

***Opportunities and Challenges for the Engagement of
Islamic Religious Leaders in Children's Rights from the
Perspective of UNICEF Iran***

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Note:

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Children's rights are everybody's business. While Governments have a special accountability to ensure child rights, they cannot and should not do the job alone.

Iran has a remarkably young population with approximately 38 % of its citizens being under the age of 18 and even 70% under the age of 29.

Therefore broad-based social engagement for children is a public and private responsibility.

Clerics have strong influence and guide thinking and action of millions of believers.

Bringing together child rights and Islam is neither as difficult as it may seem nor is it a small challenge.

For this engagement to become successful it is important for religious leaders and partners from other sectors of the society to walk together in practical partnerships.

From an international perspective the engagement of religious and non-religious actors for the child rights should be guided by: the best interest of the child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child introduces this principle formally in its article three to guide action of policy makers and caretakers:

"In all action concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative or legislative bodies, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration."

There are four dimensions for the practical engagement of Iranian religious leaders with child rights:

- Research
- Social mobilization and promotion of child-friendly social behavior
- Poverty reduction
- Advocacy for best legal standards

1. Example on basic research

It is fundamental for the universal recognition and local respect of child rights that religious leaders engage in national and international dialogue about different forms of interpretations of child rights.

Historically Western experts have largely dominated international interpretations of human rights norms.

It is important that Islamic researchers develop a common language and deeper understanding of the CRC and other human rights conventions and facilitate debate about them.

Such debate will increase national understanding about child rights and prepare substantive grounds for reforms towards the best realization of these rights.

In this context Mofid has recently started a research project on analysis of the different articles of the Convention from an Islamic perspective.

Given that Iran is a major center for Shiite scholars, such basic research could become a valuable resource book in Iran and beyond.

The research is based on the Qoran, relevant hadiths, and other religious sources. It also includes scientific literature on different aspects of childhood in Iran.

The research methodology is guided by religious and academic reasoning.

The basic idea is to present the main bibliographic sources on child rights in Islam, define childhood and dignity of the child and discuss key child rights principles such as *non-discrimination* and *the best interest of the child*.

The research includes potentially or actually controversial articles and provides arguments and different forms of religious interpretation of CRC-articles. This research can build the basis for an Islamic encyclopedia on child rights in the long run.

Academic work for children is not an end in itself. Hence any research on children's rights carries the duty to disseminate and debate its finding in religious circles and in the broader public.

This is particularly important in Islam since there is no formal institutional mechanism - like for example in the case of the Episcopal Conferences of the Roman Catholic Church – where new paradigms are formally adopted by central bodies of religious leaders and where religious institutions would subsequently spread the new thinking across society.

The decentralized nature of Islam requires a decentralized communication approach including trainings of Friday prayer leaders, broadcast media and public conferences with stakeholders.

For these reasons a strategy for public dissemination is an integral part of the project.

2. Example on promotion of child-friendly social behaviour in the fight against HIV/AIDS

Religious leaders, have the moral authority to influence social opinions and behavior.

It is therefore important that clerics promote values that protect the child.

The promotion of positive social behavior has been one of their traditional roles in Islamic communities.

While the care for health, nutrition, and education has a long standing tradition in Islam, new threats to the wellbeing of children require new guidance by religious leaders in order to protect the health of the communities. An important new threat in this regard is HIV/AIDS.

Iran is at a crucial stage of the epidemic. The infection rate has sky-rocketed in recent years.

In addition the modes of transmission of HIV are changing in Iran: sexual transmission has become a second important way of acquiring the virus.

Therefore the factor that will decide whether Iran will succeed or fail to contain HIV/AIDS is "Prevention".

As the virus is moving towards sexual transmission, the population which is most at risk is youth.

Therefore UNICEF and all other UN-organizations in Iran are especially concerned with the protection of the youth.

Islamic morale matches directly with such concern.

Therefore religious leaders, professional health staff and international organizations as UNICEF are natural allies in the fight against the virus.

In facilitating the engagement of religious leaders through Friday prayers and other community-based activities UNICEF has commissioned the development of a book for "religious leaders" by "religious leaders" by Imam Sadegh University.

The discussions around the development of such booklet are a concrete example for the challenges that can be faced in developing joint guidance.

Effective prevention of HIV-infections entails providing youth with the information and skills to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS.

The book contains spiritual and practical guidance for engaging religious leaders, including the promotion of scientifically recognized concepts such as "safer sex", "condom use", "peer group activities" to empower youth to protect themselves.

At the same time views about sexuality and gender relations can differ among experts.

Discussion topics between UNICEF and the authors included the relation of HIV&AIDS with immorality and faithlessness or the idea that HIV& AIDS is a punishment for sin.

Other debates referred to the need to ensure that all statements, especially those related to abstinence, faithfulness and condom use should not be gender-balanced.

The promotion of health behavior in the case of HIV also includes addressing some traditional habits which may expose the followers to HIV infection such as polygamy, temporary and early marriages and thus require religious leaders to comment on them.

The booklet demonstrates that religious and non-religious experts are able to find common ground through empirical science and religious reasoning to ensure a solid morale and platform for a strong engagement of Shiite leaders.

Some final remarks

Experiences of UNICEF in Iran show how important religious engagement with different aspects of child rights is: for the children of Iran and for the society as a whole.

Engagement for the rights of children also bears advantages for religious leaders and professionals in the field of child rights.

By engaging with children's rights religious scholars can increase their social capital with the majority of the Iranian population;

By understanding and engaging with Shiite norms and religious reasoning government and non-government actors can gain greater acceptance and mobilization for child rights within large masses of Islamic believers.

The process of successful religious engagement with child rights requires a good understanding of child rights, the creation of a culture of dialogue with Parliamentarians, policy makers and staff of Government and civil society.

It will also require Islamic scholars to intensify their understanding towards applied social sciences, international law and human rights.

As mentioned earlier: Ultimately the main thrust for all people engaged for the realization of the rights of the child – religious and non-religious is to determine the best interest of the child in a given situation.

It is therefore important for religious scholars to engage with academic and practical organizations working for children to absorb the scientific knowledge about children.

The distinguished Shiite scholar Ayatollah Boujnurdi has wisely said: "...Islam has no limits in terms of time and place and lives on to the end of the world, it needs to keep up pace with the development of human societies and to respond to new problems. We believe that time and place play a role in religious thought and Ejtihad, we should always adopt a new religious line and orientation and our view should change in parallel with social developments."

It is important that Iranian religious leaders increase their understanding of international child rights standards and the non Islamic world benefits from Islamic thinking on this matter.

In the context of the recent global UN Study on violence against children religious scholars from Iran made important contributions to inter-religious understanding of violence against children and to the development of action points for religious leaders worldwide

Opportunities for international dialogue between Islamic and non-Islamic, religious and non-religious thinkers and practitioners on child and women's rights must be maximized.

This is in the best interest of children and is an important contribution to global peace and the advancement humanity. It is a way to replace the so-called “Clash of Civilization” with a “Dialogue among Civilizations”.

This Conference on Human Rights and Religion is an important contribution to this global dialogue.

