



Violence, poverty and abuse led girl, 16, to gallows

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Iran Focus

Neka (northern Iran), Aug 31 – The orphaned 16-year-old girl hanged in front of residents in this town close to the Caspian Sea on August 15 suffered years of brutal violence, exploitation and torture in the hands of relatives, local officials and plain strangers, and in a country where girls are the most vulnerable members of society, she had no one to go to for help.

The tragic picture emerges from dozens of interviews conducted by an Iran Focus correspondent with Atefeh Rajabi's classmates, friends, relatives and neighbors in this humid, overcrowded industrial town that sits on a busy highway linking Tehran with the north of the country.

The hanging of Atefeh Rajabi has shocked the residents of Neka, who still differ widely in their assessment of the girl, but none voices support for the punishment that she has received. An air of tension and eerie silence hangs over the town's smoke-filled tea-houses, or chaikhanehs, where men spend hours chatting quietly in clusters of three or four over tea. In a summer month like August, business should be booming in this town as thousands of Tehran residents flock to the sandy beaches of the Caspian. But right now, the visitors are for the most part not holidaymakers.

"There are lots of strangers who come and we are used to them," says Askar, a young shopkeeper who sells a variety of citrus fruit jams. "But right now, all of them are asking about the girl. They want to know who she was and how she died."

The shock of Atefeh's execution has gone far beyond this town. Even in a country that has the highest number of executions in the world and routinely executes minors, Iranians across the nation have been bewildered by accounts of the hanging of a 16-year-old girl. The fact that the religious judge himself put the rope around her neck and the letters of "congratulations" from the town's governor to the judge, commending him for his "firm approach" have only added to the torment and pain many say they have felt.

"Atefeh was not a well-behaved girl, that's for sure. But do you hang a girl for having sex with an unmarried man?" asked Fariba, a girl in Atefeh's neighborhood, who like many others did not want to be identified.

According to judicial records, by the time Atefeh was 16, she had been convicted five times of having sex with unmarried men. Each time she spent some time in jail and was given 100 lashes (Under Iran's law, punishment for having sex with a married man would have been far heavier.)

Atefeh's father is an unemployed drug addict whose whereabouts are not known. Her mother died when Atefeh was still a child and she was left in the care of her octogenarian grandparents, which meant no care at all.

"She was abused by a close relative," says Mina, one of the few girls in Neka who identify themselves as Atefeh's friends. "But she never dared even to talk about it to anyone. Tell your teachers? They'll call you a whore. Tell the police? They lock you up and rape you. Better keep your mouth shut."

Mina sobs as she recalls her friend's tormented life, but many of these horrendous experiences are everyday facts of life for girls being brought up under a rigid theocratic regime that has institutionalized misogyny in its laws and practices.

"She sometimes talked about what these 'Islamic moral policemen' did to her while she was in jail. She still had nightmares about that. She said Behshahr Prison was the Hell itself."

Alijan, a local grocer with graying hair, said many parents did not want Atefeh to socialize with their kids, because they thought she would have a corrupting influence on other young girls.

"Who can blame them?" he said, with a deep sigh. "In this country, if you're a man and you go to jail, you can forget about having a future. Now imagine if a girl goes to jail. She was hopeless."

"I knew this girl very well and she did not deserve what they did to her," explains a middle-aged woman who once taught Atefeh in the local girls' school. "She was lively, intelligent, and, of course, rebellious. She wouldn't take injustice from anyone. But the authorities here equate these qualities in a girl to prostitution and evil. They wanted to give all the girls and women a lesson."

Hamid was one of those fathers in the neighborhood who did not want her two daughters to befriend Atefeh, but with hindsight, he feels the guilt of not having done anything to help the girl.

"I think the most devastating event in her life was the death of her mother," Hamid said. "Before that, she was a normal girl. Her mother was everything to her. When she died, she had no one to look after her."

A pharmacist, whose shop is not far away from the Railway Square, where Atefeh was hanged, recalls her final, painful hour. "When agents of the State Security Forces brought her to the gallows, I felt cold sweat running down my back. She looked so young and innocent, standing there in the middle of all these bearded men in military fatigues. Judge Reza'i must have felt a personal grudge against her. He put the rope around her neck and left her dangling on the gallows for 45 minutes. I looked around and everyone in the crowd was sobbing and damning the mullahs for doing this to our young people."

Atefeh had no access to a lawyer at any stage and her death sentence was upheld by a Supreme Court that is dominated by fundamentalist mullahs. Haji Rezaii, the religious judge, was reportedly so incensed with Atefeh's "sharp tongue" during the trial that he travelled to Tehran to convince the mullahs of the Supreme Court to uphold the death sentence.

The tragically short life of Atefeh Rajabi and its brutal end are a reminder of the plight of millions of girls in a country where, according to state-owned newspapers, 75 percent of the population live below the poverty line, 66 percent of women are victims of some form of domestic violence, and over 70 percent of women suffer from varying degrees of depression. Iran remains, in the words of UN Human Rights Rapporteur Maurice Copithorne, "a prison for women."