

## Religious Socialization in Iranian Islamic Girls Schools

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Received: May 12, 2015 Accepted: January 28, 2016 Online Published: July 7, 2016

doi:10.5539/ass.v12n8p56

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v12n8p56>

### Abstract

Although Iran's educational system is not secular in character, many Iranian parents prefer to send their children to private Islamic schools. It is widely assumed that such schools are more effective in socializing their students toward the Shiite worldview. To date, no known studies have been conducted to investigate the impacts of the Islamic schools' formal and informal religious education on Iranian youths' religious commitments and preferences. In short, this article focuses on how attending private Islamic schools in Iran impacts on the construction of students' religious beliefs and attitudes. A qualitative, phenomenological methodology was employed with thirty former students of Islamic girl schools, aged 20 to 25 years old. Overall, the findings contrast somewhat with the existing literature by demonstrating that in most of our study participants, attending Islamic schools influenced future religious preferences and commitments by increasing unpleasant feelings and critical attitudes toward religion in general, and the Islamic-Shiite religious worldview specifically.

**Keywords:** religious socialization, religious education, Islamic girls schools, young Iranians, Islamic-Shiite worldview

### 1. Introduction

The Iranian educational system is not secular in character. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the country's educational system has become the primary focus of the government's Islamization project. In its widest sense, Islamization is a process of society's moving towards Islam. As the most accessible socializing agency, schools provide a unique environment for the religious government of Iran to present their preferred Islamic values to post-revolutionary generations in a systematic manner. In short, the main aim of the Islamization project is the creation of devout Muslims who are faithful to the ideal and cultural values of the established religious order and also committed to the revolutionary values. The Iranian government has explicitly set Islamic education as its objective, which aims to familiarize students with Islamic beliefs, values, and rules. In general, studying religion (from the Islamic perspective), the Quran, and the Arabic language are compulsory in Iranian schools, alongside other subjects (Shorish, 1988; Godazgar, 2001).

According to the Iranian educational system, schools are divided into public and private. Private schools were permitted to re-open after the revolution (1979) in 1988 as "non-profit" institutions. Nowadays, there are almost 16,000 non-profit, private schools available in Iran and more than one million students (near 8 percent of the overall number of the students in Iran) have been studying in these schools. Unfortunately, there is no information regarding the exact number of Islamic schools in Iran but it could be stated that the large number of Iranian private schools are Islamic. (Note 1)

Iranian Islamic schools are educational private institutions where everything is defined by Islamic identity and religiosity. Islamic schools attempt to socialize their pupils according to the Shiite worldview. The dominant religious climate in these schools is the main parameter that makes them different from normal schools. Islamic schools in Iran provide special extra-curricular activities for students, such as daily collective prayers, reading Quran in morning programs, holding Islamic ceremonies, reading special prayers once or twice a week, organizing extra religious classes or speeches, and travelling to holy places. These activities are mostly compulsory. Since the Islamic revolution, Iranian schools have also been segregated by gender at all levels. Iranian Islamic girl schools, in addition to having Islamic formal and informal education, place an emphasis on observing the Islamic dress code and rules of conduct for women. Generally, wearing the *Chador* (i.e. a special

type of veil) is compulsory for girls studying at the majority of Iranian Islamic schools, especially at the secondary school level. In fact, the main target of Islamic schools is to train religiously committed women who follow the Islamic rules and regulations in every stage of life. (Note2)

To date, in spite of the large number of students that attend religious schools in Iran, no known studies have been conducted on the religious beliefs and attitudes of young Iranians studying in Islamic schools. In addition, no known studies have investigated the impact of the Islamic schools' approach to religious education on Iranian students' religious commitment and preferences. This article is a part of larger study that has attempted to address the existing gaps regarding young Iranians' religious beliefs and attitudes in Islamic schools in Iran. In this article, we attempt to explore how young Iranian women who studied in Islamic schools perceive the Islamic schools' formal and informal religious education program.

## **2. Religious Socialization and Its Agents**

Religion is a complex agent of socialization. In short, religious socialization has been defined as "the process through which people come to hold religious preferences" (Sherkat, 2003, p. 152). Johnstone (2006) believes that religious socialization, which is a process of becoming religious, is not a unique or unusual process but "is simply socialization by a group into a body of norms that provides a set of meanings and interpretations that individuals internalize and relate to the large body of other meanings they possess" (p. 82). Johnston suggests two general methods or mechanisms which religious groups or religions employ to socialize their members: formal and informal mechanisms. He considers the formal educational system as the first mechanism that religious groups and societies establish in respect of religious socialization. In the next step, Johnston believes that socialization takes place informally through interaction with members of religious groups or societies. Needless to say, such religious socialization could happen in all kinds of groups, but the family is indeed the most important resource of informal religious socialization (Johnstone, 2006, pp. 57-59). Undoubtedly, religious socialization is more than just formal religious education. It includes the acquisition of religious attitudes and values, behaviours, habits and skills transmitted not only in schools or religious organizations, but through the family, the peer group, mass media, and society as well.

