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The Precarious Status of Working-Class Men in Iran

SHAHRAM KHOSRAVI

In early August 2016, I spent several days doing research in the offices of Iran's Legal Medicine Organization in a building close to Parke Shahr (the City Park) in south Tehran. Social inequalities in Tehran have historically taken geographic form in a dichotomy between the rich north of the city and the poor south. South Tehran has higher rates of poverty and illiteracy, more rural migrants, and more slums.

In the large main hall on the ground floor, around 80 people were waiting their turn. They had come for different reasons. Some were victims of crimes who needed certificates for their injuries. Others were alleged offenders who had been taken there for medical examinations. The accused, all young men, were escorted by policemen and usually were handcuffed.

One day around noon, a young man in his mid-twenties was brought in to be registered at the reception desk. He became rowdy as he sat on the floor between the rows of chairs, handcuffed, with his feet also chained. He screamed that he was innocent and had been mistreated by the police. The other people in the hall were disturbed. Police officers took the man outside and handcuffed him to an iron bar. He sat on the ground, leaned against the wall, and stretched his legs while his right wrist was fastened to the bar above his head. In a quiet voice he repeated, "I want to talk to the president. If he hears my story, he will release me. Please, I want to talk to the president. Just a few minutes." People around him started laughing and ridiculing him.

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Hours later, just before he was brought back inside the building to be examined by a psychiatrist who would determine if he was mentally ill or not, we heard the muffled sound of voices not far away. It drew the attention of the people who had been making fun of the young man. We soon found out that the voices, rising in volume and strength, were those of a group of workers who had gathered outside the City Council building a block away, demanding several months' worth of their unpaid salaries. The police were present in large numbers.

The handcuffed man who kept pleading to talk to the president was one of many low-income young men who have been targeted by a policy of punishing the poor in Iran in recent years. This has been part of the transition from a revolutionary state that aimed to provide welfare for the poor in the 1980s to today's postsocial state with its neoliberal focus on the market economy. The sociopolitical transition can be observed best in the shift of the symbolic position of working-class men: from veneration in the first decade after the revolution to condemnation three decades later.

REVOLUTIONARY HERO

One of the main goals of Iran's 1979 revolution was to deliver social justice for the poor. The revolution belonged to the dispossessed people, or so the official discourse proclaimed. During the revolution and in the first decade after it, the main figure held up for public acclaim was called "the disenfranchised" (*mahroum*) and "the dispossessed" (*mostaz'af*), usually a man who had been marginalized and excluded from the shah's modernization (or Westernization) program concentrated in the large cities. He was an unskilled worker, a farmer, or a nomad.

The revolutionary state romanticized poverty and the working-class lifestyle, which were celebrated throughout society. The figure of the dispossessed man as the hero of the nation appeared everywhere: the cinema, television programs, billboards, primary-school textbooks, and stamps. Gradually a kind of cultural capital promoting self-sacrificing and virtuous modesty was forged.

While for women this revolutionary culture took its form in female modesty, enforced by the requirement that women wear veils in public places, it defined proper comportment for men as well. The idealized figure of the poor man became the celebrated model of masculinity. He was modest, self-restrained (*qanne*), ready to sacrifice himself for the revolution and the nation—as hundreds of thousands of men did during the war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988. However, the veneration of this heroic masculinity started to fade away in the mid-1990s, when a neoliberal turn in the political economy of Iran became more and more visible.

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq war, social policy changed in Iran. Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–97) addressed economic issues rather than ideological ones. Presenting himself as a pragmatist, he launched the "Reconstruction Era," characterized by expansive privatization, deregulation, and reduction of subsidies. Weakened collective contracts led to the loss of job security. Inflation and unemployment soared.

The shrinking of the welfare state, resulting in the loss of benefits for many workers, along with chronic unemployment and underemployment, created new forms of social marginalization and exclusion. Gradually, a postsocial state with more focus on the market economy than on welfare replaced the revolutionary state of the 1980s. Furthermore, international sanctions against Iran, partly still in force, have resulted in a drastic deterioration of the domestic economy. Left alone by the state and in the absence of a well-established civil society, the Iranian family is more precarious than ever. Families struggle under the financial and social burdens of supporting their children through education, military service, unemployment, marriage, and frequently even after marriage.

Worshipping success

As with neoliberal turns anywhere, there is a tendency toward individualizing poverty in Iran as state support is reduced. People are expected to overcome serious social hurdles through endurance, risk-taking, hard work, and belief in individual voluntarism. In this way, the postrevolutionary neoliberal turn created its own ideal masculinity. The self-sacrificing and modest hero of the revolution was replaced by a masculine ideal defined by entrepreneurial success and consumerism.

The figure of the "dispossessed" glorified in the 1980s has given way to the celebrated figure in the current official discourse: a "successful" (*moafaq*) individual. In the 1980s, Iranians were supposed to sacrifice their lives for God and the nation; now they are expected to be financially successful. The official line valorizes hardworking, self-made, responsible individuals as ideal citizens.

