

IRANIAN GIRLS: A STUDY ON CAUSES AND EFFECTS

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Abstract: The problem of runaway girls has been one of the most unsolvable social problems in Iran; it is a problem by itself but it will not stop in itself and will entail several other problems. Because issues related to the subject of sex is still taboo in Iran, there has not been enough research on these issues and this is one of the reasons why this issue has not been dealt with properly. Reviewing what has been done so far on this subject, the present paper will proceed by presenting a report of a longitudinal study along with in-depth interviews with 56 runaway girls who lived now in a safe house by the government. We studied issues like drug and alcohol abuse, rape, sex, robbery, suicide or parasuicide, girl trafficking, and abortion; we found that family issues, broken families and strict parents and most importantly, having a boyfriend have been the most important factor for these girls on deciding to escape from home. We have provided recommendations to families, civil society organizations and the government based on our findings.

Keywords: Runaway Girls; Social Problems; Addiction; Prostitution; Iran

Introduction: Lifestyle change has always been accompanied by discontents and transition from traditional to modern life is the source for rapid and turbulent lifestyle change. The phenomenon of 'runaway girls' is one of the greatest moral dilemmas in the transiting societies, particularly in the Middle Eastern cultures including Iran.

Confused by being informed about news about emergence of new patterns of sexual behaviors, the traditional and family-centered society of Iran struggles to find new mechanisms to cope with the issue of runaway girls. Although research in Iran has shown that bad family relationships can be a predictor of girls running away from their homes (Samani, 2006: 262), there are many examples that girls in good families also have decided to leave their homes without informing their families.

The present study which is the result of an in-depth study on a group of runaway girls in Qazvin province in Iran, endeavors to shed light on contexts and factors that predict running away from home and tries to reveal some of the consequences of running away on girls' life and mental health. Before presenting our results, let us have a review on previous research on runaway girls in Iran.

Review of Literature: As we saw in the previous section, the issue of runaway girls is very important everywhere in the world, and particularly in cultures like Iran. Therefore, many Iranian researchers have taken up this issue (although, as we will see at the end of this paper, we insist there should be much more research on this subject). For example, Shareh and Aghamohammadian (2007) employed an accessible sampling method to study 20 runaway girls in Toos Welfare Organization in the city of Mashhad and compared them with 20 ordinary girls. By studying identity traits, they concluded that the less the individual has moral commitments, the more she is likely to run away from home.

Rasoulzadeh *et al.* (2005) compared personal and social characteristics of runaway and non-runaway girls in Tehran. After studying 45 runaway and 45 ordinary girls, they showed there was not much difference between personalities of both samples and these two groups only had different social statuses.

Moazami Goudarzi *et al.* (2001) studied stress-relief tests on a group of runaway girls. They ran a stress-relief test on 15 runaway girls and 15 ordinary girls and concluded that runaway girls respond much more positively to stress-relief tests. Hamidi *et al.* (2004) studied 50 runaway girls to learn about their family structure and find out how family roles, problem-solving ability and emotion-expression are important in their lives. In the second phase, they chose 15 girls and enrolled them in a rehabilitating program along with their families. They concluded that there are problems in family structure of the runaway girls and therefore more work should be done on their families.

Tehrani Zadeh *et al.* (2005) conducted a comparative study on 60 runaway girls in Welfare centers in Tehran and 60 ordinary girls and showed that inefficient attitudes can be a problematic cause and increases the risk. Moreover, taking into account the negative cognitive schemata during childhood, they concluded that the age had no relationship with cognitive errors; the relationship between economic situation and inefficient attitudes in ordinary girls was affected by poor living conditions.

Fathi (2007) tried to identify the most important factors that encourages girls to run away from their homes and based on these factors, he provided some solutions. He compared a group of runaway girls with another group of ordinary girls and showed that runaway girls more than ordinary girls had been subject to parental abuse and even molestation. Moreover, family rupture symptoms like divorced parents, addiction, record of incarceration, and

arguments and quarrels among family members had been reported more often among runaway girls, than among ordinary girls.

Shareh (2008) conducted a survey on 500 high school girls in different parts of the city of Mashhad and this analysis showed that poverty, being raised in a single parent household, high age differences between parents and daughters were some of the most important factors that increase the risk for a possible future escape.

