

The Islamic Republic of Iran and children's right to education: acceptability and adaptability

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.3930>

ISSN 2535-5406

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Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda, which contained 17 goals, one of which was Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). SDG4 was adopted to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UN, 2015b). Along with the Agenda, the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016) was designed as a roadmap to achieve this goal. The Agenda was adopted unanimously by all 193 UN member states, including the Islamic Republic of Iran (UN, 2015a). However, in 2016, when states were required to start implementation, controversies over the Agenda began to brew in Iran and among the country's authorities. These were triggered by an announcement made on a nationwide education initiative by the (UNESCO office in Iran (Tasnim News, 2017). Ultimately, the Supreme Leader of Iran weighed in on the matter, stating that:

the Islamic Republic of Iran will not submit to documents such as [Agenda] 2030 of UNESCO. Why should a so-called international body, which is undoubtedly under the influence of world powers, have the right to set tasks for the world's nations? It is principally wrong to sign a document and then come and execute it in silence. No! This is absolutely not allowed. (Tasnim News, 2017)

This paper focuses on the legal reasons why the Agenda was supposedly rejected and on educational-related principles in other core UN instruments that Iran has signed and ratified, and not as yet rejected. It will also examine how and whether these principles are applied as part of the 4 A Right to Education Framework (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 13-15) as outlined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This article will only focus on two of these rights: acceptability and adaptability of education. The first two rights, availability and accessibility, are discussed in a separate article (Moinipour, 2021). As that article illustrates, discussion of human rights education in Iran at this point is futile as the Islamic Republic has not as yet implemented it. Nevertheless, a discussion of the right to education is essential, as the right to education is a precursor to the implementation of human rights education (Moinipour 2021).

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The controversies that arose around the preparation of the 2030 National Education Document based on Agenda 2030 and commitment to UNESCO are founded on Articles 77, 125, 138, and 153 of the Iranian Constitution, according to Tasnim News, a semi-official Iranian news agency. Article 138 states that the Council of Ministers' decisions must not be contrary to the 'text and the spirit of the laws'. It is also stated in this Article that the 'regulations and protocols of the government, and the legislation of the commissions' must be communicated to the 'President of the Republic' (Islamic Republic of Iran [IRI], 1989). Iran's commitment to Agenda 2030, however, was supposedly not communicated. In addition, according to the news agency, the 2030 National Education Document contradicts Article 153, which states that '[a]ny form of agreement that would result in foreign domination over the natural and economic resources, foreign domination over culture, the army, and other affairs of the country, is forbidden'. Article 77 also states that the Islamic Consultative Assembly must ratify '[t]reaties, transactions, contracts, and all international agreements'. Lastly, Article 125 states that '[a]ll the treaties, transactions, agreements, and contracts between the government of Iran and other governments as well as all the pacts related to the international unions, after they are approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly, must be signed by the President of the Republic or his legal representative' (IRI, 1989). Members of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution also had issues with having to follow a UN document under the guidance and supervision of the UNESCO Office. That is because Iran's Supreme Leader ordered the Council to be the country's cultural 'command room', or the supreme cultural and scientific headquarters of the country's institutions (Tasnim News, 2017).

Despite strong opposition to Agenda 2030, the right of children to education, the state's obligation to secure it, and the need for a remedy to allow for the right to exist in the first place are all defined elsewhere in international human rights law. The ICESCR is one of the core instruments by which the legal right to education is established. Even though this treaty was signed and ratified prior to the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran inherited it without opposition and, as such, is legally committed to it (Moinipour, 2018). Under Article 9 of the Iranian Civil Code, the Islamic Republic is liable for its international obligations. Article 9 of the Civil Code states: '[t]reaty stipulations which have been, in accordance with the Constitutional Law, concluded between the Iranian Government and other government [sic], shall have the force of law' (IRI, 1935). This means that the

provisions of these instruments are part of the ordinary Iranian legal system, among other laws. This is recognised by Iranian researchers such as Katouzyan and Rahimi (2003, p.189), and Ghodratollah (2013). Consequently, the Islamic Republic of Iran is obligated to implement the 4A Right to Education Framework, making education available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 13-15).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

In 1991 and 1994 respectively, the Islamic Republic signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), not because it suddenly had an epiphany about children's right to education but because 'it was under pressure at the time due to its human rights practices' (Heyns & Viljoen, 2001, p. 492). Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC are dedicated to the child's right to education. According to Article 28, following ratification, Iran agreed to recognise 'the right of the child to education ... with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity'. Article 29 is particularly relevant to the acceptability and adaptability of education. It requires states to direct the education of children to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment. (UN, 1989a)

The agreement to commit to the above, however, became conditional immediately upon the Islamic Republic's reservation regarding the 'articles and provisions which may be contrary to the Islamic Shariah'. By doing so, the Islamic Republic relieved itself of its duty to implement them fully. In addition, upon ratification the Islamic Republic of Iran reserved 'the right not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws and the international legislation in effect' (Moinipour, 2018; UN, 1989b). As long as this reservation is in place, enforcement of CRC will prove complicated. However, this does not mean that the Islamic Republic is not still obligated to respect the right of children to education and to implement the 4A Right to Education Framework, based on its commitments in the ICESCR.

