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HOST COUNTRY POLICIES TOWARD CHILDREN MIGRANTS

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MULTIPLE DISCRIMINATIONS AGAINST AFGHAN GIRLS¹ IN IRAN

INTRODUCTION

In the last century, as a result of globalization, some concepts such as “social justice” and “right to non-discrimination” have become the main focus of several human rights studies, all around the world. In a developing country, like Iran, the obvious hierarchy between social classes and different groups of people has led to negative prejudice and discrimination of those in authority over others.

One of the most discriminated social groups in Iran are the Afghan Refugees and Asylum-Seekers (RAS), who have been living there for more than three decades and are still deprived of many basic human rights. However, the Afghans who live in Iran are not all discriminated in the same way. The RAS children, and especially girls, endure this top-down view from three diverse dimensions and get multiply discriminated because of: their Afghan background, their gender, and their age.

¹ The phrase “Afghan girl” which is repetitively used in this study refers to all female children under 18 years old, regardless of their status as a refugee or an asylum-seeker, whose background and current status is somehow connected to Afghanistan and the Afghan culture, and they are currently living in Iran for any reason.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it aims to focus on the perspective of the Afghan girls about the different forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and adultism and the effects of these processes on their lives; and second, to examine to what extent the Afghan girls are aware of the discriminations against them.

What motivated the author to study the situation of Afghan girls in Iran was noticing that the voice and the viewpoints of the Afghan girls have not been heard in most of the previous research regarding the situation of RASs. In such studies girls are rarely considered as an unattached, discriminated group with special needs. This means that in most studies RAS girls are treated either generally as RAS children or they are treated as women and considered within the context of subordination in gender studies. To give just one example, consider the statistic about the number of RAS girls, which has been published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): “Refugee women and girls accounted for 48 per cent of the refugee population in 2012, a proportion that has remained constant over the past decades” (UNHCR 2012: 3).

In general, there are not so many studies available with the focus on Afghan RAS children. It is not difficult to imagine that when it comes to the girls’ perspective, our knowledge is even more limited. This might be due to their weaker participation in the society in comparison to boys.

BACKGROUND

Afghans’ Migration

Afghanistan is quite a large country, located in the southern Asia. It borders Iran in the west and Pakistan in the south and the east. Until the last century Afghanistan was part of Iran and thus a high degree of cultural proximity exists between both countries. On the one hand, the geographical location, the common language, and more job opportunities in neighbouring countries, were some of the pull factors, which led to the immigration of millions of Afghans to Iran or Pakistan. On the other hand, drought, a weak financial situation, lack of job opportunities, and above all, lack of security as a result of continual wars, one after the other are the most common causes of Afghans’ migration from their home country. As a consequence Afghanistan is the first country in the world in terms of the number of RAS.

Afghans who have immigrated to Iran originate from different sociocultural backgrounds. According to a study by Abbasi-Shavazi et al. the majority of Afghans living in Iran are of Hazara and Tajik ethnicity, and mainly work as labourers, farmers, tailors, and stonemasons (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005: 18–24).

Despite all the pull factors which have encouraged many Afghans to immigrate to Iran and remain there more than three decades, there exist also Afghans, who are dissatisfied with their situation abroad and status as a foreigner, and who have either returned to Afghanistan or emigrated to the other countries. One of the most outstanding reasons of this dissatisfaction reported by the migrants themselves and mentioned in many studies is the discriminatory attitude of Iranians toward Afghan refugees or asylum-seekers.

MULTIPLE DISCRIMINATION

In almost all human rights treaties, the right to non-discrimination has been mentioned and emphasized as one of the principal articles. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is one of such treaties and its Article 2(1), states:

“States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status”.

The above-mentioned article and all the other non-discrimination articles in the human rights treaties aim to eliminate any negative discrimination, which usually emerges in different forms such as sexism, racism, classism, adultism, and other “-isms”. Self evidently, these different types of discrimination usually do not occur singularly for an individual human being. A person can simultaneously be subjected to multiple types of discrimination and be ignored by various power holders. An example of multiple discrimination is the situation of Afghan girls in Iran, who are subjected to racism, sexism, and adultism at the same time.

Racism

RASs are one of the most discriminated groups in societies all over the world. Iran, as the second largest host country for Afghan and Iraqi refugees, unfortunately maintains quite a large number of discriminatory regulations and practices against them.