According to Sherkat (2003), the main agents that impact religious socialization include parents and family, peers, religious denominations, and educational systems and institutions. Furthermore, demographic variables such as age (cognitive development), gender, ethnicity, social and economic class, and personality characteristics, impact religious socialization (Saroglou, 2010; Sherkat, 2003; Arnett, 2007; Johnstone, 2006; Hunt, 2005; Helve, 1991; McCullough, Tsang, & Brion, 2003).

### *2.1 Schools & Religious Socialization*

The connection between education and religious preferences and commitments has continuous importance for social and educational researchers. In fact, schools, alongside families, have the vital task of shaping and directing children's and youths' religious identities. In addition, some scholars believe that families as a main source of primary religious socialization socialize their children through channelling them into religious education as a main source of secondary religious socialization. In other words, these scholars believe that religious education has significant direct and indirect influences on individuals' religiosity (Himmelfarb, 1979; Shah, 2004; Erickson, 1992; Vermeer, 2010). On the other hand, others believe that formal religious education in schools has less effect on the religiosity of children and adolescents after controlling for the effects of families and peers (Greeley, Mccourt, & Mccready, 1976).

Debates aside, there is agreement that schools are a unique socialization agent that compliments the primary influence of the family (Wentzel & Looney, 2007). Schools are one of the earliest social environments that children interact with, and remain within, until they become young adults. The importance of schools in the socialization of children and youths is not only through organized, structured curricula and classes, but also through implicit influences. These are often referred to as the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum (embedded in the school climate) is what the students generally experience in the school as a social context separate from the formal education they receive.

In addition to the school environment, peers play an important role in the school socialization process. Although teachers and instructors perform the central pedagogical function of transmitting knowledge and values, the process is complimented through social interactions with peers (Ballantine & Hammack, 2001). Peers tend to have a lasting impact on the socialization process within schools, particularly during adolescence.

In general, the existing literature in relation to religious education could be categorized into two major themes. The first views religious education and schooling from a psychosocial perspective. A large number of researchers

and scholars belonging to this category have devoted their time to the necessity of religious education in schools from the context of today's democratic, secular world. Much of this work has been carried out in Western countries. This body of work has looked at the social and psychological impact of attending religious schools and receiving formal religious education on different social and psychological outcomes such as identity (particularly national identity), culture (e.g. collectivism, individualism, etc.), worldview construction and social values, social and moral behaviour, social and cultural integration, assimilation and isolation, and lifestyles (see, e.g. Merry & Driessen, 2005; Macneill, 2000; Sagy, Orr, & Bar-On, 1999; Tan, 2007; Curry & Houser, 1997; Zia et al., 2007). Conversely, the second category includes a large number of studies that attempt to unearth the influences and effects of attending religious schools on educational problems, especially academic achievement. This research considers religious education and schools more from the pedagogical perspective rather than the social point of view (See, e.g. Jeynes, 2002a, 2002b, 2009).

Broadly speaking, much of the existing research investigating the relationship between religious education and socialization has focused on the indirect effect of religious education through other agents of socialization, particularly the family and peers. However, in recent years, the number of studies looking at religious education independently have also increased (see., e.g. Shah, 2004; Vermeer, 2010).

### 3. Methods

A qualitative method design was employed in this study. Consequently, a total of thirty young girls, who were former students of Islamic girl schools in Iran and aged between 20 to 25 years old, were interviewed. The interviewees were selected out of the young girls who had completed between four to twelve years (from age seven to eighteen) of studies in various Islamic schools. In addition, the interviewees graduated from their respective schools between two to five years from the time of interviewing. By limiting the number of years after graduation between two to five years, we attempted to choose interviewees who were removed from their school experiences long enough (but not too long) in order to provide a thorough assessment of their respective experiences.