The former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Katarina Tomaševski, emphasised that if providing an education based on the 4A Right to Education Framework were not treated as a legal obligation of the state, education could be:

delivered by religious institutions, with an implicit (or explicit) purpose of proselytizing; it can be perceived as a gift by a country's political leaders or

aid donors. Such models do not make education sustainable (proselytizing is often resisted, a gift can always be taken away) while beneficiaries are not treated as subjects of rights but rather as objects of charity, aid or political patronage. (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 15)

The above analysis is important as we delve into the educational system of one of the most religion-centred states in the world, and its theocratic, authoritarian political system. Once the implementation of Agenda 2030 was halted in 2017, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution considered implementing its own Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) instead. This was drafted in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Supreme Council of Education and adopted in 2011 during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The first goal in this document emphasises the concern n Tomaševski is making. In reforming education, this goal emphasises ‘fostering monotheist individuals ... in compliance with the Islamic norm system’. The goal, according to this document, is not just limited to Iranian citizens. The Islamic Republic intends to create an educational system ‘capable of materializing ... the ideal Islamic life, universal Justice and Islamic-Iranian civilization’, which will lead to the ‘realization of a global reign for perfect mankind’ (IRI, 2011). This, plus the emphasis on ‘loyalty to the Islamic Republic of Iran’s ruling system’, as enshrined in Goal 2 of this document, instils doubt as to how the principles of the ICESCR might be implemented or further compromised once these goals are achieved. As Tristan McCowan states, ‘rights-respecting environments are important sites of learning’, and the intentions and objectives of the state in achieving this are equally important; otherwise, the ‘goals in question are irrelevant or inimical to the enhancement of rights’ (McCowan, 2012, p. 67). Based on this, creating such environments is essential for every child, not only for those who conform to the Islamic Republic’s theological agenda.

Although the CRC is a treaty exclusively dedicated to children's rights, the ICESCR still ‘provides the most comprehensive protections of the right’ to education (Kalantry, Getgen, & Koh, 2010, p. 261). Articles 13 and 14 of the ICESCR are dedicated to the right to education and lay out, among other things, the principles of the acceptability and adaptability of education, both of which are discussed below. It is worth keeping in mind that states are obligated to progressively realise most of the principles enshrined in the ICESCR. However, certain aspects of these principles, such as the non-discriminatory implementation of rights (to the extent restored by the state), must be immediately adhered to upon acceptance of the treaty. What states cannot do is to ‘deliberately halt progress or regress’ (Kalantry et al., 2010, p. 257).

The next two sections examine the acceptability and adaptability of education in Iran in accordance with the ICESCR to determine how and to what extent children's right to education is being affected by the state’s policies and its resistance to meeting its international obligations.

Acceptability

Based on the principle of human dignity, acceptability of education, ‘addresses the form and substance of the education with regards to both quality and appropriateness’ and lays out the responsibilities of the state in ensuring that ‘schools have certain minimum standards for teachers, students, building facilities and curricula’ (Kalantry et al., 2010, p. 278)

Article 13(2)(e) of ICESCR specifically addresses questions of acceptability. It states that: '[t]he development of a system of schools at all levels shall be actively pursued, an adequate fellowship system shall be established, and the material conditions of teaching staff shall be continuously improved' (United Nations, 1966). The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), a treaty body that monitors and evaluates the compliance of States Parties with the ICESCR, has elaborated on the acceptability of education in its General Comment No. 13 (1999). This will be further discussed below.

Adequate fellowship system

According to Article 13 (2)(e) of the ICESCR (UN, 1966) and the Committee's clarification of this law (CESCR, 1999), the state is obliged to have a 'developmental strategy for its school system'. This includes all levels of schooling, and must be prioritised by the state. The state is also required to establish 'an adequate fellowship system', which the Committee interprets to mean that the provisions of the Covenant's non-discrimination and equality must be taken into consideration. This also means that the fellowship system 'should enhance equality of educational access for individuals from disadvantaged groups' (CESCR, 1999, para. 26).

Article 19 of the Iranian Constitution states that '[t]he people of Iran enjoy equal rights, regardless of the tribe or ethnic group to which they belong. Colour, race, language, and other such considerations shall not be grounds for special privileges' (IRI, 1989). However, there is discrimination against refugees, particularly Afghan children, girls, disabled children, and children belonging to minority ethnic communities. Children belonging to religious minorities, particularly to religions not recognised in the Constitution, such as the Bahá'í faith, face particular discrimination. One reason may be that 'religion' is not explicitly mentioned in the above Article, making this law open to abuse. In addition, Article 20 of the Constitution states, '[m]embers of the nation, whether man or woman, are equally protected by the law. They enjoy all the human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that are in compliance with the Islamic criteria' (IRI, 1989). While this Article states that women and men are equal before the law, the 'Islamic criteria' make this law, in essence, deeply discriminatory towards girls and women; so much so that it prioritises boys over girls when it comes to education. In addition, it considers girls to be mature at the age of nine, allowing them to be married off or pulled out of school and normalised as second-class citizens.