In the last two decades Iran’s government has transformed its policy concerning Afghans’ migration and tended to repatriate immigrants and to close its borders to impending immigration by introducing arduous rules, which are most of the times discriminatory as well. As a result, between 2002 and 2008 UNHCR has assisted Iran in repatriating more than 859,000 registered refugees

to Afghanistan (UNHCR 2008:172). The repatriations did not stop in 2008 and according to the latest statistics 15,000 more Afghans were repatriated in 2012 (UNHCR 2012: 1).

The decision of Iran's government to repatriate Afghans was made when the war and other push factors in Afghanistan remained strong and no worth-mentioning positive change was envisaged. Consequently, many of the repatriated Afghans returned to Iran again. Iran's new approach has been even more visible in the recent years, when the government declared that no more residence cards (Amayesh cards) would be issued for newly arriving asylum-seekers, and the formerly issued cards have to be validated every year at a cost.

The Amayesh card is not a work permit. Therefore, the refugees have to apply separately for a permission to work. Moreover, the family of the cardholder does not have the right to accompany him/her. Even the children of a refugee father who were born and grew up in Iran are not always entitled to a residence permit and hence, most of the times, they get excluded from education in public schools due to the lack of an official document and due to the high extra cost of education for Afghans.

Self evidently, discrimination does not affect everyone in the same way or with equal intensity. The vulnerability of one's status in the society, his/her resilience, the attitude of the dominant group toward minorities, age, gender, and several other factors can influence the intensity of the discrimination that a refugee experiences. In this regard, the RAS girls and women may be discriminated more than the RAS men on the basis of their gender.

Sexism

The situation of Afghan RAS women and girls in Iran is directly influenced by women's rights in Islam, in which a woman is subordinate to man. For instance, according to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, married women, irrespective of their age, are not entitled to have a passport and travel alone without an official permission of their husband. Unmarried girls, again – regardless of their age, cannot get married without the official consent of their father or their legal guardian. It is also remarkable that “the mother cannot, under traditional Islamic law, be recognized as the legal guardian of her own children” (Ali 2000: 63) since the guardian has to be male and after the father, according to Islam, the paternal grandfather or the uncle will be the child's official guardian.

The dependency on men starts from birth, when a child can only inherit the father's nationality and family name and not the mother's. The superiority of men over women, which lasts throughout their life, reduces the women's self-confidence and abilities for decision-making and being independent.

The sad fact is that amending the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in a way which would ensure more equality in theocratic states such as Iran or Afghanistan is not easily attainable. Since “it is common belief that the shari’ah is divine and hence immutable” (Engineer 2001: 24–25). This immutability prevented Iran from ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW), which introduces many of articles which would contradict Iran’s constitution.

Except for racism and sexism, adultism is also one of the most transferable discrimination types, which plays an important, but mostly invisible, role in the lives of the Afghan girls in Iran.

Adultism

Until recently, adultism, i.e. discrimination particularly against children, has not been considered and studied in anti-discrimination research as much as the other types of discrimination. In one of the few pieces of research which exist, adultism is defined as: “the attitudes and behavior of adults who assume that, because of their age, they are more intelligent, competent, and generally better than children and young people and thus they disregard children’s opinions and views” (Ritz 2008: 1, own translation)².

However, the definition of adultism in Iran is not equivalent with the above statement. Adultist attitudes in societies with patriarchal structures, such as Iran and Afghanistan, are much more intense, deep, and primal. In such contexts adultism does not deal with issues such as considering the children’s point of view as seriously as that of others, but rather with the violations of the rights of children to educate, to play, or even to live.

Like many other discrimination types adultism in Iran starts with the child’s birth when, due to the Islamic laws, the child starts to officially belong to the father or the parental grandfather. Therefore, there is no disapproval for any violence and discrimination against children executed by their fathers and paternal grandfathers and, accordingly, the guardian is usually not condemned for such acts. For instance, according to the Iranian criminal law, there is no penalty for a father or a paternal grandfather of a child if they murder the child, while the penalty for the same crime for the mother is death.