Religious foundations and family religious settings have significant influences on the religious socialization process of youths. Many scholars believe that parental primary religious socialization has a long-life impact on religious identity of children (see e.g. Helve, 1991; Krause & Ellison, 2007; Hunsberger & Brown, 1984; Park & Ecklund, 2007; Himmelfarb, 1979). Despite the fact that family's influences could be considered directly, indirectly (through channelling children to religious peers, schools, organizations, etc.), or both, in all studies concerning religious beliefs and attitudes, the researchers should consider the family religious orientation and commitment of their informants as the first agent of religious socialization. Thus, in this study, in order to have a clearer image of the process of religious socialization of our young interviewees, the religiosity and religious orientation of parents, siblings, and very close relatives of our young interviewees were also considered. However, since the interviewees of our research were former students of religious schools, some general similarities in religiosity level and model of their families were observed. All the informants came from a religious background and grew up in religious families. As religious schools in Iran are private and tuition fees are relatively high, students that study in these schools typically come from upper or middle-upper class families. Most of the informants in the current study were living in the affluent or wealthy areas of Tehran (the capital of Iran).

Gender has been shown to be a strong predictor of positive religious socialization. Several studies have demonstrated differences among men and women in respect to the religious development process, with most pointing to young women being more religious than men (see, e.g. Helve, 1991; Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer 2001; Hunt, 2005). In addition, in the preliminary stages of our study, we observed that in spite of existing similarities there are some differences between the formal and informal religious educations provided in boys and girls Islamic schools in Iran. Finally, as the main researcher collecting the data was female, we were concerned with gender complexities in relation to accessing informants given the strictness in which Iranian Islamic schools approach the gender issue. Given these multiple considerations, we decided to confine the interviewees to young women. Undoubtedly, this limiting criterion has helped us to study the research problem with greater intensity and focus.

Non-probability sampling and purposeful selection of participants are key points in every qualitative study. As such, the research findings cannot be generalised to the larger population of young people studying in Iranian Islamic schools. Nevertheless, we feel the findings are an important initial attempt at making meaning of a previously unexamined subject that sheds light on a religious culture that is at best under-investigated and that deserves greater attention by researchers. A brief profile of the interviewees is presented in a form of table in

appendix A. (Note 3)

#### 4. Findings and Results

##### 4.1 Religious Socialization in Iranian Islamic Girls Schools

Due to the fact that socialization is an objective-subjective process that always takes place in the context of a specific social structure, researchers often speak about the success and failure of a given socialization process. Given that a wholly successful or unsuccessful socialization process does not exist theoretically or empirically, scholars often refer to degrees of success or failure of specific socialization processes (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Berger, 1967). In this respect, our evaluation criterion was constructed by assessing two important processes: first, the level of harmony, accordance, symmetry or asymmetry of the former students' religious worldview with that of the formal established Shiite worldview; and second, the feelings and attitudes of the former students regarding their religious socialization process in the Islamic schools.

Although our young interviewees were students of different Iranian Islamic schools (Note 4), they had more or less similar feelings and attitudes toward their religious education. It could be stated that in most of the cases, they believed that going to Islamic schools actually turned them off to Islam and Shiism, either temporarily or permanently. The findings revealed a wide range of unpleasant feelings and reactions toward religious education.

Zoha, 23 years old, does not consider her family very religious in comparison with some other Iranian families. In her opinion, religion is a completely personal issue. Zoha defines herself as an theist who is attempting to behave morally. She does not generally perform Islamic practices and rituals. Zoha spent five years in Islamic schools at both the primary and secondary levels. She believes that having gone to Islamic school kept her seriously away from identifying with any religious belief and practice, and this continued for many years after graduation. Zoha clarifies:

Going to the Islamic school has a great negative impact on my religiosity. When I came out from my Islamic guidance school, I've given up praying. I remember in school, my classmates and friends stood in the prayer's lines even when they had their periods. They were scared to get their negative points. Sometimes, they participated in collective prayers without performing their ablutions. I couldn't understand them... little by little, these contradictions raise my doubts about different Islamic beliefs ... They've really kept me away from religion, Islam and religiousness for quite a number of years (Zoha, 23 years old).

Shadi is another respondent whose experiences were similar to Zoha. She spent five years in Islamic school at both primary and secondary levels. Shadi believes her parents to be religious. She mentions despite the fact that her parents have a deep religious faith and perform all the Islamic rituals, they permit their children to decide for themselves. Shadi believes that she is not a religious person but she believes in God. Shadi has lots of unpleasant memories from her school days. The memories that she recalled even after having left the school five years before made her feel very upset and angry. She criticizes her school's religious education and orientation system. She believes that her school's religious training program was useless.

My school's religious trainings were really ridiculous. They didn't have any special aim or reason. Our only fun was going out of school without wearing the *chador* and watching out that nobody saw us. It was nothing about religion... They could train me in a way that I had the *chador* today, but now I feel hatred when I see somebody in the *chador*. I always discuss the *chador* with my mum. I ask her to have the *hijab* but not by wearing the *chador*. In fact, the *chador* reminds me of all my school's bad memories (Shadi, 24 years old).

