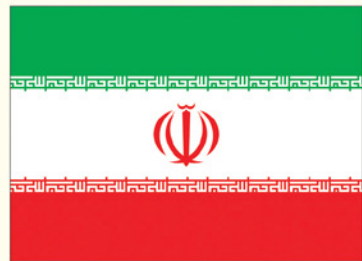


# Growing Up in Iran



Barbara Sheen



Growing Up  
AROUND THE WORLD

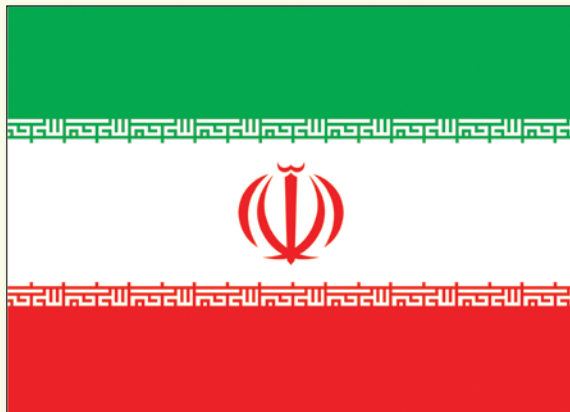
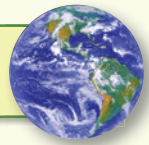


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# IRAN AT A GLANCE



## Official Name

Islamic Republic of Iran

## Size

636,371 sq. miles  
(1,648,193 sq. km)

## Total Population

82,801,633 as of 2016

## Youth Population ●

0–14 years: 23.65%

15–24 years: 16.57%

## Religion

Muslim: 99.4%

Other (Christian, Jewish,  
Zoroastrian): 0.3%

Unspecified: 0.4%

## Capital ●

Tehran

## Type of Government

Theocratic republic

## Language

Persian (53%), plus other unofficial languages, including Azerbaijani and other Turkic dialects (18%), Kurdish (10%), Gilaki and Mazandarani (7%), Luri (6%), Arabic (2%), and Balochi (2%)

## Currency ●

Iranian rial

## Industries

Petroleum, petrochemicals, gas, fertilizers, textiles, cement and other construction materials, food processing, metal fabrication, armaments

## Literacy ●

86.8% (age 15+); 98.7% (age 15–24)

## Internet Users

36.07 million, or 44.1% of population as of 2015



# CHAPTER TWO



## Home and Family

In a society in which behavior like listening to certain types of music or not observing religious rituals can get people into serious trouble, Iranians are cautious about how they behave in public and in whom they place their trust. Iranians say that they live two lives and have two distinct identities: a public identity, which is known as *zاهر*, and a private identity, which is known as *باتن*. Iranian youngsters learn from an early age to protect and maintain this separation. Says one teenager, “When we were six, we already knew there were two worlds: one at home and one at school. We knew that we could not talk about what went on at home with our classmates. We knew how to keep secrets. Soon, we understood who we could joke with and who we had to tell that our parents prayed 100 times a day.”<sup>15</sup>

In public, youngsters conform to accepted roles of behavior, such as observing important religious holidays, following dress codes, and keeping their distance from members of the opposite sex. But in their homes, surrounded by their families, they can be themselves without worrying about societal rules. Teen Maryam uses the chador that she wears in public as an example of this dual existence: “I’m only wearing it because I have to. My heart wants something else entirely. The chador actually sums up the essence of Iran: underneath it, many women wear sexy lingerie—just as Iran looks Islamic on the outside, but if only you knew how things are really like underneath. All Iranians have a split personality.”<sup>16</sup>

Iranian families support and trust each other. Home and family provide young Iranians with a safe haven where they can express themselves freely and do things like watch banned movies without worry. Home and family are the backbone of society, and trusting and helping family members is the norm.

## The Nuclear Family

The majority of young Iranians grow up in a traditional nuclear family that consists of a father, mother, and siblings. The average age of marriage is twenty-two for women and twenty-seven for men. And most Iranian youngsters have at least one sibling. On average, urban couples have two children, and rural couples have three.

**“The chador actually sums up the essence of Iran: underneath it, many women wear sexy lingerie—just as Iran looks Islamic on the outside, but if only you knew how things are really like underneath. All Iranians have a split personality.”<sup>16</sup>**

—Maryam, an Iranian teenager

Traditionally, Iranian families are patriarchal in structure. The father is the head of the household. He is the chief decision maker, primary breadwinner, and spiritual leader of the family. He expects obedience and respect from his wife and children, and he usually gets it. Although approximately 30 percent of Iranian women work outside the home, women are responsible for child rearing and running and maintaining the household. The nation's laws support this structure, giving superior legal status to men. For instance, if a couple divorces, the law automatically grants the father custody of the children.

Children are the center of a married couple's life. Girls are usually more sheltered than boys, especially after they reach puberty. In Iranian culture a daughter is considered a precious jewel. If she is modest and chaste, she can marry well and bring honor to her family. If not, she can ruin her family's standing in society. Therefore, protecting her virtue is vital. Indeed, from a young age boys are taught that they must help protect their family's honor. It is not unusual to see little boys scolding their sisters for any action that shows a lack of modesty.

Both sons and daughters are doted upon by their parents. Wealthy families often buy teenage children expensive jewelry, designer clothes, and luxury cars. Yet Iranian youngsters are rarely spoiled. As soon as they are old enough to understand, they are taught to respect and trust their parents and to put their family's needs above their own.

Children are also raised to be dependent on their parents. Middle-class and wealthy families usually support their children

until they finish their education and secure well-paying employment. Poorer families provide whatever financial support they can.