² “Der Begriff verweist auf die Einstellung und das Verhalten Erwachsener, die davon ausgehen, dass sie allein aufgrund ihres Alters intelligenter, kompetenter, schlicht besser sind, als Kinder und Jugendliche und sich daher über ihre Meinungen und Ansichten hinwegsetzen”.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methods and methodology

According to Article 12 of the CRC children, as one of the most significant groups within the society, have the right to contribute to the decisions that concern them and to freely express their opinions, which are often different from those of adults. However, most of the time they are labeled as incompetent and hence their opinions are unheeded even in the studies which concern them.

This research is designed to focus on the subjective perspective of Afghan girls on multiple discrimination that they experience. It is carried out by means of a qualitative methodology, which is believed to be more applicable in order to achieve the aims of the study.

During the study multiple qualitative methods have been applied. Although the foremost method of the study was a semi-structured interview, focus group discussions and passive-participatory observations, as supplementaries, have been applied as well. This was done in order to substantiate the trustworthiness of the collected information via the interviews (Sapkota and Sharma 1996: 64).

Sample

The study and the interview framework were premeditated for the girls above 11–12 years old for two main reasons. First, girls in this age range are approaching puberty and consequently they are more likely to be discriminated by the family and/or the societies in various manners, such as by being forced to keep their social activities within limits. As a result, in research concerning child abuse and violation, such as the one conducted by Rees et al. in 2010 about the maltreatment of children, usually children in a similar age range are studied. The second reason is that children in this age range are more capable than younger children to directly and eloquently express their experiences and opinions when interviewed.

In total six girls were interviewed: Fariba aged 11, Zahra 12, Shabaneh 13, Rahimeh 14–15, Yasaman 16, and Sara 17–18. Except Zahra, who was born in Iran and had the Amayesh card, the other girls either had a contemporary visa in their Afghan passport or were living without any legal residence permit or even an identity card. The interviewees were all born of Afghan parents and, except Sara, they have never been in Afghanistan since their birth/migration.

The interview guide

The interview guide was formulated in the first period of the study, after assembling general information concerning the situation of Afghans in Iran. It was constructed around the following two research questions:

- 1) How does multiple discrimination in the form of adultism, racism, and sexism, influence the lives of Afghan girls in Iran?
- 2) To what extent are Afghan girls aware of these forms of discrimination and which of these types of discrimination do they find the most troublesome?

Considering the aims of the research, several sub-questions were developed and prepared for the interview. All questions regarding the discriminatory attitudes were asked with great caution in order to avoid generating any alertness of discrimination in the respondents. As the research timeframe was restricted to one month, raising the alertness of discrimination in the interviewees and then leaving them to themselves was morally inappropriate.

Since the proposed method for the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews, the framework of the interview was flexible and the participants had the opportunity to partially guide the process of the interview by asking questions or sharing their stories.

Challenges and Limitations

Alike all the other studies, this study also encountered various limitations and challenges. The first and the most obvious one was the time frame, which was not long enough for a holistic study. Understanding the girls' status in the families and the Afghan society requires having in-depth knowledge on the boys' and men's opinion about gender norms as well, which failed to be addressed due to the time limit.

As it has already explained, finding respondents for the interviews was challenging. Hence, there was a six years difference between the youngest and the oldest participants. This difference made the process of interviewing and data analyzing a bit more complicated. Since the interview questions and the way they were asked had to be adopted to the age of the interviewees in each of the interviews. For instance, the older the interviewee was, the more direct questions could be asked, and vice versa.

Winning the trust of the interviewees was yet another challenge of the study. It presented itself in two different dimensions. First, the interview questions and generally the subject of the study were sensible, deep, and not simply discussable. Second, the vulnerable position of the RASs may not have given them space for the free expression of their opinions. The risk of losing their refugee status or being deported could have prevented RASs to precisely describe the discrimination they have experienced in the host country (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001: 24).

Last but not least, an adult researcher observing children cannot remain unnoticed by them due to the age difference (Fine and Sandstorm 1988: 13).

This visibility can be more intense when the differences between the researcher and the researched group become more and more significant. Despite the fact that Iran and Afghanistan have a similar cultural background, the differences in age and ethnicity do not allow an adult Iranian researcher to completely realize the viewpoints of Afghan children. Consequently, there may be always a gap between the children's real perspectives and the perspective analyzed by an adult researcher of another ethnicity, which was one of the barriers of this study as well.