Material conditions of teaching staff

According to Article 13 (2)(e) of ICESCR, the material conditions of teaching staff are also important, not only in realising students' right to education but also in allowing teachers to teach in accordance with the 'norms and standards of quality education'(UN, 1966). The quality of education is inevitably undermined if teachers are 'underpaid, overworked, and work under difficult conditions' (UNESCO, 2019b, p. 113). Under the law, the state is obliged to continuously improve the working conditions of teachers in order to fully realise the right to education. Therefore, the right to education and the rights of teachers are intertwined. Article 2(2) obliges States Parties to 'guarantee that teachers are free from discrimination'. According to Article 3, 'both male and female teachers have equal economic and social rights'. Based on Article 6, teachers have 'the right to work', as well as 'the right to favourable

conditions of work' (Article 7), and 'the right to form and join trade unions' (Article 8) (CESCR, 1999, para. 27; UN, 1966; UNESCO, 2019b, p. 113).

As teachers are at the forefront of delivering the curriculum and have the task of imparting the aims of education, their role in the 'educational process' is essential and of particular importance (UNESCO, 2019b, p. 112). In this regard, the Committee on the Rights of the Child states that 'efforts to promote the enjoyment of other rights must not be undermined, and should be reinforced, by the values imparted in the educational process. This includes the content of the curriculum and the educational processes, the pedagogical methods, and the environment within which education takes place' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, para. 8).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child further stipulates that it is 'important that the teaching methods used in schools reflect the spirit and educational philosophy of the CRC and the aims of education laid down in article 29 (1)' (2001, para. 18). It is, therefore, paramount for the Islamic Republic to withdraw its reservation to the CRC for there to be any hope of realising the right to education in accordance with international human rights law. Teaching methods should also be 'tailored to the different needs of different children' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, para. 9). Academic qualifications and training are needed for teachers to be able to 'deliver quality education' (UNESCO, 1960, Article IV (d)).

In Iran, the educational system is centralised, and the Ministry of Education is responsible for training teachers. There are Teacher Training Centres, which train teachers for primary (ages 6-11), guidance cycle (Middle School, grades 6th to 8th), and gifted children's schools' (Arani, Kakia, & Karimi, 2012, p. 2). Individuals are able to obtain an associate degree from these centres once they complete a two-year programme. The only prerequisite for entry into such a programme is a high school diploma and a pass in the national entrance exam. Training for teachers at the high school level (grades 9-12), which is not mandatory, is somewhat different. According to an article published by three authors, two of whom are employees of the Ministry of Education, in order to teach in a high school, theoretically a 'bachelor's degree is required'. However, because there are not enough teachers in Iran, 'schools have been compelled to use teaching staff with other educational backgrounds' (Arani et al., 2012).

Even though there are not enough teachers, as a result of Iran's post-desecularisation programme and the Ministry's recruitment policies (IRNA, 2020), the only teachers allowed to stay on and continue to be employed are those who understand 'the true meaning of Islam' (Arani et al., 2012, p. 6). This is regardless of how good or bad they are as teachers. That is why many qualified teachers may be left out of the equation altogether. The state's concern seems not to be the teachers' commitment to the right of children to education and whether they can deliver quality education. It is rather the teachers' loyalty to the state, their willingness to 'follow a curriculum as outlined by the Ministry of Education' and ultimately proselytisation. Teachers are 'expected to cover the content entirely without any opportunity to deviate from the approved curriculum' (Arani et al., 2012, p. 6). This rigidity does not allow the needs of different children to be met, as required by the CRC. Marginalised and minority groups such as disabled children and children belonging to ethnic and religious minorities suffer the most as a result.

The Ministry also fails to compensate properly its teachers. They are paid below the poverty line, which is 10 million tomans [2,375 USD] for a family of four (The World of Economics, 2020), and, as a result, have to hold second and third jobs.

The situation is even worse for ‘unofficial’ teachers (Eghtesad Online, 2020). Even though teachers are struggling to make ends meet, the Ministry also fails to ensure they are paid on time. Delays in payments for as long as five months (Tabnak, 2020), which have led to strikes and imprisonment of union leaders, show the state’s failure to improve the material conditions of its teaching staff. Consequently, the right of children to an acceptable education is compromised.

Curricula and pedagogy

Educational acceptability also alludes to the quality of educational form and substance. This quality, and particularly curricula and pedagogy, determines how meaningful education is to every single child, the community he or she belongs to, and to the whole society (Kalantry et al., 2010, p. 278). Curricula and pedagogy must be appropriate and of high quality. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of the Islamic Republic as a state party to ‘regulate the education sector – both public and private – to ensure that establishments at all levels and of all types meet the minimum standards as set out by the state’. The law also requires education to be ‘relevant and culturally appropriate’ to the students. Acceptability of education, however, goes beyond children, even though they remain the main beneficiaries. Acceptability of education is extended to parents, who should have freedom both in terms of religious education and the language of choice (UNESCO, 2019b, p. 77).

Language of choice

For education to be acceptable, the language of instruction needs to be taken into consideration. Language barriers, particularly those faced by children belonging to indigenous and minority groups and disabled children, as well as by teachers, could also affect educational accessibility and acceptability (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 12). Though the issue of official language(s) of instruction is still debated, states are obliged to respect the right of minorities to set up their own schools with instruction in minority languages (Tomaševski, 2001, pp. 29-30). There are numerous ethnic groups in Iran, and many children are not exposed to any other language except their mother tongue until they go to school. They often face difficulty once they begin education, since they are abruptly placed in an unfamiliar and somewhat hostile environment. These children are not permitted to speak their own languages even amongst themselves, and they may be punished for doing so. In addition to what could perhaps be called a culture shock, they are often humiliated for not knowing Farsi or for speaking it with an accent (Unrepresented Nations Peoples Organization [UNPO], 2018).

Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution states that while ‘Persian is the official and common language and script of the people of Iran’, the ‘use of regional and ethnic languages in ... the teaching of their literature at schools, alongside the Persian language, is freely permitted’ (IRI, 1989). However, according to various human rights organisations there are ‘strict limits on the usage of... minority languages in Iranian schools’. So much so that there is a ‘relatively low academic performance and high dropout rates of ethnic minority students compared to Persian students’ (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, Centre for Supporters of Human Rights & Minority Rights Group International [CCCR, CSHR, & MRGI], 2018, p. 24). There is a diverse group of minorities who speak languages other than Persian (Farsi): these include ‘Azeri, Kurdish, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Luri, Arabic, Balochi, and Turkmen; smaller languages such as, Qashqai, Taleshi, Baadi, and numerous other local

languages' (Moradi, 2020, p. 1171). There are also different dialects and offshoots of various languages. What the state has been aiming to do over the years is to create a homogenised nation-state, and to do this, it has 'deployed various mechanisms such as standardised universal education in Persian, monopolizing the media, and demographic change through internal migration' (Moradi, 2020, p. 1171). This illustrates that the state's efforts are not as geared towards the fulfilment of their legal obligations as they make them out to be. On the contrary, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been pushing its religious-political agenda, and continues to do so.

Parental beliefs and convictions

According to international human rights standards, parents should also be free to 'send their children to schools that conform to their religious, moral, or philosophical beliefs' (UNESCO, 2019b, p. 77). Under Article 13(3) of the ICESCR, the state should respect the rights of parents to establish schools 'to ensure the religious and moral education of their children is in conformity with their own convictions'. In this regard, the state has a negative obligation, which means that it should 'follow a policy of non-interference in private matters' (Coomans, 2004, p. 65). According to the Committee, official schools are also required to teach the 'general history of religions and ethics' only if this is taught objectively and without bias and if the freedoms of opinion, conscience, and expression are respected. The Committee also makes it clear that instruction in a specific religion or belief is in conflict with Article 13(3) unless 'provision is made for non-discriminatory exceptions or alternatives that would accommodate the wishes of parents and guardians' (CESCR, 1999, para. 28; Veriava & Paterson, 2020, pp. 130-131).

In 2006, Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, stated that there is a need for 'evolution and reorientation of education', in yet another call for the renewal of the importance of Islamic teachings in the educational system. The evolution and reorientation that he referred to was not meant to ensure that Article 13(3) of the ICESCR was respected. It was rather to ensure that a 'philosophy of Islamic education' was clearly defined. The creation of the FRDE was a response to the Supreme Leader's statements. The controversies surrounding the 2030 Agenda brought about a reconsideration of the FRDE, a document which bases education on the 'Islamic norm system' in order to prepare children to achieve the stages of *Hayate Tayyebah* [the ideal Islamic life] (IRI, 2011, p. 10).

Even though the branch of Islam is not specified in this document, Iran has a Shi'a Muslim majority. Therefore, the 'Islamic norm system' is based on Shi'a Islam. Thus, the proposed 'evolution and reorientation' continues to disregard the country's estimated 5-10 per cent of Sunni Muslims (out of the estimated 99.4 per cent of the Muslim population). Another branch of Islam, Sufism, also exists, with an unofficially estimated several million adherents. Besides Muslims, there are other religious minority and belief groups in Iran such as Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Their children are forced to receive instruction based on a specific religion without 'non-discriminatory exceptions or alternatives that would accommodate the wishes of parents and guardians'. Even though a few of these minority religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, are recognised in the Iranian Constitution as being legally permitted to establish their own schools based on their beliefs, all minority groups' rights are violated in one way or another and to varying degrees.

The severest violations are reserved for the followers of those religions not recognised in the Constitution, such as the Bahá'í.

Parents and guardians who belong to non-recognised religions are not just prevented from exercising their right to establish schools 'to ensure the religious and moral education of their children is in conformity with their own convictions'. Historical negationism is also used to incite hatred against particular religious minority groups, and to ensure the Islamic Republic remains legitimate and relevant. One example is the state's decades-long dealings with the Bahá'í community, which is the largest non-Muslim religious minority group in Iran. In 2008, all primary school children in one Iranian city received a 'gift' on their last day at school. The 'gift' was a 12-page colour booklet that 'provided an erroneous and misleading life story of the Báb', the forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í faith, and an important and holy figure for Bahá'ís. In this booklet, the Báb was 'presented in a mocking and degrading manner' (Bahá'í International Community [BIC], 2008, p. 20).

Pedagogical approaches

For education to be acceptable, pedagogical approaches—both subject matter and teaching methods—should be non-discriminatory. The curricula should 'incorporate content appropriate to the students' cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds'. This must be of good quality and relevant to students and parents (Kalantry et al., 2010, p. 278). Both content and teaching methods should be subject to the objectives of Article 13(1) of the ICESCR, upon which the Islamic Republic has agreed to direct education to 'the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity' and to 'strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms' (UN, 1966). Besides ensuring that pedagogical approaches meet Article 13(1)'s objectives, the Committee clarifies that states are required to 'establish and maintain a transparent and effective system which monitors whether or not education is, in fact, directed to educational objectives set out in Article 13(1)' (CESCR, 1999, para. 49; Kalantry et al., 2010, p. 278).

