MEDIEVAL, CATASTROPHIC, AND UNIMAGINABLE!
THE CONDITION OF RURAL WOMEN IN IRAN

Women’s Committee
The National Council of Resistance of Iran

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The Condition of Rural Women in Iran
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October 15 represents an opportunity to address the condition of rural women in Iran, support them, and emphasize the importance of their role as working people.

Since 2008, the United Nations has designated October 15 as the International Day of Rural Women to promote gender equality and empower women in rural areas.

Rural women play an important role in eradicating hunger and poverty as almost 42% of rural women are involved in the agricultural sector. The majority of the women form the agricultural labor force and contribute to the livestock’s unpaid domestic care.

October 15 has been designated in the name of rural women to create awareness among society about the unnoticed and unappreciated contribution of rural women. This day is a good opportunity to delve into the plight of Iran’s rural women and lay emphasis on their role. They have always played a critical role in economic pillars. Some of them work in the fields of agricultural production, livestock husbandry, and handicrafts.

Although these women play a significant role, they live catastrophic lives fraught with poverty, suffering, and slavery. They are generally unpaid, and their contributions to the economy and society are ignored.

To be able to develop and be creative, rural women must overcome a multitude of obstacles and challenges. Early marriages and leaving school, domestic violence, and lack of knowledge of their legal and social rights are some of these obstacles.

Moreover, rural women continue to suffer from poor health and hard labor when villages throughout the country face water bankruptcy.

Under the mullahs’ patriarchal regime, women in rural areas have limited opportunities to participate in social activities.
Any government that wants to develop social welfare and economic order must pay attention to the needs of rural women and cooperate with them because they constitute half of the active labor force in the rural economy. Unfortunately, in Iran, the value of rural women’s labor is considered to be lower than that of men. Their income is close to zero and their situation is the best example of unpaid labor. These women experience unimaginable gender inequality and suffer traumatic consequences because of the patriarchal infrastructures in an authoritarian and misogynistic regime.

Employment Statistics

Women’s shares of employment are higher than men’s shares in the service and agricultural sectors and less in the industrial sector. Approximately 53 of every 100 women working in Iran work in the service sector. Another 26 of 100 are employed in the industrial sector and 20 per 100 in the agricultural industry. Many women in rural areas perform heavy labor for 15 to 16 hours a day, resulting in severe stress and tension. Of the 10 million rural women in Iran, making up 12.4% of the population, 6 million are 18 or younger. These women and girls play indispensable roles in both supporting their families and providing agricultural products and food security for the country. More than 70% of labor related to livestock and poultry in the country falls to rural and nomadic women. Rural women do some 40% of farming and gardening activities and more than 80% of traditional agricultural production. The Study and Planning Center for Agricultural Economics in Bushehr and Hormozgan provinces announced, “50% of the planting force, 60% of the labor force, and 65% of the harvest force are women.” In Gilan and Mazandaran provinces, about 63% of the livestock care workforce are women. Therefore, the rural women in the country play a major role in the field of animal husbandry.

Hemmat Bagherzadeh, CEO of the West Azerbaijan Rural Cooperative Union, lamented the low number of paid rural women in the province, saying, “Maybe 4 out of 1,000 women are engaged in economic activity and have jobs that provide a source of income.” Hemmat Bagherzadeh, CEO of the West Azerbaijan Rural Cooperative Union, lamented the low number of paid rural women in the province, saying, “Maybe 4 out of 1,000 women are engaged in economic activity and have jobs that provide a source of income.”

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Dependence and lack of job security

Lack of independent income makes rural women dependent on men, thus limiting their ability to make decisions, have choices, or participate in substantive issues. These women are often employed in part-time, seasonal, or low-income informal jobs and rarely have employment contracts. In the absence of job security, they are always fearful of losing their jobs and are deprived of their rights during pregnancy.

According to local research on rural women’s handicrafts, the most significant obstacles are the lack of government support, economic infrastructure to sell products, long-term revenue, educational resources, and availability of raw materials. Parichehr Soltani, secretary of the working group on rural women in nomad tribes and deprived regions, in the presidential Directorate for Women and Family Affairs, said, “In general, no action has been taken for the materials needed for rural women to make handicrafts. For example, each ball of spinning yarn costs at least 60,000-70,000 Tomans, but due to lack of access to markets, women are forced to sell this yarn or other similar products at one-third of the price to intermediaries. So, these women are being exploited by intermediaries!”