Narges is a unique case in our study. She is a sensitive young girl who was a student for eleven years in one of the most famous religious schools in Tehran. Narges does not like the religiosity of her parents. She believes that her parents are very traditional and do not perceive the today's conditions of Iran's modern society. Narges explains that she fears greatly the life hereafter and the Day of Judgment. In fact, Narges's deep-seated fear is rooted in her early religious education in Islamic school. Narges does not like Islam at all and strongly believes that her Islamic school should be blamed for having instilled these fearful ideas. She clarifies in this regard:

I'm not enjoying my life very much. I think that is my schools' fault. I don't like my children going to the Islamic school in future. I don't want them to have bad experiences like me. They (the Islamic schools' principals and teachers) didn't know at all what they really expected from the students, for example, they held religious ceremonies but asked the children to be silent and not clap their hands... I remember when I was in the elementary school, they were talking about many scary things like the pressures that one feels in grave after death, the hell, fire, and scary creatures in the morning programmes. They've really given me a

fear of death. This isn't a normal fear... (Narges, 23 years old).

From the findings, two factors played a principle role in the degree of unpleasant feelings and negative attitudes that the students had toward their Islamic schools' religious education. The first is the degree of dissimilarity between the homes' and schools' religious teachings. Students who belonged to families whose religious socialization was not as strict as that in their Islamic schools suffered more from the school's religious pressures. As a result, they faced contradictions in everyday life that directly and deeply affected their feelings and attitudes toward Islamic-Shiite beliefs and values.

Raha studies art at one of the universities in Tehran. She spent ten years in preliminary and secondary education in Islamic schools. In general, Raha likes "the moderate religiosity model" of her parents although there are some small differences between them. Raha believes that the religious perspectives and teachings that she received in Islamic school were dissimilar to her parents' religious education. She explains that these paradoxes confused her a lot during her school years.

My parents have educated us in the religion but there is no force to practise everything we were taught. It is up to me to pray or not .... My father has always taught me not to break anyone's heart, not to harm others and not to talk behind one's back. These are what my father has taught me but the school authorities were doing all these things regularly. I was really confused. I couldn't understand why people who keep talking about God, Islam and the Prophet, do all the bad things. There is a huge paradox in their words and actions. That's why I have never liked it... I have tried to forget them and I don't like to think of them (Raha, 24 years old).

Zahra, who received five years of religious formal education in an Islamic school, elaborates on the differences between home and school:

In the school, everything was mandatory and they punished us so hard if we didn't follow them. But at home, there was no punishment although they really liked it if we followed Islam generally ... I believe that reading *Ziarat-e-Ashura* or *Dua-e-Tavasol* every week is meaningless. They made us read these prayers every Thursday and Tuesday. I always liked to run away from it ... I was always fighting with my mum when she prayed for two years after school ... I didn't like anything religious at that time ... (Zahra, 23 years old). (Note 5)

In contrast to the above situation, the students who received relatively similar religious training from home and school found it easier to accept the Islamic schools' religious principles although they also believe that their Islamic schools' approach was very strict. The students faced fewer contradictions in their daily lives, which helped them to feel less pressure in school.

Leila is twenty two years old. She is married and studies chemistry at a Tehran-based university. She studied at Islamic schools for eleven years. She grew up in a traditional Muslim family. In addition, she married into a very traditional Muslim family when she was eighteen. Leila believes that her religiosity is in accordance with her parents' religiosity. She explains that although her parents' religious teachings were less strict than her schools' teachings, they were not so different. Therefore, she did not feel uncomfortable in school.

The Islamic schools that I've studied in were very strict generally. They put so much severe pressure on us, especially about the *hijab*. I remember one of our teachers told us that if our hair comes out from the scarf, God will hang us by our hair in hell... my parents' religious trainings were much easier than the school but not so far different from them. Perhaps, that's the reason it wasn't so hard for me to obey the school's religious rules, such as wearing the *chador* or performing the daily prayers because I've already done all of these at home...(Leila, 22 years old).

The second major influence on our interviewees' feelings and attitudes toward their Islamic schools relates to the degree of religious pressure that the students encountered. In most of the cases, our informants -- who went to Islamic schools where the religious programmes and education of the schools were more voluntarily rather than compulsory -- felt more freedom and less pressure. Therefore, they had less negative views toward the school's religious educational program.

