

Sex Slave Jihad

By Donna M. Hughes
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A measure of Islamic fundamentalist success in controlling society is the depth and totality with which they suppress the freedom and rights of women. In Iran for 25 years, the ruling mullahs have enforced humiliating and sadistic rules and punishments on women and girls, enslaving them in a gender apartheid system of segregation, forced veiling, second-class status, lashing, and stoning to death.

Joining a global trend, the fundamentalists have added another way to dehumanize women and girls: buying and selling them for prostitution. Exact numbers of victims are impossible to obtain, but according to an official source in Tehran, there has been a 635 percent increase in the number of teenage girls in prostitution. The magnitude of this statistic conveys how rapidly this form of abuse has grown. In Tehran, there are an estimated 84,000 women and girls in prostitution, many of them are on the streets, others are in the 250 brothels that reportedly operate in the city. The trade is also international: thousands of Iranian women and girls have been sold into sexual slavery abroad.

The head of Iran's Interpol bureau believes that the sex slave trade is one of the most profitable activities in Iran today. This criminal trade is not conducted outside the knowledge and participation of the ruling fundamentalists. Government officials themselves are involved in buying, selling, and sexually abusing women and girls.

Many of the girls come from impoverished rural areas. Drug addiction is epidemic throughout Iran, and some addicted parents sell their children to support their habits. High unemployment 28 percent for youth 15-29 years of age and 43 percent for women 15-20 years of age is a serious factor in driving restless youth to accept risky offers for work. Slave traders take advantage of any opportunity in which women and children are vulnerable. For example, following the recent earthquake in Bam, orphaned girls have been kidnapped and taken to a known slave market in Tehran where Iranian and foreign traders meet.

Popular destinations for victims of the slave trade are the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf. According to the head of the Tehran province judiciary, traffickers target girls between 13 and 17, although there are reports of some girls as young as 8 and 10, to send to Arab countries. One ring was discovered after an 18 year-old girl escaped from a basement where a group of girls were held before being sent to Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. The number of Iranian women and girls who are deported from Persian Gulf countries indicates the magnitude of the trade. Upon their return to Iran, the Islamic fundamentalists blame the victims, and often physically punish and imprison them. The women are examined to determine if they have engaged in "immoral activity." Based on the findings, officials can ban them from leaving the country again.

Police have uncovered a number of prostitution and slavery rings operating from Tehran that have sold girls to France, Britain, Turkey as well. One network based in Turkey bought smuggled Iranian women and girls, gave them fake passports, and transported them to European and Persian Gulf countries. In one case, a 16-year-old girl was smuggled to Turkey, and then sold to a 58-year-old European national for \$20,000.

In the northeastern Iranian province of Khorasan, local police report that girls are being sold to Pakistani men as sex-slaves. The Pakistani men marry the girls, ranging in age from 12 to 20, and then sell them to brothels called "Kharabat" in Pakistan. One network was caught contacting poor families around Mashad and offering to marry girls. The girls were then taken through Afghanistan to

Pakistan where they were sold to brothels. In the southeastern border province of Sistan Baluchestan, thousands of Iranian girls reportedly have been sold to Afghani men. Their final destinations are unknown. One factor contributing to the increase in prostitution and the sex slave trade is the number of teen girls who are running away from home. The girls are rebelling against fundamentalist imposed restrictions on their freedom, domestic abuse, and parental drug addictions. Unfortunately, in their flight to freedom, the girls find more abuse and exploitation. Ninety percent of girls who run away from home will end up in prostitu-

tion. As a result of runaways, in Tehran alone there are an estimated 25,000 street children, most of them girls. Pimps prey upon street children, runaways, and vulnerable high school girls in city parks. In one case, a woman was discovered selling Iranian girls to men in Persian Gulf countries; for four years, she had hunted down runaway girls and sold them.

She even sold her own daughter for US\$11,000.

Given the totalitarian rule in Iran, most organized activities are known to the authorities. The exposure of sex slave networks in Iran has shown that many mullahs and officials are involved in the sexual exploitation and trade of women and girls. Women report that in order to have a judge approve a divorce they have to have sex with him. Women who are arrested for prostitution say they must have sex with the arresting officer. There are reports of police locating young women for sex for the wealthy and powerful mullahs.

In cities, shelters have been set-up to provide assistance for runaways. Officials who run these shelters are often corrupt; they run prostitution rings using the girls from the shelter. For example in Karaj, the former head of a Revolutionary Tribunal and seven other senior officials were arrested in connection with a prostitution ring that used 12 to 18 year old girls from a shelter called the Center of Islamic Orientation.