Women and girls in Dishmuk village, in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province, have great talent in creating handicrafts. However, the lack of government support drives them to stay at home and become depressed. If the government supported their jobs,
they could play valuable roles in the labor force and contribute to the economy. It is possible to empower these women and let them play their role in the rural economy. However, the regime’s anti-feminist stance means that no action has been taken in this regard.

Gender discrimination and unequal rights

The condition of rural women in Iran is fraught with inequality and discrimination. Ironically, they are the labor force excluded from the economic current. Despite being as productive as their male counterparts, female farmers have less access to land, credit, agricultural inputs, markets, and high-value supply chains. Their products are sold at lower prices; they are either paid less than men are or not paid at all and only provided with food and accommodation. Moreover, they lose their productive capacity after the death of their husbands or fathers.

Rural women are employed in the daily-wage and often seasonal labor sectors. Almost no women are involved in the macro-production sector and the work place is entirely in the hands of men. In addition, in the agricultural sector, very few women own resources, land, or farming fields. Usually, they work at home. These women have fewer educational opportunities than men do, which in turn keeps them away from the labor market and economic activities. Although rural women have unique experiences in some production sectors, their talent and power are ignored.

Ignoring the work of and dismissing rural women

Deep gender discrimination gaps have impacted the condition of rural women in Iran. They are the first to lose their jobs with no more opportunities for them. Although they can do the most sophisticated and technical jobs in the agricultural field and animal husbandry, just as good as men, they have no role in the market. Women’s role in the family's economy is summed up in the limited production and sale of agricultural products while trade is considered a male occupation. About 45% of rural women do not receive their salaries in person, and 63% are not allowed to spend independently. Thus, they do not have independent income.

Shirin-Banu Rezai lives in Kalehchoob Sirvan village. She says, “Women work harder than men because, in addition to farming, we have to do the housework, raise our children, prepare meals, and produce a variety of protein and dairy products. But no one sees the hard work that women do in the village unless one of us gets sick or dies.”

A life of slavery

The condition of rural women in Iran is catastrophic! In rural areas, women endure inconceivable pressures. In addition to shouldering the main burden of rural agriculture and economy, they also do all the housework. They are engaged in many activities such as keeping and caring for livestock and poultry, preparing firewood, bringing water, weaving carpets, mending the tent and their residential space, weaving carpets, milking the cows, producing milk and yogurt, cleaning the home, baking bread, cooking, washing the family’s clothes, raising the children, etc. These women experience a harsh life of slavery. They are the first to wake up and start work before sunrise every day and the last one to go to bed.

Women’s conditions in different rural areas

The exhausting condition of women in the mountainous and impassable areas of Lorestan is common to all villages in this province. The quality and facilities of houses, health, and education of rural women in Lorestan are at a lower level. Production and maintenance are traditional due to the lack of investment and modernized facilities in these areas. For example, the life of women in the villages of Poshtkuh and Pishkuh regions in Aligudarz County is very difficult. The hot summer and sun make it very difficult for villagers to access water and grass for livestock. Thus, they migrate to the foothills of Zagros Mountains, leaving their mud and stone houses only to live in black tents, also made by women.

However, the story of women living in the Zalqi district of Aligudarz is different. They lack the most basic living needs. These women have to walk for miles on dirt roads with dangerous curves in remote areas. They lack proper shelter and clean drinking water, and suffer from poor health and malnutrition. These women rely on traditional means of animal husbandry, production of dairy products, and baking bread to prepare the family’s basic meals.
The regime’s inefficient policies, combined with the water crisis, have brought about a particularly difficult situation for rural women. Official and expert statistics show that more than 300 Iranian cities from Khuzestan province to Sistan and Baluchestan suffer from water bankruptcy.

In Ardabil province, alone, some 1,700 villages suffer from water shortages. Villages in Ilam, Kerman, and West Azarbaijan provinces also experience water shortages. According to Reza Ardakanian, the Minister of Energy, as of early July 2021, half of the country’s rural population did not have access to clean drinking water, and villagers survived by carrying and collecting buckets of water.