This dependency goes beyond financial support and extends into adulthood. Typically, parents are closely involved in making major decisions in their grown children's lives, including their career choice and spouse selection. Unlike in the West, where a couple's decision to marry is a private matter, in Iran both sets of parents play a vital role in the process. In many cases mothers scout out prospective mates for their children. In other cases the prospective couple already knows and cares for each other. They then share their interest in each other with their mothers. In either situation, once a prospective mate is identified, the mothers arrange one or more get-togethers between the couple and their parents. This allows the young people and the families to interact and get to know each other better. It is important that everyone get along, share common values, and feel they can trust each other, because when individuals marry, their families become entwined. Generally, the new relatives become privy to each other's private home lives. Also, in many cases the families



*A family in Tehran makes a snowman. Children are doted upon by their parents and are often the center of attention.*

merge business and financial interests. In fact, before a couple weds, their families draw up a marriage contract that specifies a wide array of financial details.

## Extended Family

The new in-laws become part of each other's extended families. Extended family members form a complex group, similar to a tribe, that includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins, as well as non-blood relations who are connected to each other via marriage. Such groups can be quite large. Often, extended family members live close together in family compounds or on the same street. But even if they do not, Iranians consider extended family ties to be extremely important. As D.D., an American woman married to an Iranian, explains, "Their lives are like a big spider web. Each life is intricately woven together. . . . As Americans we are individuals doing our own thing. . . . This is not true of Iranian culture."<sup>17</sup>

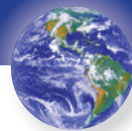
**"Their lives are like a big spider web. Each life is intricately woven together. . . . As Americans we are individuals doing our own thing. . . . This is not true of Iranian culture."<sup>17</sup>**

—D.D., an American woman married to an Iranian man

The large web that extended family forms creates a supportive network that is available when family members need help finding employment, caring for the sick and elderly, assisting with child care, or providing financial support. Grandmothers typically take care of new mothers and babies for at least ten days after the birth. And extended family members have been known to offer their savings or the deed to their homes to help relatives in financial or legal trouble. In fact, it is common for successful family members to help support poorer ones. Moreover, large family groups

often share ownership of businesses and property and take out loans as a unit. This is not surprising, since family members trust each other.

Iranian families also come together to celebrate special events and religious festivals. Those who live far apart stay connected via frequent Skyping, as well as journeying to and staying in each other's homes. Therefore, Iranian teens are used to having houseguests. Hospitality is a vital part of Islamic teachings and Iranian



## Iranian Weddings

Once a couple becomes engaged, wedding plans begin. Iranians typically have elaborate weddings that are extremely costly. All wedding expenses are paid by the groom's parents. The bride's family is expected to provide the couple with furniture, linens, cookware, appliances, and other large and small items needed to start a new home, as well as a gift of cash, jewelry, and/or property. Among the wealthiest families, the last may even include a house or apartment. This is important because unmarried children usually live with their parents until they wed, so they bring few of their own household items into the marriage. The parents' vital involvement in the wedding itself and in helping set the couple up in their new life tightens both the parents' bond with the couple and their control over them.

In addition, before a couple marries, they and their parents agree on a set amount of money that the groom is required to pay the bride in case they divorce in the future. This is done because a husband has the right to divorce his wife at any time. The husband is not required to pay alimony or provide any financial support to his ex-wife. A wife has no say in the matter and cannot divorce her husband without the husband's permission. In some cases the couple adds a clause to their marriage contract that gives the woman the same divorce rights as the man.

culture. In Iran, according to author Margaret Shaida, "a guest is a gift from God."<sup>18</sup> And because the web of extended family is so complex, it is not unusual for the guests to be virtual strangers who are friends or acquaintances of distant relatives.

## A Variety of Homes

Houseguests are welcomed into a variety of homes. The type of home young Iranians grow up in depends on the location and the family's financial status. But no matter the type of building, Iranian homes provide teens a safe place where they can be themselves away from the restrictions of public life.

Teens growing up in cities often live in an apartment building. The apartments of wealthy families are frequently located in luxurious high-rise buildings surrounded by tall, locked gates. Inside the gates are fountains, reflecting pools, and artfully planted greenery. The buildings themselves feature ornate lobbies, banks

of elevators, and many of the amenities found in posh hotels. Author Jamie Maslin describes his friend Ali's residence:

Two huge security gates opened up for us, revealing a palatial, ultramodern apartment building. A beautifully tiled driveway led past several floodlit fountains showering a vast pool, and down to an underground parking area. Inside it was like a five-star hotel with a vast lobby decorated in marble and gold and carpeted with an exquisite Persian rug. In the basement there was a full gym, a communal swimming pool, steam room, and sauna.<sup>19</sup>

Less privileged urban teens live in small one- or two-room houses made of metal and concrete or in comfortable but more modest apartment complexes that are usually shielded by exterior walls that keep out street noise. Rural teens often grow up in small houses that may look unappealing from the outside but are quite comfortable within. Author Nicholas Jubber describes his friend Khamandar's rural home:

Khamandar and his family lived in a rickety old brick house just off the village's main street, where the railings teetered off the third story balcony like they weren't sure to which floor they belonged. . . . When you ventured outside through the abandoned ground floor, it was like you were wading through a ship that's got itself stuck on the mudflats. But [inside] no household could ever have been as warm.<sup>20</sup>

Other rural teens grow up in sprawling compounds in which multiple family members reside. Each family group has its own set of rooms, but everyone shares a kitchen. Typically, all the rooms open onto a courtyard, where fountains bubble, pomegranate trees blossom, and caged birds sing. Here family members drink tea, relax, and visit as children play and teens hang out together. Still other rural teens live in unique homes that are carved like steps, one above the next, into the sides of mountains. One dwelling's roof serves as the yard of the one above it.

Whether urban or rural, lavish or modest, most Iranian homes have electricity and piped-in water and natural gas. Most have

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