RESULTS

The four-month research and data analysis demonstrated how racism, sexism, and adultism have a direct and mostly negative effect on the Afghan girls' development, their future, and their current life status in Iran. Interviewees have shared various challenges and limitations that they have to confront as a result of the above-mentioned types of discrimination in their daily lives.

The study indicated that from the girls' perspective, the most observable and challenging form of discrimination was racism, i.e. the racist attitudes of Iranians toward them. They have impulsively shared their experiences of racism as an exasperating and inseparable phenomenon in all aspects of their lives. However, it seems that the experiences that the children shared did not cover all the forms of discrimination to the same extent, although they might have experienced them on the same level. For instance, despite the firm entrenchment of sexism and adultism in both the Afghan and Iranian societies, interviewees have cited these two forms of discrimination, and especially adultism, only in response to the interview questions and treated them as less discussable and important as racism.

The obvious finding from the interviews was that Afghan girls in Iran are facing multiple discrimination in both the public and the private sphere, which puts them in a more vulnerable position in comparison to the RAS boys.

Obviously, the vulnerable situation that the Afghan girls live in, is not only related to negative insights. Easier adaptability of the girls to difficult situations, their power of resilience, and also learning skills which help them survive the predicaments, might be considered positive aspects of their lives. However, it seems that the positive effects discriminatory practices have on them are not comparable with the negative ones both in terms of their scale and intensity.

Structure of the families

The most common family structure in the Islamic countries, such as Iran and Afghanistan, is based on a married couple and their children, in which the

husband is in charge of financial supplies and the wife is responsible for running the household. However, in the recent years and with the changes in the structure of the families and societies all over the world, Islamic societies have confronted some variations in their structures as well.

The family structure of the participants studied in this research also adhered to the above-mentioned modes of operation. The father and the boys were typically working and were responsible for earning the family income, while the girls and their mother stayed at home, sharing the house chores, and also supplementarily helped the male breadwinners by doing diverse jobs, such as embroidering or tailoring. However, in some of the observed households, girls were responsible for both the housekeeping and the breadwinning.

The interviewees' parents were all either completely illiterate or only with the ability to read and write. Hence, one of the common daily responsibilities of most of the interviewees was to help their younger siblings with their homework. The interviews and observations also showed that despite the high number of out-of-school children in the families and the illiteracy of the parents, most of the Afghan mothers and fathers were highly attentive to the education of their children.

The study also demonstrated that, in general, the marriage age in the Afghan culture is low, especially for the girls, who are in danger of child marriage. Two of the interviewees' mothers got married at the age of 9, and the rest between the ages of 16 and 19, while the marriage age of the interviewees' fathers varied between 19 and 48.

The child marriage of girls in the Afghan society and the considerable age differences between the parents may be two of the most significant reasons behind the intensity of the authority of men over women in Afghan families. The age differences do not let the women participate in decision-making on the same terms as men and most of the time women have no other alternative but being obedient.

The authority of men over women may be later translated to their children, i.e. when they are not asked about their point of view when important decisions are made within the family. The ignorance of the children's opinion and the father's authority at home have been mentioned in most of the interviews. In this regard, Yasaman said: "In our family my father makes nearly all the decisions. We go nowhere without the permission of my father". The full authority of the father in the Afghan families has a direct affect on the situation of the children and specially the girls at home and in the society.

Children's status in the families

Besides financial poverty, it seems that poor education of the Afghan households led to less care about children and their particular needs. The observations

demonstrated that the status of children in the Afghan families is subordinate to the other members. It seems that in some families children instead of having their particular needs, such as playing or formal education, satisfied are more of a labor force. Apparently, they are born in order to take some of the responsibility for the family off their parents by supplementing the household's income.

Half of the studied in this research, besides being in education, were working 8–10 hours a day as shoe makers, bag makers, or glass beads embroiderers. All of them said what their and the other family members' incomes are spent on household needs and that they themselves cannot enjoy the money they earn.

An unexpected outcome of this study was that in most of the observed and interviewed families those children who were illiterate or more likely pulled out of school were boys, since they were supposed to work and be the main breadwinner of the family. In this regard, Zahra stated: "My brother is 17 years old. He studied only through five grades and now he is working. My parents told him that now it's time for you to go to work and do something for your future. Therefore, he left school and started working".