More than 282 cities in Iran are in a state of water stress, and 101 cities are in a state of high alert, according to the National Water and Sewage Company. Mojtaba Yousefi, a member of the regime’s parliament in Ahvaz, acknowledged that the people of 800 villages in Khuzestan province lack access to sustainable drinking water, despite their proximity to five major dams and seven rivers.

The Ministry of Energy acknowledged, “About 3,000 villages with a total population of 700,000 people in Sistan and Baluchestan do not have running water.” The ministry should supply water to the villages free of charge. On the ground, however, there are not enough water tankers to supply the drinking water. Each 12,000-liter tanker costs between 700,000 and 800,000 Tomans, which the impoverished people of these regions do not afford.

Hence, rural women and girls face the harsh daily task of carrying water. In hot and cold weather, they have to carry the heavy buckets of water from springs and rivers over long distances on rough roads. Doing this work causes many physical and psychological injuries to them.

**Excessive physical exhaustion**

To take just a sip of drinking water, rural women work so hard that they become physically exhausted. Sometimes, they even lose their lives. The question is, is this normal? Is such suffering acceptable? One of the most deprived parts of the country in terms of water shortage is Sistan and Baluchestan. Women and girls who live in this province have various ailments, yet they have to haul buckets of water several times a day. In addition, the lack of access to sustainable and clean water supply for women means restrictions on daily and even weekly individual washing in certain seasons. These restrictions lead to certain physical ailments such as premature menopause and premature aging in rural areas. However, there are no official statistics.

Women suffer from a variety of orthopedic pains, vertebral fractures, and even miscarriages when they carry heavy buckets of water over long distances in harsh weather conditions: temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius in the summer and freezing temperatures in the winter. “Lack of clean water causes many infections in women in our area,” said Parinaz, who suffers from severe osteoarthritis. “Carrying heavy buckets of water has added joint pain to our other aches and pains.”

**Hootags pose a threat to the lives of rural girls!**

Conditions for rural women in Iran are worsening every day. Given the drought, they have to carry heavy buckets of water multiple times over long distances. At a time when advances in science and technology have changed the world, women in Sistan and Baluchestan must supply drinking water from ponds, called hootag. The hootags collect rainwater to be used by both humans and animals.

For example, residents in Emamiyeh Village in the Rudbar region have no choice but to use contaminated water from hootags for their daily consumption. In Garmbeit village, like many other villages in Baluchestan,
Poverty, the leading cause of the suffering of water carriers

In poverty-stricken areas, most residents are malnourished. The women and children who carry water buckets face significant problems. A 40-year-old female resident who has been fetching water since she was 5 years old suffers from lower back and foot pain. “We have nothing,” said another resident of Sarkost village in the Bent Nikshahr district. On the one hand, we have to struggle for a loaf of bread, and on the other hand, we have to struggle to fetch water. No one hears our voices.”

In Margon and Dehdasht villages, in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province, even pregnant women carry water buckets. The hands of women and children are covered with calluses. “Carrying water buckets has become a game for our children,” said Hovaysh, a rural woman. “But when the water runs out, the game no longer makes sense. A mother’s heart is torn apart when she sees her children’s calloused hands. No one understands us unless they put themselves in our place.”

Residents of Jazireh, Salkh, and Gambron villages in Qeshm are left without water for 3 months. Ms. Gorani, the elementary school principal in Salkh, says, “There has been no water for 3 months now. Rainwater left in the old reservoir is more desirable for the women of two villages.”

In Ab-Ali village, residents get their water in 20-liter buckets carried by donkeys, or women and girls have to carry them on their shoulders. Goharmardeh, Golgeh, and Silab are also among the villages that do not have piped drinking water.

The villages of Gurchineh Qaleh Urmia, Abali-e-Sofia, Dehbid, Dah-Qanat, and Pachat Charbiun are deprived of a clean potable water network in Margon County in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province. “Rural women have to walk several kilometers to get drinking water, but when they return, they are exhausted and have no energy to do the household chores,” said Salman Bina, a member of the Dishmuk Council in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province.

The women of Sartongfaleh village, located in Izeh, get drinking water with great difficulty. One of them says, “It takes at least 5 hours to fill 4 barrels, and I have to spend all my time every day providing water to

Skyrocketing prices, hollow promises

About 40 villages in Rudzir, in the northern region of Khuzestan province, face water shortages. Leila Saadat, a village resident, said, “Due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the problem of the water supply, we have to either get water from a spring with difficulty or buy water from a tanker at the overpriced price of 100,000 Tomans every two days. Sometimes we do not have water for up to 10 days, and we have to get it from a spring for our livestock.”