Other instances of corruption abound. There was a judge in Karaj who was involved in a network that identified young girls to be sold abroad. And in Qom, the center for religious training in Iran, when a prostitution ring was broken up, some of the people arrested were from government agencies, including the Department of Justice.

The ruling fundamentalists have differing opinions on their official position on the sex trade: deny and hide it or recognize and accommodate it. In 2002, a BBC journalist was deported for taking photographs of prostitutes. Officials told her: "We are deporting you, because you have taken pictures of prostitutes. This is not a true reflection of life in our Islamic Republic. We don't have prostitutes." Yet, earlier the same year, officials of the Social Department of the Interior Ministry suggested legalizing prostitution as a way to manage it and control the spread of HIV. They proposed setting-up brothels, called "morality houses," and using the traditional religious custom of temporary marriage, in which a couple can marry for a short period of time, even an hour, to facilitate prostitution. Islamic fundamentalists ideology and practices are adaptable when it comes to controlling and using women.

Some may think a thriving sex trade in a theocracy with clerics acting as pimps is a contradiction in a country founded and ruled by Islamic fundamentalists. In fact, this is not a contradiction. First, exploitation and repression of women are closely associated. Both exist where women, individually or collectively, are denied freedom and rights. Second, the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran are not simply conservative Muslims. Islamic fundamentalism is a political movement with a political ideology that considers women inherently inferior in intellectual and moral capacity. Fundamentalists hate women's minds and bodies. Selling women and girls for prostitution is just the dehumanizing complement to forcing women and girls to cover their bodies and hair with the veil.

In a religious dictatorship like Iran, one cannot appeal to the rule of law for justice for women and girls. Women and girls have no guarantees of freedom and rights, and no expectation of respect or dignity from the Islamic fundamentalists. Only the end of the Iranian regime will free women and girls from all the forms of slavery they suffer.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the Iranian human rights and pro-democracy activists who contributed information for this article. If any readers have information on prostitution and the sex slave trade in Iran, please contact her at dhughes@uri.edu

House of Sand and Fog dissects Iranian emigres

About four years ago, Shohreh Aghdashloo heard about the book "House of Sand and Fog" on Oprah Winfrey's television program. She was fascinated by the novel about an Iranian immigrant family and told her husband that when a film was made of the book she wanted to play the role of the immigrant wife.

As husbands do, he scoffed, saying there would be no film of the book. He was wrong, as husbands occasionally are.

When the film was being cast, Aghdashloo got a call to tryout. When she got home, she realized she was never told what part she was trying out for. She was afraid she had just been called for one of the many small walk-on roles for Persians.

She was summoned for a second audition. She was told not to wear make-up. And what is the role, she asked? The immigrant's wife, she was told.

She got the role. And now, at the age of 51, she is one of the most talked about "new" actresses in Hollywood. She has received a New York Film Critics award for Best Supporting Actress and is being nominated for the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. "House of Sand and Fog" is not, however, a pleasant film. Do not plan on a gay dinner out after seeing it.

It is the story of an Iranian family that flees the revolution. The husband, played by Ben Kingsley, best known for his starring role in "Gandhi" was a colonel in the Shah's Air Force. In America, he is trying to maintain his social status while actually working on a high way crew and in a convenience store. He reads of an ocean side house being sold for unpaid taxes and buys it, planning to fix it up and sell it for much more, to achieve the American dream.

But the county had seized the house and sold it in error. No taxes were owed. The troubled woman who owned it, portrayed by Jennifer Connelly, never opened her mail and so didn't act when she received notices that the house would be seized.

The colonel and the woman then face off, they clash and both their lives go into a nose dive. For the rest of this tragic story, you will have to see the movie.

At its heart, the film is about decent people struggling with life. This is not the typical American film with its good white hats and its bad black hats. There is no distinct line between good and evil. Everyone in the film is at least trying to be good.

As Gary Thompson wrote in the Philadelphia Daily News, "What you have is your basic fight to the death, made interesting because each character is arguably "right," and each is unusually complex. Each has attractive and unpleasant characteristics that surface and recede, so our allegiance and sympathies constantly shift."

It is also not your typical American film that ends with every one living happily ever after. Far from it. "Saving Private Ryan" is light-hearted compared to "House of Sand and Fog."

Shohreh Aghdashloo has perhaps the oddest role in the history of American film. In American films, the foreigners all speak English. Foreign tongues are verboten. But about half of Aghdashloo's line are delivered in Farsi.

She serves as the bridge between her husband and the woman who has lost her house. She is the voice of humanity trying to put the brakes on the burgeoning conflict.