Adultism

The first community and the first time in life when Afghan girls may sense the unequal power relations in the various social strata is usually through interactions with the parents or/and older siblings in their family. They soon notice that most of the time they play the subordinate role in the interactions they have with adults.

There exist numerous adultism attitudes, which have firmly entrenched in the Iranian and Afghan societies. The legality of these attitudes alongside with the significant position of adults in the conventional societies caused a misperception of "adultism" in public beliefs and defining it mostly as "respect". However, this respect is not reciprocal and it only addresses the child's obligation towards adults.

Even in the mass media and children's literature, the superiority of adults over children is obvious. In movies, a well-behaved child usually depicted as an obedient child who does not disagree with the parents' decisions and always respects them. Presenting and emphasizing the "respect for children" seems not to be vital in the media.

When the Afghan girls were asked if they were ever heard: "you have to do what I tell you" or "you should not speak, because you are only a child", they all answered positively and explained the situations they have experienced, which was very much expectable.

The unpredictable part of the study was the response of the Afghan girls to the next interview question, which was: "Have you ever wished to grow up sooner and be an adult?" All of them, except one, had never desired it and their

reasons were very much understandable. They believed once they become an adult, they need to overcome more difficulties. Shabaneh and her younger sister believed that as they grow up, they will need to spend more money on clothes and other life necessities, which they cannot afford. Sara, who was in her last years of childhood, said that although she has not had a proper childhood, she never wished to grow up, because the older she becomes, the more problems she has to handle. The only participant who responded positively to the question and wanted to grow up was Rahimeh. When she was asked to describe the advantages of being an adult and the difference between adulthood and childhood, she stated: "I would like to grow up soon and be an adult, so that I can work more and help my brother in generating household income".

Although all the interviewees have experienced features of adultism in their life, it seems that they did not consider it as a form of discrimination like racism. In this regard, John Bell argues: "Other "isms" like racism and sexism are well established and accepted as realities. [...] The concept of adultism, the systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people, is relatively new and has not been widely accepted as a reality" (1995: 2). Hence, adultism in the girls' perspectives was rather defined as a social norm and not a form of discrimination. This implies that children get used to being under the authority of their parents and their adultist attitudes. This is because most of the children in the society are in the same situation .

Girls in Afghan Societies

The study demonstrated that Afghan girls in Iran are usually discriminated both in their origin and immigration countries. As formerly discussed, girls and women in Islam are treated as the inferior sex and with a subordinate position in relation to males. This status has been clarified in one of the suras in the Qur'an, which states: "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. [...]" (Qur'an 4:34).

However, the roots of gender discrimination in Iran and Afghanistan are not limited to Islam. Many other factors such as cultural barriers have an effect on it. The interviews with the girls also demonstrated how significant is the role of the relatives and acquaintances in maintaining the gender-discriminatory customs. As explained before, in most of the observed Afghan families, girls have more opportunities to attend school than boys. However, due to the prejudgments of their acquaintances, this opportunity will be reduced by the time the girls get older and reach marriage age. All the participants in the focus group discussion agreed on the constraints and judgmental attitudes of the families toward older girls. Rahimeh precisely described the situation as follows:

“Our relatives and acquaintances are really bad. They gossip all the time about the others. They say, she is not a good girl; otherwise she wouldn’t go that far from home alone (the distance between school and home). Because of that, my father doesn’t like when we go to school. Now I’m 14 years old, but when I reach 17 like my sister, I won’t go to school anymore. My father doesn’t let her go. So she stays at home and does the chores”.

The intensity of gender discrimination of the older girls in Afghan families is obvious because of their puberty age and because they are seen as the “*izzat*” (honor) of the family. Meaning that, whatever they do, whatever they choose, and the way they decide to live is directly related to the families’ reputations. They can preserve the parents’ good names by being a good girl, which actually means an obedient girl, or disvalue them. As Rahimeh discussed, disvaluing the Afghan family’s honor may happen even with the girls go to school alone.

The interviews demonstrated that most of the Afghan girls are supposed to get married early, because of different factors such as the poor economic situation of the family, the Afghan conventionalism, illiteracy of parents, and/or, according to Sara, the religious beliefs of the parents, in which the later the daughters get married the greater the sin of their parents.