Criticizing the deputy for Baghemalek, Leila continued, “He came to our house 4 years ago and promised to solve the water problem of Rudzir villages in Saydun County. During these 4 years, he has not taken the smallest step. On rainy days, the conditions are even more challenging, as we have to risk getting stuck on muddy mountain paths to get water. Instead, the authorities only provide a water tank for the village. If we have a guest, we do not have enough water to brew tea, and this is really embarrassing.”

girls have to walk two kilometers in the hot sun to the nearest hootag, just to drink contaminated water and bring some home. Sadly, the number of children who die while fetching water is increasing daily. Girls are at much greater risk since they are the ones fetching water.

Statistics show that thus far, 24 children have lost their lives due to scorpion stings, crocodile attacks, and drowning in the rivers, wells, and hootags. In 290 villages in the region of Dashtyar province, face water shortages. Leila Saadat, a village resident, said, “Due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the problem of the water supply, we have to either get water from a spring with difficulty or buy water from a tanker at the overpriced price of 100,000 Tomans every two days. Sometimes we do not have water for up to 10 days, and we have to get it from a spring for our livestock.”

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In Khargoosh village near Sirik City in Hormozgan Province, women and children use condensation from air conditioners to bathe. Women wearing masks and long black gowns could barely carry their water buckets. They said, “We sold our cattle due to the water shortage, and now we have no agriculture. This year, the palm trees did not bear fruit, either. Our share is worse than others. We are the ones who work the most, but we get the least.”

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The residents of nearly 3,000 villages in South Khorasan Province have evacuated their villages and migrated to city slums because of water shortage, said Mahta Bazr-Afkan, a researcher on water resources.

In Jushaq rural district in Delijan County, in Markazi Province, water shortage and drought have cut agricultural activities down to produce only one type of crop. With the decrease in agricultural activities and the drying of trees, women’s participation in seasonal flower-picking (June and July) has also reduced to limited hours. “We have nothing now,” said a 67-year-old woman. “Since the farm water has dried up, it cannot be cultivated. So we only have a few flower plots.”

The condition of animal husbandry is also not good. A 25-year-old woman said, “Of all the families living in Bahar village, only three families have livestock. So there are only three women taking care of the livestock.”

Demands for water are answered by bullets

Khuzestan has 13 dams and various water transfer projects. Nevertheless, the province and most of its villages face a severe water shortage. More than 65 families in Baraftab Sadat Mousavi village of Izeh lack drinking water.

In June 2021, people’s thirst for water led to a mass uprising in Khuzestan cities. They took to the streets for 14 days, but the regime’s only response was to open fire at civilians. The repressive forces killed at least 13 people by gunshot. Since the regime is incapable of meeting the people’s demands, it either makes hollow promises or responds with repression and violence. However, 20 days after the widespread crackdown, the deputy General Prosecutor admitted, “Unfortunately, no effective action has been taken in recent years to provide safe drinking water. Significant funds have been allocated to water projects, but according to investigations, criminal acts have been committed.”

This crisis is a product of 44 years of looting of Iran’s water resources by the regime and the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). They have built a large number of faulty dams to generate revenue, and destroyed important water basins, such as Lake Urmia, and the Gavkhoni, Parishan, and Bakhtegan wetlands.

Lack of housing and shelter

Poverty is so extreme in rural areas that some residents do not even have shelter or housing.

Jairan Khanom lost her husband to cancer 20 years ago. This single head of household must take care of her five children and elderly mother. They have been living outside Sivand village in Marvdasht, Fars Province, for many years. She still does not have a home to shelter her family from the cold and heat. “I just ask God for a house,” said Farideh, a female resident from a village near Dishmuk in the Dehdasht district of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province. “I have nothing but two chickens. Just a month ago, I did not have rice or meat to feed my children.”

Poverty, suicide, and self-immolation

The clerical regime has robbed people, especially villagers, of their food and water by looting Iran’s wealth and pouring it into the wide pockets of its leaders and mercenaries. As a result, as poverty and misery continue to spread, we are witnessing shocking suicides and self-immolation among rural women.