Images of these successful men—managers, entrepreneurs, businessmen, landlords; wearing expensive suits, driving imported SUVs, living in luxury apartments in Tehran—are everywhere, from the cinema and billboards to social media. There is an increasing number of popular Instagram and Facebook pages with names like "Rich Kids of Tehran" or "Rich Kids of Iran" that serve as spaces where young Iranians flaunt their wealth. The images are usually juxtapositions of athletic male bodies and signs of wealth: cars, fashion, watches, as well as access to women. Social media has offered a safe space for exhibitionism centered around the new masculine ideal.

At the same time, luxury shopping malls have mushroomed all over Tehran, changing the urban landscape. Consumerism has gradually turned everyday life into an arena of competition. Acclaimed success—a better education, more wealth, a good marriage, social status—is the goal of the competition. And competition has become deeply rooted in young Iranians' lifestyles.

The other side of this ideal of successful masculinity is, of course, failed masculinity. The ideal is celebrated in contrast to others who are less fortunate. This polarization is class-based, but it also has elements of ethnicity. This masculine "other" is not only poor; he is often an immigrant from the provinces, belongs to an ethnic minority, and is regarded as uncultured.

Moral panic

While official discourse and mainstream media in the 1980s praised the poor (usually male) citizen as the central figure of the revolutionary nation, now in the fourth decade after the revolution the poor man is regarded as a failure and a burden. He exists outside the regulatory system, violates established norms, and may constitute a risk to the wellbeing of the social body and to the safety and quality of life of "normal" citizens.

The young man handcuffed in the Legal Medicine Organization belongs to this new category. He embodies failed masculinity, which is labeled as *arazel owbash,* a recent pejorative term used in the official discourse to criminalize working-class men. *Arazel owbash* (thugs and ruffians) is almost entirely used in reference to young men from low-income classes. According to police statistics, 95 percent of all arrested *arazel owbash* are younger than 25 and many are from south Tehran.

Narratives of *arazel owbash* and their "crimes" have proliferated dramatically in the official media during the past few years, causing paranoia and moral panic in society. Images of beefy men with knife scars and tattoos, alongside reports on increasing drug and alcohol consumption, thuggish behavior, violent robbery, and gang rapes, are used by the official media to justify the brutal zero-tolerance policy against underprivileged young men. Yet the term *arazel owbash* has no legal definition, and it is not clear on what specific charges these men are being arrested. In the absence of a clear legal definition, anyone can be *arazel owbash*.

The revolutionary state romanticized poverty and the working-class lifestyle.

Being listed as *arazel owbash* often means extrajudicial imprisonment. Poor young men are detained without trial. Many are subjected to public shaming spectacles without having undergone a proper trial. They are usually still in pretrial detention when they are put on display in front of a crowd. Some of them have already served their sentences but are still picked up by the police. Rounding them up may serve the purpose of convincing the public that a strong police presence is necessary for maintaining security. It may also be a tactic to make people forget the police brutality against middle-class people in the postelection protests in 2009.

Young Iranian citizens are stigmatized and criminalized not for what they do but for who they are: poor men who are seen as "unproductive" or a "burden on society." Far from the acclaimed figure of the revolution, today's working-class men are depicted as barbarians, uncultured parasites. Stuck in a state of chronic insecurity, poor youth are regarded as a social risk rather than being at risk. This precarious status destabilizes their lives not only through the insecurity of wage labor but also through the criminalization of their lifestyles and their bodies. The focus on the criminalized male bodies of low-income groups conceals the actual causes of juvenile delinquency—such as discrimination, unemployment and underemployment, systematic police harassment, and social marginalization.

Irregular work

The policing and punishment of the urban poor has escalated in tandem with increasing economic precarity among Iranians, particularly young people. Every year more Iranians are classified as poor. Official sources reported in 2015 that 40 percent of Iranians lived below the poverty line. The unemployment rate among young people (defined as those 20 to 24 years of age) is 25 percent, almost twice the national average. Many experts believe that the actual rate is much higher.

Women's situation in the labor market in urban areas is especially precarious. Although the number of women finishing university is almost twice the number of men, unemployment among women is more than double the rate for men. In general, higher education does not open the doors to the labor market. It is estimated that the number of unemployed men and women with a university degree is nearly 6 million.

One major consequence of these precarious labor conditions has been an expansion of the informal sector and irregular labor. Irregular employment means that workers have temporary, often informal jobs, and usually are not covered by health or unemployment insurance. Job security is already unattainable for the majority of the working class. Irregular employment, short-term contracts, and underemployment have become so common that experts warn job security could disappear altogether in the near future.

Iran's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs reported in June 2014 that 11 million people, or almost 50 percent of the workforce, were in irregular employment. The situation is even worse for the working class, among whom the rate of short-term and irregular employment is above 90 percent. In the private sector, the rate was 100 percent. Between 10 and 13 million Iranians are entirely excluded from the insurance system.