The above-mentioned restrictions and discrimination on the basis of gender in the Afghan society were obviously not the only reasons which caused the interviewees’ aversion to being a girl. Sara, who was particularly aware of sexism in her environment described her feelings in this way: “Being a boy was always one of my dreams. If I was a boy I would have more freedom, I could emigrate to another country and follow my dreams. Then my parents would not decide for every little thing in my life instead of me”. Except the lack of independence, which has been mentioned by Sara, her statement also demonstrates greater intensity of adultism against the Afghan girls when compared to the boys. As formerly described, the vulnerable position of girls in Afghan families and their role as “*izzat*” of the family provides a ground of adultist practices and enables pressure exerted by the parents, relatives, and even the older brothers.

However, it was not only Sara who was not satisfied with her gender; all the other girls except Rahimeh gave a positive response to the question “Have you ever wished to be a boy?”. When they were asked for a more precise description of the situation that they have experienced and which made them wish to be the other gender, Fariba stated: “Once I was playing football. My uncle got mad at me and told me you are a girl and you have to be careful what you do. He told a girl shouldn’t play football. But I like playing football”. Zahra, as well as Sara, referred to the gendered and stereotypical attitudes against girls present in public attitudes, and said: “I, sometimes, wish I was a boy. My mother made me do the

housework and tells me you should do this and that. She never tells such things to my brothers”.

On the one hand, it seems that the reinforcement of sexism by adultism has increased the probability of gender discrimination against the Afghan girls mostly in the private sphere and by their families and acquaintances, since all the sexist attitudes described by the girls referred to domestic discrimination. On the other hand, the discrimination they experienced on the grounds of their ethnicity and their RAS status usually occurred in the public spheres and in the Iranian society, which will be precisely described in the next section.

Living as an Afghan in Iran

The experiences of the Afghan RAS girls indicated their precarious living situation in Iran. As stated before, none of the interviewees, except Zahra, had Amayesh card, and hence there were living either illegally or on a temporary visa. For this reason, they were deprived of many of their human rights. Even those Afghan children, who were born in Iran and have lived there their whole life are not entitled to an Iranian identity card. The rule also applies to the children who are born from an Iranian mother and an Afghan father, since, as mentioned before, in the Iranian constitution children always receive the father's nationality.

Living as an Afghan child in Iran, with all the discriminatory regulation, usually leads to psychological pressure and hopelessness in children. According to Manfred Liebel, “the indeterminate residence status of child refugees puts them in an insecure and stressful life situation” (2007: 169, own translation³). In this regard, some of the interviewees expressed their anxiousness about their current and future life with sentences like “I’m not sure if I can attend school and study next year as well”, or “I would like to study and be a doctor in the future, but I don’t think that it’ll be possible”.

The right to a free and formal education is self-evidently one of the most important rights, which has been emphasized in the CRC, but which Afghan RAS girls in Iran are deprived of. In the recent years Iran's government has amended its regulations by introducing even more discriminatory measures such as increases school fees for the children, so that the Afghans would be forced to repatriate. Zahra, who has studied five years in public schools and she was now attending SPRC, explained the situation: “when I was studying in a public school, they (school principals) asked us to pay lots of money, only because we were Afghan. The other children didn't have to. I didn't like it there”. However, the rule does not apply to asylum-seekers who are not allowed to register in public schools due

³ “Entscheidend für die belastende Lebenssituation der Kinderflüchtlinge ist, dass ihr Aufenthaltsstatus fast immer ungesichert ist”.

to the lack of residence permits and, in most cases, also any identity documents, even if they pay the fee.

As described before, the legalized racism against the Afghan children has become more intense in the last two decades. It is also remarkable that the discrimination has intensified despite the fact that in 1994 Iran ratified the CRC which stresses the importance of protecting the rights of RAS children in Article 22.

Besides the legalized discrimination, the girls have frequently mentioned the violation of their right to dignity by the racist, discriminatory conduct of behavior of Iranians in public spheres. In the focus group discussion Mahnaz described a situation, in which she was treated discourteously by a baker who refused to sell her bread and strewed flour on her clothes. She asked the baker for the reason, and he responded “you are an Afghan and we do not sell breads to Afghans”.

Racist behavior, especially against the Afghans, in the society and among various social strata in Iran is so obvious that the word “Afghan” is frequently used by the Iranians as a swear word. When the interviewees were asked about a situation in which they were treated rudely due to their Afghan background, they all referred to a situation in which they were called Afghan (as a swear word), whenever someone recognized their background.