A shocking suicide in Chabahar

In a rare move, Moineddin Saeedi, a member of the regime’s parliament from Chabahar, referred to the news of a woman’s suicide 4 years ago, at a meeting of the Civil Commission. The woman had prostituted herself to provide drinking water for her child. “Let us die of shame!”

Until 2019, except for a psychologist, no one had set foot in the village of Sherung Roung, which is about an hour outside Dishmuk in the Dehdasht district of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province. Even young women and girl children committed suicide by self-immolation in Dishmuk from March to September 2019. Although the Dishmuk region has a nitrate mine, the regime’s inhuman policies have led to catastrophic deprivation, poverty, and unemployment in the area. The Dishmuk region has the highest per capita rate of suicide and self-immolation in Iran. The Friday Imam of Dishmuk said, “Out of 1.4 billion Tomans of credit for the prevention of social harms in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, not a single Rial has been allocated to Dishmuk. From 2009 to the beginning of 2020, no training classes were held in this area. For more than 3 years, the Department of Education has had no deputy for care and training to the young.”

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The COVID-19 pandemic made conditions for rural women in Iran extremely difficult due to the lack of timely and effective vaccinations and Khamenei’s ban on foreign vaccines. Rural women had to work amid adverse conditions that included a lack of services, equipment, and adequate infrastructure. Most rural women were 35 percent more likely to be infected by the virus due to their daily tasks, like housecleaning and shopping. Moreover, they had to wash clothes that could have been infected with the Coronavirus and care for children, the elderly, and the sick members of the family. These tasks were added to their unpaid daily work.

Majid Ahmadi, Governor of Boyerahmad, told a meeting of the Coronavirus Taskforce, “27% of those infected by the virus in the county are rural women.”

Price hikes, loss of income, and spreading unemployment

The COVID-19 pandemic and the regime’s inhuman policies negatively affected the condition of rural women in Iran, leaving them without access to clean water, health services, clean energy, etc. Since women are responsible for their children, the elderly, and other family members, many lost their limited independent economic opportunities. The pandemic had a negative impact on all occupations – but because women primarily work in informal occupations, they suffered the most. In addition to the women who peddle on the streets and female workers who work in small workshops, rural women lost their jobs, as well.

Fateme Esmailipour, Managing Director of Rural Women’s Micro Funds, said, “Rural women are mostly engaged in animal husbandry, growing medicinal plants, handicrafts, etc., but they have completely lost their jobs due to the Coronavirus outbreak.”

Ghasemabad Rudsar village also suffered severe damages after the outbreak. Shohreh Mehrabadi, an expert on the village’s handicrafts, says, “After the outbreak, the price of raw materials increased gradually every month so that after a year and a half, the price went from 70,000 Tomans to 180,000 Tomans. To buy from a factory requires a large investment, which rural women generally cannot afford on their own. Therefore, only one person gets the profit, and the weaver doing most of the work is left with no money. We don’t have any hope of continuing to work since we get nothing.”

Women do the textile weaving in the northern villages of Iran. They sell their products to tourists and it is one of their sources of livelihood. After the outbreak, tourism came to a halt and the number of clients fell drastically. The declining purchases led to lack of motivation on the part of the women who did the weaving.

Mehrabadi goes on to raise a fundamental and thought-provoking question: “At the same time, our main question is, in the time of the Coronavirus crisis, who should support tent-weaving?”

In Kalpurgan village in Sistan and Baluchestan, women’s incomes from pottery production have been halved due to the pandemic.

Parvaneh, a 30-year-old female resident, said, “We have not had any foreign visitors since the pandemic.” She has been trained in potting since she was 7. “The Internet in the village is down, and it is impossible to access social networks to answer questions. There is no support from the Cultural Heritage Office for Kalpurgan pottery producers. While the pottery from Kalpurgan village is internationally registered, the budgets for this village don’t reach the qualified level for producers. Even the Director-General of Cultural Heritage doesn’t visit the village to learn about potters’ problems.”

Inequality Takes Its Toll on Rural Women during the Pandemic

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COVID-19 exacerbates violence and discrimination against rural women

Domestic violence against women increased worldwide during the Coronavirus pandemic and Iran’s rural women were not an exception.