Curricula

The issue in the Islamic Republic is not only what is in the curricula but also what is not. Censorship of textbooks, though not often exposed as a human rights violation, does count as censorship, which is a type of violation. Besides affecting the acceptability of education, this type of violation also affects accessibility (Tomaševski, 2001, pp. 13-15).

In 2008, a study of 95 compulsory textbooks at all levels, including the five-year compulsory elementary school, the three-year middle school, and the first three years of high school, was carried out (Paivandi, 2008). Unsurprisingly, the study found that the textbooks are heavily censored, and this censorship is particularly due to the 'Islamization of the schools' (Paivandi, 2012, p. 87). Everything taught in the textbooks—every viewpoint, every phenomenon, every event—is based on the Shi'ite perspective. According to Saeed Paivandi:

Islam appears as a full-fledged universal social and spiritual discourse which is not time- or place-specific and which has eternal credibility. The education system seems to seek a form of "divine" and "sacred" legitimacy about the essence of its discourse. The direct consequence of this orientation is the dominant presence of religious themes in textbooks. (Paivandi, 2012, p. 87)

Religious education (RE) textbooks are impregnated with subject matter on everything surrounding Islam, such as its history, historical and contemporary figures, principles, and practices, while only briefly mentioning other constitutionally recognised religions. However, other textbooks such as ‘social studies, history, Persian language, and science’, where one would not expect religion to be mentioned, are also filled with discussion of ‘religious, Islamic, and political issues either directly, by insinuation, or by using metaphors’ (Paivandi, 2013, p. 87). In RE textbooks, any non-discriminatory mention of other religions not recognised in the Constitution is intentionally left out. While children from the three religious minorities groups recognised in the Constitution, namely Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews, receive religious education relevant to their beliefs, all children, including those from both recognised and not formally recognised religious groups and those who are non-believers, are forced to learn ‘topics in non-religious textbooks that do not correspond to their beliefs’ (Paivandi, 2012, p. 91).

Besides the disproportionate focus on Islam in RE books and its unnecessary incorporation into other textbooks, the fact that the state’s form of Islam is at present based on Shia tradition has created a large divide between girls and boys (Paivandi, 2012, pp. 88-89). Not only are schoolchildren sexually segregated, but curricula are also heavily focused on men, hence institutionalising the inequality that is the basis of the patriarchy that exists in Iran.

Women are presented as being less important than men, and the way in which they are depicted is also age-discriminatory. Women are shown alongside men only in ‘images of family, social, and religious issues’ and alone only in ‘connection with the subjects of family, education, daily life, and pastimes’. Women are only present in seven per cent of images related to work and the professions (Paivandi, 2012, p. 89). This serious under-representation of women in the work/professional world is reflected in clear terms. For example, in a Grade 4 social studies textbook, it is stated that ‘usually, the father works outside the home. He has the duty to provide food, clothing, and other necessities for his wife and children. In some families, the mother works outside the home, as well’ (Paivandi, 2012, p. 89). There is next to no mention of important female personalities in cultural, scientific, political, social, and religious fields (Paivandi, 2012, p. 89).

This is in clear violation of international human rights law that guarantees non-discrimination in educational quality. In addition, based on the 4-A Right to Education Framework, material should not be censored and must ‘reflect a wide range of ideas and beliefs’. In order for education to be acceptable, international human rights law also requires that no student be expected to ‘conform to specific religious or ideological views’ (Osler, 2016, p. 20). Based on state policies, this is exactly what the Islamic Republic of Iran intends to do. It wants to ensure curricula are such that every single individual conforms to the Islamic norm system of Shi’ism, as interpreted by the Islamic Republic.

Teaching methods

Besides the curricula, discriminatory stereotypes of girls and boys also invite discriminatory teaching methods. In girls’ schools, the focus is more on the teaching of arts and humanities, due to the belief that girls have different physical and cognitive abilities and are usually assumed to be weaker than boys. On the other hand, the focus for boys is more on science, technology, engineering, maths and

sports (UNESCO, 2019b, pp. 88-89). In order to have any hope and opportunity for the rectification of this gap, and to give all children access to quality education, the Islamic Republic needs to sign and ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as a first step. Article 10 of CEDAW, in particular, 'sets forth the normative content in relation to the elimination of discrimination against women and ensuring equal rights with men in the field of education' (UNESCO, 2019b, p. 88).

Teaching methods should also be appropriate for children and their unique needs (UNESCO, 2019b, p. 115), while respecting the child's dignity. This includes the elimination of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is inconsistent with Article 13(1) of the ICESR, which obliges the state to ensure the right to dignity of the human personality of children under its jurisdiction are safeguarded. Public humiliation is yet another form of discipline which negatively affects human dignity. International law requires states to introduce positive and 'non-violent approaches to school discipline' instead (CESCR, 1999, para. 41).