The interviews illustrated that Afghans are rather cautious in their contacts with neighbors due to their vulnerable status in Iran and in order to prevent impending problems. Despite all the cautiousness, some of the interviewees mentioned the disrespectful behaviors of their neighbors against them. Herein, Fariba explained the discrimination experienced by her brothers: “whenever my brothers go to play football in the alley the older boys from our neighborhood tell them they shouldn’t come here to play. Go to hell, you the Afghan. Don’t play here”.

Despite the wide discrimination, none of the interviewees was able to define the term “discrimination”, when they were asked to do so. The only girl who could define and describe it precisely was Sara, since she was older and more educated than the other interviewees. When she was asked if she had ever experienced any discriminatory situation she answered:

“Yes, I’ve always experienced discrimination in my family, because I’m a girl and because I’m an Afghan immigrant in Iran. I’ve got humiliated thousands of times due to my nationality since I was a child. Whenever I went out and they (the Iranians) recognized that I’m an Afghan, they humiliated me and addressed me “the Afghan”, as a swear word. At that time, I didn’t know what the difference is between being an Iranian and an Afghan; but I’ve always wished to be an Iranian”.

The described discrimination against Afghans in Iran relates to all the immigrants regardless of their age, gender, and residence status. Nevertheless, the scale of rights' violation of the Afghan children is the same as that of adults. This is because children usually do not have any access to legal authorities. There is an Iranian proverb that says, "the right is not something to be given, but it must be taken". However it seems that the rights of children and especially the RAS girls in Iran do not follow the same rule, since if the authorities do not recognize their rights, they have almost no opportunity to formally obtain them.

CONCLUSION

The study was designed to focus on the perspective of the Afghan girls in Iran about the multiple discrimination they face on the grounds of their gender, background, and age in their daily lives, and also to examine to what extent they are aware of the discriminatory practices in their environment. The main focus of the study was on the three forms of discrimination most often experienced by Afghan girls in Iran: racism, sexism, and adultism. In order to reach the objective of the study a qualitative research methodology was applied and six Afghan girls between the ages of 11 and 17 were interviewed individually to gain knowledge on their point of view regarding the above-mentioned forms of discrimination.

The results demonstrated that Afghan girls are intensely experiencing all of the mentioned forms of discrimination, although their outlooks on the different forms were not on the same level. From their perspective racism is the most exasperating and obvious form of discrimination they face, while adultism seems to be the most invisible form, both in the public opinion and in the girls' point of view.

The study also shed light on the reinforcement of adultism by sexism in the girls' lives; since, in the perspective of their parents and adult members of most of the Afghan and Iranian families, a girls' behavior is directly linked to the honor of their kin. As a result, the Afghan girls are more in danger of adultism in comparison to the boys. According to the majority of the interviewees the pressures and restrictions on them get even more intense once they grow older and reach the marriage age.

The confluence of sexism, racism, and adultism in one point in the Afghan girls' lives in Iran represents the existence of deeply entrenched hierarchy in the society. The first step in fighting against discrimination in Iran should be reforming the existing regulations in accordance with basic human rights. The legalization of sexism and adultism in both Iran and Afghanistan seems to make them invisible in the public view. People get used to legalized forms of

discrimination and define them as social norms. Consequently, children who are born in hierarchical societies with normalized forms of discrimination will most likely continue to act accordingly. However, reforming sexist and adultist regulations may not happen in the current situation of both countries, when most of those in power are men or women who defend the men's present rights (some of which are inappropriate) and ignore the rights of women.

The second step should be educating everybody on human rights, regardless of the social class they belong to. Since it is still common to see that even educated groups are widely presenting racist attitudes toward the Afghans in Iran and defending the existing hierarchy. Self-evidently, mass media play an important role in this regard.

Last but not least, all the groups which are discriminated against in a society should be identified and heard. Studies concerning the Afghan girls and other discriminated groups need to be developed further in order to enable recognizing the violations of their rights and their requirements and to give them a chance to develop through positive discrimination as it is in the case of other societies. By doing this all the discriminated-against and excluded groups of hierarchical societies may get the opportunity to rise, be included in social activities, enjoy their human rights, and reduce existing inequalities.

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