In addition, however, because of greater need to wash with water, rural girls and women in Iran had to spend longer hours carrying water. Since they had to fetch water over long distances from Hootags, the possibility of death increased for them. In the meantime, as the pandemic spread, these women also lost the ability to own land and resources. Since rural women are often dependent on their husbands for land ownership, the loss of their husbands to the Coronavirus put them at greater risk of losing their inheritance.

A Baluch needle-worker slams government’s inaction

Sistana Mehmandoust is a needlework artist who has become world-famous. She comes from Malek Heydari village near Zabol in Sistan and Baluchestan Province. She is one of the founders of a cooperative that sells rural handicrafts and has been in this business for 12 years.

“About 2 years ago, raw materials became more expensive, and needlewomen were no longer able to purchase the fabrics and yarn needed for their products,” said Sistana Mehmandoust. “When COVID-19 affected the country, work was completely shut down, and many handicraft cooperatives in Sistan and Baluchestan could not export or participate in exhibitions and sell their products.” Sistana expressed her objection against the regime, saying, “We needed support, but no one did anything for us. At the time of COVID-19, loans are given to just a few people.

“The raw materials are so expensive that needlewomen cannot purchase them. The people’s economic situation is so terrible that they are more concerned about being able to earn a living than buying handicrafts.”

Deterioration in health and nutrition

Environmental pollution has a devastating effect on women’s health. In addition to the pressure and stress of housework, women exposed to infections are at risk of miscarriage, giving birth to disabled and premature babies, and a variety of cancers and nerve weakness.

Mojgan Soltani heads the women’s sports group at the Ardabil General Directorate of Sports and Youth. She reported the prevalence of neck, shoulder, spine, pelvic, knee, and leg abnormalities among rural women in the province and said that rural women have the most back and knee abnormalities.

Parichehr Soltani, secretary of the working group on rural women in nomad tribes and deprived regions, in the Directorate for Women and Family Affairs, said, “Rural women are on their own for medical care as they live and reside very far from medical centers. Pregnant women don’t get enough nutrition and don’t have fast access to health facilities. In the past, food was given to pregnant rural women, but this is not happening now. If a woman had a child once every 3 years, today they give birth to a child every year. Rural women are malnourished because they are not checked annually. Cancers are diagnosed late; therefore, the disease spreads through the whole body.”

Soltani added that the budget for the annual ultrasound plan for pregnant women and the control of common cancers in rural and nomadic women had not been approved. She continued, “These women are in dire need of dental care. Rural and nomadic women have bad teeth due to multiple pregnancies and malnutrition, but dental services are very expensive, and they cannot afford them. They are also deprived of basic sports facilities.”

The condition of rural women in Iran, especially in provinces such as Sistan and Baluchestan and Khuzestan, is much worse. The per capita number of beds in hospitals and general and specialized clinics in Sistan and Baluchestan is less than one bed per 1,000 people. From this, one could guess what the situation is concerning health centers for pregnant women and postpartum care in rural areas.

In Kurdistan and all the Kurdish areas, many people work as porters because of widespread unemployment. The number of porters, including women and children, has increased during the Coronavirus pandemic in the last 2 years. These porters, however, do not have medical insurance and access to treatment.

For example, Mata Ayesheh, a 65-year-old woman in Paveh, Kermanshah, has been working as a porter for 27 years. She suffers from lung disease, shortness of breath, back pain, and hearing loss. Sadly, after 27 years of working, she still lacks health insurance and must pay for all her medical treatments.
Rural girls deprived of education

Research shows that the main reason that female students in rural areas are dropping out of school is because of environmental poverty (family and educational environment of the village). Environmental poverty is affected by economic poverty, gender discrimination, lack of Internet access, lack of teachers and educational facilities, distance to school, lack of safe transportation to school, early marriage, and parental illiteracy. These unresolved fundamental, infrastructural problems cause rural families to have no other choice but to keep their daughters at home.

School dropout statistics

According to a report by the Research Center of the mullahs’ parliament, some one million Iranian students in various levels are deprived of education. According to this report, “The total number of students deprived of education in the 2015-2016 school year was 862,777. This figure rose 26% and reached 911,272 in the 2021-2022 school year.”

The Research Center also indicated that 279,019 students dropped out of school in the academic year 2021-2022. They included 160,000 elementary level students.