The immigrant family could be from any country. But the book makes them Iranian and the film goes out of it way to emphasize their Iranian-ness. The wedding scene has Persian music. The family's furniture is typical of an Iranian home. The colonel reminisces over a photo of himself at a dinner with Mohammad Reza Shah. How many Americans will even notice that photo let alone have any idea who that man is? But it is the use of Farsi that brings it all together. Ben Kingsley speaks only a half dozen scattered words of Farsi, badly mangling Qom as Kum.

Aghdashloo's first speaking scene is given entirely in Farsi, however, and she returns to Farsi repeatedly. It isn't all translated in the subtitles, leaving American film goers to sometimes translate on their own from Aghdashloo's demeanour.

Aghdashloo made three films in Iran before the revolution, only one of which was ever released in Iran. One of the still banned films is "The Report" directed by Abbas Kiarostami. In February 1979, at the age of 25 she and her husband drove out of Iran to Turkey and on to settle in Britain. Her husband did not take to life in exile. They separated and he returned to Iran. She went to college in London and planned to enter journalism. But she got an acting

role in Persian play, Rainbow, right after graduating. That role took her to California in 1987. There she saw another play and fell in love with it, and with the play write, Houshang Touzie.

When she got back to her London home, she found a postcard from Touzie. "It said "Bia" (come) about 500 times. I still have it. I immediately returned to L.A." and she married Touzie, the man who didn't think she'd ever have a chance to play the colonel's wife in "House of Sand and Fog."

She got some acting roles, making appearances in such television shows as "Columbo" and "Matlock." But she did not like the typical roles she was offered, which she has summarized as the wife or mother of Middle Eastern terrorists.

She has spent much of her professional life appearing on Persian language television in Southern California, where she hosted an opinion program for 10 years, and performing in or directing Persian stage shows.

That may all change now as scripts are rolling in.

In an interview with Variety, the daily newspaper of the U.S. entertainment business, Aghdashloo described her decision to leave Iran. She was part of a drama workshop and went to the theatre each morning. She said she was ignoring the revolution around her. One morning in February 1979, she arrived at the theatre to find the doorway bricked up. "Right at that moment I decided to leave."

The book from which the film is taken was written by Andre Dubus III. He uses the "III" because his late father was a prominent author as well. Why did Dubus make his central character an Iranian? It was all the fault of a woman, an Iranian he dated in college. In an interview a few years ago he explained the genesis.

Question: You dated an Iranian woman around the time of the revolution. Did you know much about Iran?

Dubus: Not until I met her. I hadn't heard of Iran. Like most teenage Americans, I was ignorant of all geography. She said she was from Persia. She explained it all to me. We were in a relationship for three or four years, in so far as you can have a relationship with a Persian girl who is loyal to her Shiite Muslim heritage, which she was. Very interesting to go from late sixties early seventies free love to dating a Muslim.

Question: She had been recently expatriated?

Dubus: Yeah. Her father was a retired Iranian colonel in the Shah's air force. And that's were I learned about the Shah. I learned about how corrupt the regime was. I learned more after I left that relationship and studied more about the CIA involvement in all sorts of cultures. And just how terrible the Shah was. How terrible the CIA was. And the fact that my friend was actually a part of that culture was interesting.

Question: And twenty years later this shows up in House of Sand and Fog. Complicated experience, the life of the Iranian exile...

Dubus: It's much more a thing of face and pride. Much more about pride than comfort. For Americans it would be more about, "Hey, where's the cash?" We like all that status stuff, but not as much as the Iranian. Question: You explored the complexity of this Iranian exile family's life. No one else has done that in American literature...

Dubus: I didn't think of that before. I was relieved that an Iranian reviewer in San Francisco actually gave it a thumbs up. She had some problems with my Farsi, which is understandable. I tried to get it right but some of my colloquialisms were mixed up. I'll have to fix that for the paperback.

Aghdashloo had no such complaint. She said of Dubus: "I swore he'd been hiding under my bed to create these characters, their emotions, their problems."

She told the San Francisco Chronicle, "What I like about this story is that it's about dignity, integrity, love, saving face. It shows it all."

The film is directed by Vadim Perelman, who is an established director of commercials and music videos but had never before done a full length film.

Perelman is an immigrant himself, from Russia, and the book's story of an immigrant's struggle appealed to him.

It was Perelman who resolved to hire an Iranian for the role of the colonel's wife, rather than going the usual Hollywood route that would probably produce a Mexican or a Sicilian for the role. "I was determined to get an Iranian actress, even if it meant going to Iran," he said.

Aghdashloo has, in a sense, confronted the tragedy of the people in "House of Sand

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