Informal and irregular employment also means an absence of protection against exploitation by employers. Delayed salary payments, sometimes up to six months in arrears, are not unusual for those who are irregularly employed. Every week there is a news report about workers somewhere in Iran going on strike and protesting against not having been paid for months. In the past few years, workers' protests and strikes have been severely punished.

POOR AND INVISIBLE

The policy of punishing the poor targets many groups, such as street vendors, beggars, homeless people, and undocumented Afghan migrants. Bullying of street vendors by officials has become more brutal in recent years. Hassles of various sorts, extortion, plundering, and demands for bribes are daily ordeals for street vendors in Tehran and other large cities. A routine scene on the streets of Tehran is a cat-and-mouse game between poor vendors and municipal agents whose task is "removal of barriers" that obstruct "the mobility of citizens." Thanks to cell phones and other recording devices, some of these recent assaults have been recorded and posted on social media.

This kind of systematic bullying by the police and municipality agents appears to be a widespread tactic to push the urban poor out of public places. Indeed, class oppression has become a recent feature of the post-revolutionary neoliberal state. Violence against young men from poor backgrounds is part of this trend, along with the bullying of street vendors and the terrorizing of homeless people, street children, and residents of informal settlements. Un(der)employment and irregular jobs lead to irregular housing conditions. An official source at the Majlis (parliament) said in March 2015 that since the revolution, the number of people living in slums and informal settlements has increased seventeenfold, to more than 10 million.

Officials in the 1980s were zealous about presenting themselves as belonging to the lower classes and having their pictures taken with "dispossessed" people. But today the official policy is removing the poor from public spaces and making them invisible. This demonstrates a fundamental change in Iran's state ideology. The urban poor are punished because they have failed to achieve entrepreneurial success. Young people incapable of self-management and self-development or unable to start families are considered "burdens on society." By criminalizing working-class young men, the whole issue of social inequality, structural discrimination, and the exclusion of these young men from society is suppressed and neglected.

Iranians are bombarded with success stories (particularly about those who come from underprivileged backgrounds) on television. This is an attempt to make Iranians believe that the promised rewards of a neoliberal economy are available to all. The growth of a consumerist culture and the flow of vast wealth into the hands of a segment of the population have promoted the false belief that everyone can enjoy this kind of success.

However, discrepancies between the expectations of the larger society and the individual condition have generated alienation, hopelessness, and rage among young Iranians. Sporadic riot-like protests and vandalism of cars and public buildings in middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods by the poor, particularly young men, clearly indicate the class dimension of Iran's generational conflict.

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FAMILY CRISIS

In the eyes of the authorities, the problem is larger than a class issue. Young Iranians, particularly young men, are blamed for failing to be entrepreneurial and contribute to the country's economic growth, but also for failing in biological reproduction. Anxiety has risen among authorities in recent years over the collapse of the traditional family pattern.

Protracted unemployment, underemployment, delayed marriage, and financial dependence on parents have resulted in a delayed transition from youth to adulthood for many young Iranians. Unable to start an independent life, they experience a sense of powerlessness. The state, social institutions, schools, universities, the labor market, and the family have failed to assist young people in their transition. More and more Iranian youth are caught in a prolonged "waithood," a period between adolescence and adulthood. Their prospects of escaping this situation look very bleak.

The reasons for this delay are young people's financial insecurity and ideational changes that have caused behavioral shifts in family formation. There has been widespread change in attitudes toward divorce, marriage, and sexuality. Marriage at an older age, more autonomy in the choice of a spouse, greater demand for gender equality within families, controlled fertility, increasing numbers of single-parent households, and a focus on the independent nuclear family (as opposed to the traditional extended one) are key factors that distance the new family constellations from the traditional ideal.

The number of divorces in Iran rose 120 percent between 2004 and 2014, increasing from 73,882 to 163,569. Meanwhile, the fertility rate decreased by 70 percent between 1985 and 2000, dropping to the current rate of under two children per woman. The authorities are worried about a shrinking population.

Socioeconomic transformations, together with these shifts in family formation, are resulting in changes in gender roles, demography, and sexuality. While anxiety concerning the collapse of traditional institutions and norms prevails among officials, public intellectuals such as Fatemeh Sadeghi and Yousuf Abazari see the "family crisis" and generational conflicts as inevitable consequences of Iranian modernity. They use the term "birth pains" to describe the situation of the new generation. Young people are aware of their parents' mistakes and know that they must take their destiny into their own hands.

Remember that young man handcuffed and humiliated in the office of the Legal Medicine Organization, appealing in vain to talk to the president. His kind used to be the emblem of revolutionary Iran, but today he represents the young urban poor who are symbolically and materially marginalized. Those who were once praised as the future of the country are now stigmatized as a burden. The transformation of the ideal type of Iranian masculinity, from the self-sacrificing nobility of the poor to an emphasis on success in terms of material status and wealth, highlights a crucial change in the nation's political direction that has resulted in growing class conflicts and generational clashes. The future of Iran will be determined by these battles. ■