Razieh grew up in a traditional religious family. She is 23 years old and recently graduated from university. Razieh spent twelve years in different Islamic schools. She believes that in general her schools' religious training was almost the same with the exception of her high school, which she described as an "intellectual Islamic school." She explains that it was completely voluntary for them to follow Islamic rules and regulations in her high school. Razieh believed her high school played an important role in her current religious orientation.

My high school was totally different from the other Iranian Islamic schools... we had so much freedom in

the school ... Nothing was obligatory. I couldn't remember that they put any pressure on us... actually, my school was so similar to the reality of the society, and nobody forces you to do the Islamic rituals when you enter the society. You are alone to decide. In my school, we always decide by ourselves to pray or not, for example... I think, the main target of our high school was to educate us in a way that we would become intellectual religious individuals in future... I think they have been successful... (Razieh, 23 years old).

## 5. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that religious socialization in the Iranian Islamic girl schools under study face several challenges, as expressed by our informants. By putting excessive religious pressures on the students, overemphasizing the performance of religious practices and rituals and insisting on observing all Islamic rules especially the *hijab* (the Islamic dress code for women), the schools caused the students to challenge the Islamic religious system, either completely or partially. In fact, most of our informants attempted to escape from the schools' religious pressures by rejecting the schools' religious education. The severity of the impact was dependent on several psychosocial and environmental factors, such as the degree of religious pressure that students experienced, the students' personality, and the quality and quantity of religious education at home. Undoubtedly, the relative success of one society or group in the religious socialization of its members is strongly dependent on the ability of that particular group to establish relative harmony between peoples' objectives and subjective worlds. In other words, no society or group can be successful in the socialization of its members when the members are not able to internalize the society's values and beliefs, either religious or secular.

In conclusion, the study findings demonstrate that the Islamic girl schools were not fully capable of creating a harmonious relationship between the young students' religious subjectivities and their religious objective worldviews in the Islamic school environment. The findings contrast with the existing literature (Erickson, 1992; Himmelfarb, 1979; Shah, 2004; Vermeer, 2010) in showing that the students' unpleasant feelings and negative attitudes toward their religious tradition and the Shiite religious worldview was at least partially due to the students' experiences in their schools' religious education programs.

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## Notes

Note 1. More statistics are available at <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/449185/society/education>

Note 2. A *chador* is a full-body-length semicircle of fabric that is open down the front. This cloth is tossed over

the woman's or girl's head, but then she holds it closed in the front. The chador has no hand openings, or any buttons, clasps, etc., but it is held closed by her hands or tucked under the wearer's arms.

Note 3. The names appeared in the table are pseudonyms. Real names are omitted due to ethical issues.

Note 4. In our study we attempted to select our informants in a way that we could also have the variety in the schools. Overall, our interviewees came from twenty two different Iranian Islamic girls schools located in Tehran.

Note 5. Ziarat-e-Ashura & Doa-e-Tavasol are two duas (supplications) written in *Mafatih al-Jinan*. Mafatih al-Jinan is a compilation of selected chapters from Quran, acts of worship after prayers, supplications narrated from the household of the Prophet and text of Ziyarats. It contains some of the richest and most reliable supplications and verses from the vast Shi'a literature.

## Appendix A

The profile of informants

Table 1. The profile of Informants

Name	Age	Marital Status	Years in Islamic Schools	Education
Fariba	22	Single	12	B. Student
Farnaz	23	Single	12	B.S.
Zohreh	22	Single	7	B.S.
Saba	24	Single	12	B.S.
Leila	22	Single	12	B. Student
Azadeh	22	Single	7	B.S.
Sheida	23	Single	7	B. student
Faezeh	23	Single	7	B. student
Sahar	23	Single	6	B.A.
Samaneh	21	Single	12	B. student
Parvaneh	22	Single	7	B. student
Farideh	22	Single	10	B. student
Zeinab	24	Single	4	M.S.
Razieh	23	Single	12	M. student
Zoha	22	Single	12	M. student
Mariam	23	Single	12	B.S.
Sara	25	Single	9	M.A.
Zahra	23	Married	5	B. Student
Neda	20	Single	6	B. Student
Raha	24	Single	10	B.A.
Sanam	23	Single	12	B. Student
Zoha	23	Single	5	B. Student
Shadi	24	Married	5	B.A.
Narges	23	Single	11	B.A.
Vafa	23	Single	7	B.S.
Elham	20	Single	4	B. Student
Fatemeh	25	Single	7	B.A.
Mona	23	Single	12	B.S.
Hoorah	23	Single	7	B.S.
Mahnaz	21	Single	12	B. Student

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