Habibi *et al.* (2016) conducted a phenomenological study on 12 runaway girls in a rehabilitation center in Tehran and employed Van Manen method to interpret their findings. They found that lived experience of runaway girls are full of turbulence in the family, lack of care and attention from family, and anti-social acts of other family members. They recommended more work on the family in order to prevent great consequences both for the person and for the society.

Hozoori *et al.* (2016) In their descriptive study chose a population consisted of all runaway girls referred to the Police Headquarters Counseling Center of Ardabil and selected 60 girls to participate in their study. The instruments used were a self-designed questionnaire and social support scales. Results showed that there were significant differences between injured runaway girls and other groups of girls in the amount of family and social support subscales.

As we said, there has been many studies on runaway girls in Iran, but, we claim our study is unique in that it has been conducted on girls immediately after their arrest and before their transference into Welfare centers and also we have followed them up until full rehabilitation and their return to their families.

Methodology: Based on accessible sampling method, this study was conducted on 56 runaway girls who were previously resident in safe centers in the province of Qazvin to reveal the reasons and consequences of running away from home. We took 'running away from home' as independent variable and defined seven dependent variables of drug and alcohol abuse, rape, robbery, suicide or parasuicide, prostitution, girl trafficking, and abortion as dependent variables. We designed a longitudinal study and followed up the girls immediately after they were arrested by the police, to their transfer to rehabilitation centers, to their return to their home or official decision to keep them in rehabilitation center until better opportunity could be provided. Because of the sensitivity of the issue, we employed female interviewers to interview girls and we made sure that girls' cooperation was totally voluntary in the condition that their anonymity was preserved. We then codified our findings and this helped us to do statistical analysis using SPSS.

Findings: Hypotheses' Tests: Hypothesis 1: Running away from home will culminate in drug and alcohol abuse.

Level of significance for this test is less than 0.05 ($\chi^2=31,400$; $P= 0.000$) which means our hypothesis (1) is proved. 71 percent of girls reported that their escape from home had led them to drug and alcohol abuse. This alone shows more research has to be done on the role of drug abuse before and after escape happens. Also, it should be studied in the wider context of drug and alcohol abuse in Iran, which is currently a grave problem.

Hypothesis 2: Running away from home will culminate in approaching prostitution gangs.

Our analysis showed that about 40 percent of the girls somehow contacted a prostitution gang which shows that at least with our sample, there are many gangs who are looking for runaway girls and maybe they incite them to escape home. Over that last two decades there were many efforts to suppress and control prostitution gangs but they are still active and always vigilant to find new victims.

Hypothesis 3: Running away from home will culminate in girls being trafficked into other countries.

Here, more than 96 percent of the girls reported there was no effort - either from themselves or other people they were in contact with- to transfer them to another country and therefore, the third hypothesis is rejected. We should note that, however, there are criminal groups who systematically work in the international prostitution business. Sometimes police can attack and destroy their efforts but they exist anyway.

Hypothesis 4: Running away from home will lead girls to heist.

34 out of 56 respondents said they made living through prostitution either individually or in cooperation with gangs. This shows sexuality is the main factor based on which runaway girls are dealt with in the society. 39 percent of the girls reported their expenses were secured through other means like through their boyfriends. Therefore, we cannot say running away from home will lead girls to rob from other people. One might say their job is already vacant even before they decide to escape.

Hypothesis 5: Running away from home will end up in abortion.

We saw that sexuality is an important factor for people's treatment of runaway girls. We found 78 percent of these girls had not become pregnant and among those other 22 percent, 83 percent had an abortion. Therefore, overall, we cannot say running away from home will culminate into abortion. But, we should note that that tiny number is still very important and need to be thought of.

Hypothesis 6: Running away from home will culminate into committing suicide or parasuicide.

While 20 out of 56 girls came back to normal life and even some of them married, 18 girls said if they find an opportunity, they will escape again. Moreover, 14 said they were thinking of committing suicide which means many of these girls did not see their problems outside home so harsh to think about suicide. Here, we can see that many factors related to running away still existed; nevertheless, only 2 respondents said they had visited a psychiatrist. Therefore, we can say there was no serious will on girls' part to solve problems. Other research have to be done about the lack of psychological support for these girls and their families. Our findings showed that there are high level of depression among these girls and they were more likely to commit suicide or parasuicide as compared to ordinary girls. We should not forget, however, that

Other Findings: After testing our hypotheses, we decided to do further analyses to see what more we could find from our data. We found that 75 percent of runaway girls in this study were resident of the city of Qazvin while other 25 percent lived in towns or villages. 38 runaway girls said they were single, while 14 said they were married and 4 remained silent on this matter. We can say here that marriage can be a deterring factor in preventing girls from escaping home. We can also predict that those girls who got married after their rehabilitation, would less incline to escape again (this highly depends on the quality of marital life, however).