The population of Iranian students in one school year is around 15 million and 376 thousand. From every 16 elementary student, one is forced to drop out of school. The Iran Open Data website (IOD) said that is coefficient is one in every 11 elementary girl student.

Accordingly, the number school drop outs among girls is three to four times boys and is estimated between 550,000 and 600,000. The illiteracy rate among nomadic girls and women is also high.

Mohammad Reza Saifi, Director-General of Nomadic Education at Iran’s Ministry of Education, complained about the lack of cooperation between the Research Organization and the Ministry of Education. He said, “West Azerbaijan province has 32,000 nomadic students, who have dropped out of school and did not enroll in school due to their inability to purchase textbooks.”

According to the same official, over 50% of nomad girl students have to leave school after completing their elementary education.

Educational status of village girls

In Sistan and Baluchestan, rural girls make up the highest number of school dropouts. Most rural girls, especially nomads, finish school after completing five primary classes in rundown schools, tents, or sheds. Living in impassable areas, being a nomad, having difficulty meeting school requirements, natural hazards such as the risk of wildlife attack, and fear of being disturbed by strangers on long and impassable routes are among the major obstacles that female students face when they want to seek an education.

Conditions for rural women in Iran in the remote villages of Khuzestan are miserable. Girls here are deprived of continuing their education after primary school. A teacher does not come to these villages, and it is impossible for girls to travel to school every day over several kilometers of dangerous routes.

Parichehr Soltani, secretary of the working group on rural and nomadic women in deprived areas, in the directorate of Women and Family Affairs, admitted that tribal students suffered the most during the COVID-19 pandemic. “This is because in remote areas, they do not have access to the Internet, phones, etc. However, before COVID-19, these children would usually miss 4 months of the school year due to migration. Now it is worse.”

Suicide after dropping out of school

In the village of Dishmuk in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province, dropping out of school has led to suicide. In the past 4 years, 60 female students have attempted suicide; 35 of the attempts led to death and included the case of an 11-year-old girl who killed.

“There are various reasons for suicide in Dishmuk,” said Salman Bina, a member of the Dishmuk council. “Some of the causes are financial poverty, unemployment, and the lack of girls’ dormitories for female students who want to continue their education.”
Child brides, early marriage, and multiple pregnancies

Around the world, the legal age for marriage is 18. However, the regime in Iran has set the legal age of marriage at 13. The law prohibiting early marriage has never been passed; thus, the incidence of child marriage is about 30% higher than the world average. However, statistics show only the registered marriages and do not include the many traditional marriages that are never registered. The published figures are not accurate, as the regime lacks transparency. At the very least, one can understand the physical and psychological damage caused by early marriage among children.

Shocking statistics on early marriages

Early marriage is widespread in Iran and has become commonplace in rural areas. In border provinces, 40 to 50 percent of high school students drop out for various reasons, including early marriage. The National Statistics Center (NSC) reported the marriage of 31,379 girls aged 10-14 in 2020, which shows a minimum growth of 10.5% compared to 2019 statistics. According to the same report, 100 marriages of girls under the age of 15 take place in every 24 hours in Iran. The NSC also reported that from winter 2022 to the end of autumn 2022, at least 27,448 girls under 15 years of age married in various parts of the country.45

The NSC has also reported that during five years, from 2017 until 2022, some 131,000 girls under 15 years of age got married in Iran.46

Marriage conditions for rural girls

In the village of Mohajeran in Hamedan province, the average age of a child bride is 11 – a fact that has made the village legendary.42

According to research in the village of Gilakabad in East Azerbaijan Province, girls become engaged at the age of 1 or 2, and there are almost no single children over the age of 5 in the village. In Gilakabad, a 6-month-old baby girl was promised for marriage.43

Hasanlu, a man from the village of Pask-e Sofia in the city of Khoy, said, “A big problem here is that they marry a child and after a few years they start their lives. An 8-year-old girl wants to watch cartoons and play games and can’t take care of a husband. One year after the girl’s marriage, she is severely pressured to become pregnant. If such a child has a child, she will suffer a lot of mental and physical injuries.”44

In 10 villages around Khoy city, child marriage has reached crisis proportions: 60% to 70% of girls get married before puberty. This phenomenon is also common in 50 other villages.45

“In one of the villages of the city, girls from the age of 6 or 7 are shown in public assemblies,” said Sadra Aghasi, a social activist in Khoy. He continued, “Last year, a village cleric officiated a first grader’s engagement at home. The marriage will be formal when the girl is older. In many cases, the girl and the boy go to the office for a formal marriage when they already have a newborn child.”46

Saeedeh, a female widow who was forced to marry a 42-year-old man in one of the villages of Torbat-e Heydarieh, said, “Here, if a girl finishes her primary education and remains single, it is a disgrace.”