Therefore, in order for education to be acceptable, corporal punishment, a normal disciplinary measure in Iran, must be prohibited. International human rights law states that disciplinary measures must respect the dignity of the child (Osler, 2016, p. 20). It is quite common for staff at Iranian schools to be unjust and aggressive towards students if they are found to be violating rules or misbehaving (Hedayati, Kuusisto, Gholami, & Tirri, 2019, p. 472). In a recent study, students complained of punishments, mainly physical, that were inflicted arbitrarily, or punishments that were inflicted on the whole class because of one student. Insulting students is another form of punishment used as a supposed 'effective means of discipline'. Punishments are usually imposed when a student violates the 'rules, values, and duties' of the school. These rigid expectations, particularly those concerning values, may be in conflict with the students' own values and beliefs. All students are put under pressure, in an effort to deliver 'true believers' to the society and to convert non-Muslims to Islam. Students are forced to attend Friday prayers at school, recite and memorise the Quran and wear proper and 'dignified' uniforms with dull colours such as grey or black. The girls are constantly under pressure to cover their heads and bodies. Even their wimples must be a certain length. Students are punished if they deviate from these rules, values, and duties.

All students are in the same educational system, one that uses punishment in general as a disciplinary measure by way of which their dignity is violated. However, some groups are particularly targeted, such as disabled children, refugee children, and children belonging to minority groups. These children are subjected to targeted harassment. In various instances, school authorities and teachers encourage Muslim students to physically hurt children belonging to religious minority groups. The school authorities also segregate these children from others in the classroom (BIC, 2019).

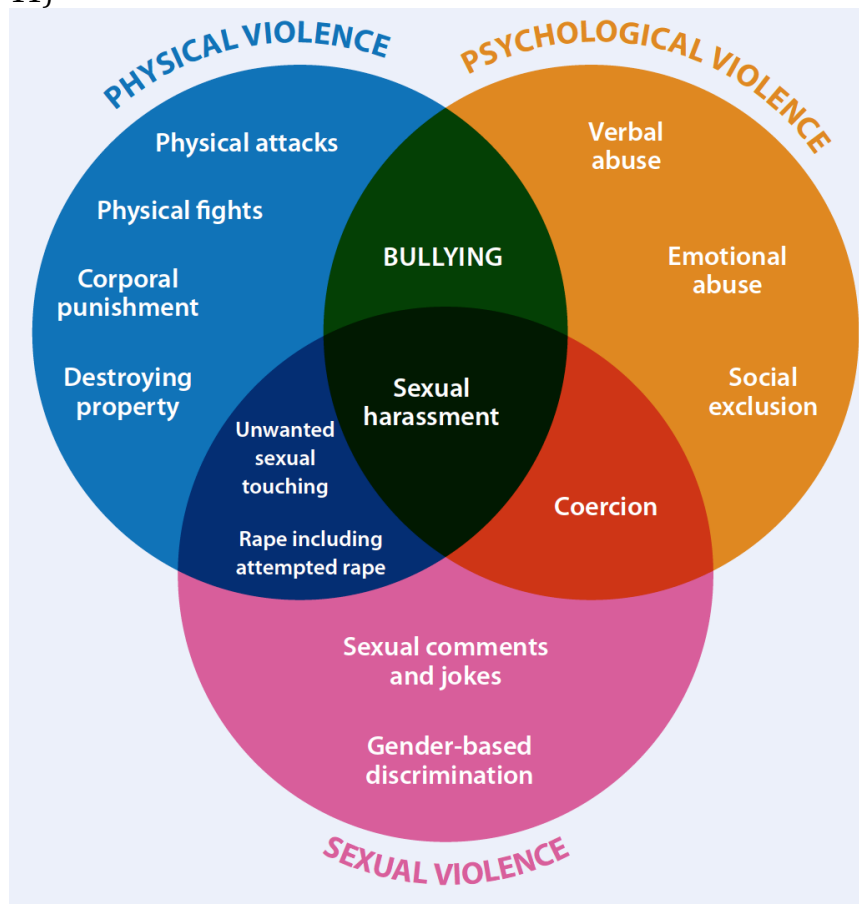
Physical and mental punishment and abuse by teachers and school authorities, and encouraging children to hurt each other are also in violation of Article 29 of the CRC. Iran signed the CRC in 1991 and ratified it in 1994. However, on signature, it made a reservation 'to the articles and provisions which may be contrary to the Islamic Shariah, and preserve[d] the right to make such particular declaration, upon its ratification'. Upon ratification, the government reserved 'the right not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws' (UN, 1989). Article 29.1b and 1d requires States Parties to

empower children through education to develop ‘respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations’ and to prepare them for a ‘responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin’. The role of education should be to prevent violence, not encourage it (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 31).

The Islamic Republic has recently taken some steps towards the prohibition of corporal punishment. On 2 June 2020, a bill consisting of 51 articles was approved by the Guardian Council to ‘protect children and adolescents’. Article 9 of this Bill (The Child and Adolescent Protection Bill) states that anyone responsible for bodily harm, sexual harassment, disability or death of a child due to negligence will be punished. However, this Bill is mainly directed at the child's guardians, and is not very specific about child protection at school. The reason why the bill is so specific about children's guardians, and the reason why it was approved in June 2020, after being previously rejected on many occasions, is thought to be the death of a 14-year-old girl by the name of Romina Ashrafi. She was beheaded by her own father, Reza Ashrafi, in May 2020, for eloping with her boyfriend, an adult man. Following the elopement, Romina was returned to her family by the police, in spite of fears that she would be subjected to violence (Rothwell & Vahdat, 2020).