None of the girls in our sample had studied at university level and most of them did not finish high school. Here we can say that education at the higher level can be a deterring factor against escaping from home. We should also note that there is the possibility that girls who study at universities outside their hometowns might have motivation to escape, but they already have a place distant from home and this makes escaping unnecessary. More study on girls who study in universities is needed.

43 percent of the girls had escaped for the first time, 29 percent for the second time and 25 percent reported they had escaped more than two times. More than 40 percent of our 56 participants said when they escaped from home they were thinking of going to another city while only 4 percent said they did not intend to leave their city. Also 54 percent of the girls in this study had spent only one week or less outside home while only 10 percent said they were out for more than 3 months.

One important finding of this study is that about 70 percent of the girls said they were deceived by their boyfriends to escape from home. Only 2 girls said they left home because their parents forced them to

marry somebody. Another 10 percent said they left home because their parents abused them.

Another important finding is that all these girls said they had sex with one or more men immediately after escape. 57 percent said they were taken directly to a home of a boyfriend and 15 percent said they had their first sex in a car immediately after escaping. 75 percent said doing sex was not against their will and only 3.5 percent said they were raped. 21 percent remained silent if they had sex willfully. This is a big alarm because this, in line with our previous findings, shows that the main cause that convince girls to escape is an external motivating agent who only sees them as sexual commodities.

That is exactly why more than 85 percent of girls who participated in this study said they did not get what they wanted and only 3.6 percent said they were satisfied with the outcome of their escape.

Discussion and Conclusion: Our study showed that escaping from home has left grave consequences for runaway girls. They were sexually, mentally, physically and emotionally abused and their families suffered dishonor and grief. The society has also been damaged by runaway girls and this social consequences will continue for decades. Moreover, runaway girls have been so damaged that it is now hardly imaginable they could back to normal life-remember after coming back to their families, most of these girls will be judged for the rest of their lives and this is one of the reasons they might decide to escape again. Girls who participated in this study were among those who were arrested by the police. We know that many of these girls are murdered or transferred to other countries for prostitution. We are largely unaware of the fate of these girls. More research has to be conducted on this subject.

As we saw earlier in this paper, in Iran most research about runaway girls in Iran have been done in the paradigm of psychology. Some research have been carried out using sociological approaches. The present paper, however, took a mixed approach to measure psychological aspects and put it in the larger sociological context. Therefore, the results of this paper are explanative and we claim our results could be generalized to other regions in Iran, particularly wherever the demographics are similar to that of Qazvin.

In this study, statistical operations showed that first, running away from home has culminated in drug and alcohol abuse, contacting and joining prostitution gangs, and abortion. All these (along with other dangers that we did not study in this research) will (and did) have grave effects on girl's lives which will determine the rest of their lives. We think doing more research on this subject is very important, both ethically and scientifically. Also, a kind of action research design would be very effective.

Our results also showed that family problems, abusing parents, broken families, and most importantly having a boyfriend are effective factors that may convince a girl she should run away from home. Most of the girls said their first sex was not forced on them and this means they were doing all things willfully because previous to that everything was arranged by a boyfriend who would later proved to be unreliable. High rate of dissatisfaction with running away shows most of these relationships only served the male party and the girls were only sexually exploited.

While most of the girls were single, only 10 percent of them could marry after their return to home and the rest of them had to live with their parents. Besides that the very conditions that had earlier convinced them to flee still existed, now reproachful parents and siblings were added and this is why some girls came to conclusion that they should escape again.

More education should be provided to these parents and siblings on how they should contribute to rehabilitation process.

Most –if not all- girls in this study (and we claim runaway girls everywhere) are victims. Most of them are even under age. If governments want to tackle these problems, they should develop more complicated means. NGOs also can have their share in this process. This sensitive issue can only be addressed if we have enthusiastic volunteers, and not regular employees who are less interested in doing jobs that they don't like. In Iran we already have seen the power of these non-governmental and civil society institutions in abatement of addiction. They have done a job that no government in the world is able to do. Hopefully, we can have similar campaigns in social problems like runaway girls.

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