Multiple pregnancies and child-mothers’ burnout

The misogynistic tradition of child marriage causes girls to become mothers at a very young age without access to adequate health and cultural facilities. These girls have children in rapid succession, their bodies wear out at a young age, and they live hellish lives. Some of these children have given birth as many as 12 times. In Zalqi village in the Aliquadarz County, girls drop out during their first years of school and are sentenced to a marriage that is not of their choosing. Their sole role is to ensure the tribe’s survival. The pain of high-risk childbirths is sad for the health of the baby and mother in Iran’s villages. Youth pregnancies, compounded by pregnancies in rapid succession, lack of access to health centers, long distances to medical centers, lack of transportation infrastructure, improper nutrition, etc., make their conditions very difficult.

For example, in Mogouii village of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, a woman usually gives birth to three children during the first 5 years of her married life.47

“Postpartum depression leads to suicide

A primary factor that leads to young girls’ suicide is early marriage. In the village of Pask-e Sofia in the city of Khoy, girls are engaged at the age of 7 or 8, go to their husbands’ houses from the age of 11 or 12, and usually have their first child at the age of 13 or 14. Most of the women in this village suffer from depression and must see a neurologist after marriage and childbirth. Delivery problems at this age sometimes lead to suicide.48

Maryam is a 35-year-old Kurdish woman who attempted suicide twice before escaping to Tehran. She said, “I was only 12 when I was forced to be married. I had to live with my husband’s family, who treated me like the housemaid. I had no safety or support. I had to wash my father-in-law’s clothes, as well as those of my brothers-in-law. I had to cook for them, and my brothers-in-law beat me almost to death if I made even the slightest excuse.” Another victim is Ronak Azizvand from Kani Rash in Urmia. On December 10, 2020, she set herself on fire in an attempted suicide. She was 14 years old when she was forced to drop out of school and marry a man from the village of Sheklabad. Thrown from the world of adolescence into what she did not understand, she was distressed by this modern oppression and slavery.49

Women in Dishmuk village of Dehdasht district in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad love death more than life. At the age of 13, young Farideh was given to a man she did not know. She lived in poverty and had nothing to eat; therefore, she poured petroleum on herself twice and hanged herself once. While she was saved from death three times, she was beaten to death by her husband.
Final Word: Rural women, the most deprived workers

Unfortunately, this booklet is too small to comprehensively explain the problems of rural women in Iran and address all their issues. Rural women’s issues include the pain of losing their loved ones in the earthquakes and floods, a lack of basic infrastructure, the destruction of ecosystems and the environment through harmful factories, the accumulation of garbage in residential areas, and the destruction of people’s homes by the corrupt government institutions.

However, the main factors complicating rural women’s conditions in Iran include misogynistic laws, as well as the lack of policymaking in the agricultural economy, and systematic government corruption. In the last 19 years, the poverty rate has doubled. The middle class has disintegrated, leaving only the poorer and lower classes. Moreover, institutional mismanagement and faulty water resource policies have set back Iran’s rural women. They are the first employed women to generate income and serve the family without any pay or benefits. Although they play an essential role in the national income cycle, the government does not accord them even minimal attention.

Corruption, theft, and institutionalized looting – all by the regime – are the root cause of the terrible economy in Iran and have led to this disaster of rural people’s misery. The regime has neither the will nor the desire nor the ability to sustainably solve the crises that affect Iran’s people. In the Velayat-e-Faqih regime, a list of plans has remained on paper for many years, and the only action that has been taken is to complicate conditions for rural women in Iran. Thus, these women’s problems, including water bankruptcy, continue to worsen.

The regime’s officials and agents shed crocodile tears and have failed to take any practical steps to improve the situation. The country requires a democratic government with fair and principled policies rather than the current misogynistic regime. Iranians need a government that understands the problems that village women face and can provide solutions for their excruciating pain.
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