached to the idea of the baby. At that time Sima would not meet with me and only talked to me on the phone. She did not attend any of the appointments I made for her. She had turned to her 'uncle' who took her to a back street clinic. The so-called midwife had inserted a rod to rupture the womb forcing a miscarriage. This is where I came into the story. I should add that Sima did not tell me her life history as easily as I am writing it here. It took a great deal of courage for her to repeat her traumatic past and I heard her tragic life story in bits and pieces during many talks.

Sima is an intelligent girl and very keen to learn. She is a romantic with all the normal things a teenager would be dreaming about. Despite all that she has been through and has experienced she is still very naive. She went away with her boyfriend to the seaside but got arrested. She was fifteen and he just seventeen. The two of them were detained for two weeks, received sixty lashes each and then released. When she got back and told me of the arrest and floggings I was horrified. I could not imagine her petite physique under force of the whip – sixty times.

'How did you bear it? Didn't it hurt?' was the stupid question I asked her. She responded with a smile of a mischievous child saying of course it hurt but after the first few lashes her back went numb and she did not feel it any more.

A short while after they got back the boys were arrested. Sima was distraught. All her dreams were tied in with her boyfriend and he was behind bars. We did all that we could but these children were being treated like adults. They had been beaten violently to confess to other crimes. We were not allowed to see them. They would not allow us to get legal representation for them while they were 'being investigated'. They were brought to court with their hands and feet in shackles. There was no hope for them or for Sima. They were each given custodial terms. I should explain that they were kept with adults and treated as adults despite the fact that they had just turned seventeen.

Sima had no money. Her boyfriend's father asked her to leave after two months. Her 'uncle' also passed away of an overdose. We tried very hard to find her somewhere to live. The State provided homes for runaways, as few as they were, they were not suitable for a girl who had fended for herself on the street ever since she was eleven. Their dogmatic judgmental religious approach and punishments meant that even if she was accepted she would not last for long.

We tried to engage Sima in some form of vocational training but her addiction meant she could not attend

the classes regularly. As much as we tried she was not ready to give up her drug addiction. She told me being numb was the only thing she had left and the only way she could cope. I even thought of delaying my studies, getting a flat and bringing her to live with me but she did not accept it.

I left Iran to come to the UK but I talk to her often on the phone. I talk to her boyfriend regularly who calls me from prison. The NGO is doing all that it can with its very limited resources and with lack of support from the State because of the nature of these children's lives. Sima's story does not have a happy ending. She is back on the streets selling her body to pay for the small room she has rented. Sima is one of the many I met. Tragically, the Islamic system is only interested in punishment and denial. This is a face of Iran the Islamic regime does not want the world to see. This is the consequence of thirty-three years of Islamic rule and justice. I was not born when the Revolution happened I am part the generation that was born after 1979; and with Sima we are the consequences of this system.

I, and many others like me, are transient figures in the harsh realities of these tragic lives. What is needed is acknowledgment by the Islamic regime that the problem exists. From there solutions can be found. There is no denial that there are certain provisions in the state system. For example, according to the national laws the boys should not have been treated they way they were or imprisoned with adults. Child labour laws prohibit the employment of these children, but the laws are not observed or adhered to in practise. Or that the welfare agency, Behzisty, is responsible for these children but it is underfunded and tied with religious prejudices, political expedience and unable to cope with the true extent of the problem.

The laws certainly need revising but the Islamic Republic is signatory to the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Pressure should be brought upon it to observe its obligation and implicate the articles of the Convention in national laws. It should not be left to individuals no matter how generous or well meaning they are to carry out the duties of a government.