The child protection Bill does not cover all aspects of violence that affect a child's dignity in the educational environment. In order for the Islamic Republic of Iran to uphold its obligation to make education acceptable, it must protect the dignity of all children against physical, psychological, and sexual violence from authorities, families and other children. As is shown in the UNESCO illustration (Figure 1), there is more to violence than corporal punishment, and most violence does not necessarily cause children to leave education since violence is encouraged and has become the norm in Iranian schools. Causing a child to leave education is punishable, as per Article 8 of the Bill. This article explains the punishment for anyone who threatens, persuades, or encourages a child or adolescent to run away from home or school or drop out of school. However, this Bill does not protect children from other serious threats such as ‘child marriage and imposition of the death penalty’, threats that could affect girls as young as nine and boys as young as 15. In addition, not all forms of female genital mutilation are prohibited nationwide (Human Rights Watch, [HRW], 2020) and there is no mention of circumcision, the genital mutilation of boys and a prevalent form of physical harm towards children. Studies show that circumcision during infancy can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anger, and intimacy problems later on in life (Boyle, Goldman, Svoboda, & Fernandez, 2002; Goldman, 1999; Hammond, 1999). Some or all of these symptoms may well affect these children's learning. This suggests that the state's responsibility to implement the 4-A Right to Education Framework requires more than just a one-directional focus on education. It must be holistic and should take into account all other aspects of an individual's life.

Figure 1 - Conceptual framework of school violence and bullying (UNESCO, 2019a, p. 11)



Adaptability

What states are expected to do in terms of adaptability of education is to consider the best interests of the child and ensure that schools adapt to children, keeping their viewpoints in mind when reviewing 'contents and process of learning', and not the other way around. In the states whose governments have failed or made no attempt to enforce the concept of adaptability as expressed in international human rights law, children are forced to adapt to whatever educational system is available, and those who do not fit or cannot adapt are rejected (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 15 & 31). Under international human rights law, 'education has to be flexible, so that it can be adapted to the needs of changing societies and communities, and to respond to the needs of students within their specific social and cultural context' (Coomans, 2004, p. 68).

Flexible education

In order for education to be adaptable, flexibility is required. According to international human rights law, not only the state but also its schools and those working in them should take into account the background of every child. They should consider whether a child belongs to a minority or indigenous group, as well as children's varying capabilities (Veriava & Paterson, 2020, p. 133).

This consideration should particularly extend to those children who, for one reason or another, cannot attend school: it is their education that is important, not their physical presence in the school building. As such, minors in detention, working children, and refugee children must all be educated, and the state must take education to them (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 15). This does not justify the existence of child labour, disregard for refugee children, or setting young offenders on a path to a worse life. Ultimately, child labour must be completely abolished. Refugee children must be respected, protected and their rights as children fulfilled.

Young offenders must be set on a path to a better life. Children's violation of the law must not result in the loss of their rights — quite the opposite. Human rights conventions 'recognise the particular vulnerability of their situation, by affording them an additional set of protections'. Therefore, under international human rights law, child offenders must maintain their rights to 'education, health, protection from violence, family life'. The CRC is also explicit about how the judicial system must focus on the child's 'rehabilitation and social reintegration and that the child's best interests should be a primary consideration in all decisions affecting them' (Children's Rights Alliance England (CRAE), 2013, p. 1). This is only possible through education, which, besides assisting them with their rehabilitation and reintegration, will contribute to their health and 'purposeful development' (Ibid, p. 12).

Needs

According to international human rights law, education should also adapt to children's needs. The needs of refugee children are one such example. For a long time, refugee children, particularly Afghans, were denied access to education. It was not until 2015 that the current Supreme Leader allowed Afghan children to have access to education 'regardless of their residency status' (Moinipour, 2018, p. 7), as if the right to education of children is something to be 'bestowed'. Even with the Supreme Leader's 2015 order, the Afghan children are still deprived of education, as they are affected by other things, such as war. Although there is no war in Iran per se, these children are recruited to fight in Syria, in Iran's proxy conflict. The 2015 order from Khamenei, which did not materialise due to other obstacles, along with the state's general treatment of refugees, shows a complete lack of concern for their well-being. In fact, the government 'proposed offering incentives such as a path to citizenship for families of foreign fighters who die, become injured, or are taken captive during "military missions"' (HRW, 2017). If the right of children to education is not respected, their other rights are consequentially violated, as the Committee makes quite clear. It states that education is 'both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights' (CESCR, 1999, para. 1).

It is not only Afghan children, particularly boys, who are affected by war. Many Iranian children died in the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war, and to this day war is glorified in schools. One textbook tells the story of a 14-year old child by the name of Hossein Fahmideh who blew himself up to stop an Iraqi tank during the war, and schoolchildren are taught about his 'sacrifice' and 'true faith'. He is remembered as a hero. During the war, even the bodies of children who were 'martyred' were showcased in schools, particularly in boys' schools. This narrative, of course, feeds into the state's ideological agenda and appears to be preferable to educating for peace.

Another example of adaptability to the needs of the child is the case of disabled children. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

was acceded by Iran in 2009. However, upon accession, Iran declared ‘... that it does not consider itself bound by any provisions of the Convention, which may be incompatible with its applicable rules’ Although by entering this reservation to the treaty Iran made its commitment to the Convention conditional, Article 24(1) does require States Parties to:

recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity’, State Parties must ensure ‘an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to (a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity; (b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents, and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; (c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society’. (UN, 2006)

While the Iranian government has taken steps to improve access of children with disabilities to education by allocating a larger budget for their schooling and ensuring accessibility to renovated and newly-built schools, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) investigation shows that significant barriers still exist. HRW’s investigation found that ‘girls with disabilities, children with intellectual disabilities and autism, and children in remote or rural areas’ are at a higher risk of being excluded from accessing the educational system. HRW identified stigma and parents’ unfamiliarity with the right to education to be two obstacles. Fear of social judgment, social pressure in attributing the child’s disability to parents’ sins or genetic defects, and bullying of the disabled child and his or her sibling(s) in school are other obstacles identified by HRW. Another barrier that stands in the way of children with disabilities to gain equal and inclusive access to quality education is the ‘mandatory medical assessment for school enrolment that all Iranian children must undergo’ (HRW, 2019). According to the HRW report:

The assessment determines whether children are “educable” based on an IQ (intelligence quotient) test, and whether they are allowed to enroll in a mainstream school, or if they must go to a special school. Children with an IQ below 70 are considered to have intellectual disabilities. Those with an IQ between 50 to 70 are deemed “educable” and must enroll in special schools; children with an IQ under 50 are considered “uneducable” and cannot attend any school. (HRW, 2019)

No effort is made to help these children learn. Instead, they are prevented from learning. This violates Article 24(2) of CRPD, where States Parties are required to ensure that (a) disabled persons are not ‘excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability...’. Even though Iran has made a declaration regarding this treaty, which exclusively concerns persons with disabilities, the state has fully and unreservedly committed itself to the ICESCR. The right to education has been recognised as a human right. This right must be respected, not only for a fraction of society but also for every person, and including those with disabilities (Article 13.1).

Whether certain individuals or phenomena are present or absent in the educational system influences how children see and understand the world and the community they live in (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 31). A lack of adaptability to the needs of disabled children, the denial of access to those deemed ‘uneducable’ and the absence of children with disabilities or the concept of disability from textbooks shape how disabled people are socially perceived. In Iran, this amounts to being ‘non-existent’. Instead, on the very first few pages of every single textbook there is a full-page picture of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the first Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, usually with one of his quotations. Much attention is given to his life, rather than the lives of children. This is supposedly done to create a dependency of children on this ‘fatherly figure’ and ensure they internalise the hierarchy, which feeds into the state’s agenda.

Conclusion

Under international human rights law, the Islamic Republic of Iran is obliged to make education acceptable and adaptable. The state’s obligation towards the right of children to education goes beyond simply providing physical spaces called schools. The state must also make education acceptable by providing quality education, devoid of any discrimination and censorship. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not only failing to adhere to these obligations; it is forcing all children to conform to Shia Islam, in conjunction with the state’s political ideology. Even those whose beliefs are in conflict with this religious and ideological view are forced to conform to it, and this is in violation of international human rights law.

The glorification of war, along with the cultural and social acceptance of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as forms of discipline, does not promote the best interests of children (Tomaševski, 2001, p. 35). The solution lies in the complete transformation of the whole Iranian educational system. As part of this transformation, the 4-A Right to Education Framework must be fully implemented and human rights education must become part of the curriculum. As Amita Sharma argues, initiatives must ‘question whether processes of reform will really ensure the transformation of relationships on more equal terms or will they reinforce dependency and hierarchy’ (Sharma, 2003, p. 3391). Such reform should also protect the dignity of all children by not exposing them to humiliation and degradation.

In addition, under reform initiatives, language barriers must be removed and the educational system should adapt to the needs of the child. Special attention should be paid to vulnerable groups such as disabled children, refugee children, minors in detention, and working children, as well as to children belonging to religious and ethnic minorities. Education must also initially be taken to children who, for one reason or another, cannot attend school. It is important for these children to get educated; however, this measure should be temporary. The ultimate goal of the state should be to abolish barriers so every single child’s right to education is respected.

Since a complete transformation of the educational system requires time, the Islamic Republic should, in parallel, take more immediate steps towards this goal. First and foremost, the exact definition of ‘Islamic criteria’ needs to be laid out in order to avoid a broad interpretation of the law, and its abuse. Secondly, all religious and ethnic groups need to be recognised in the Iranian Constitution to undo the discrimination that exists due to their absence. Thirdly, reservations and declarations against the CRC and CRDP should be withdrawn, and the CEDAW needs

to be signed and ratified without reservation. These measures need to be taken as foundational steps towards the implementation of the 4-A Right to Education Framework in order for the Islamic Republic to fulfil its international human rights law obligations. Without taking any such substantial steps, more UN agendas will be rejected, and the Islamic Republic's production of one document after another, with titles such as the 'Fundamental Reform Document of Education', will only continue to be used as a ruse to stall and to misguide the international community. Ultimately, however, it is the position of the Supreme Leader, and the authoritarianism that it invites, that is the biggest impediment to any positive change taking place towards the fulfilment of the state's obligation in implementing the principles of the international human rights law.

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