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Documentary

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# Iran's Runaway Girls Challenge the Old Rules

*Runaway*, a documentary film directed by Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, was shot in late 2000 in Tehran, and is set in Rayhaneh House, a shelter for runaway girls. Like their earlier *Divorce Iranian Style*, *Runaway* shows how Iranian women are learning to challenge the old rules, and how rapidly their country is changing. The film follows the stories of five teenagers, exploring their longing for freedom, their hopes for a brighter future, and their experiences of society's double rules and standards when it comes to gender rights. The shelter is run by the dynamic and charismatic Mrs Shirazi and her team of counsellors, who protect the girls from their families and help to renegotiate their relationships.

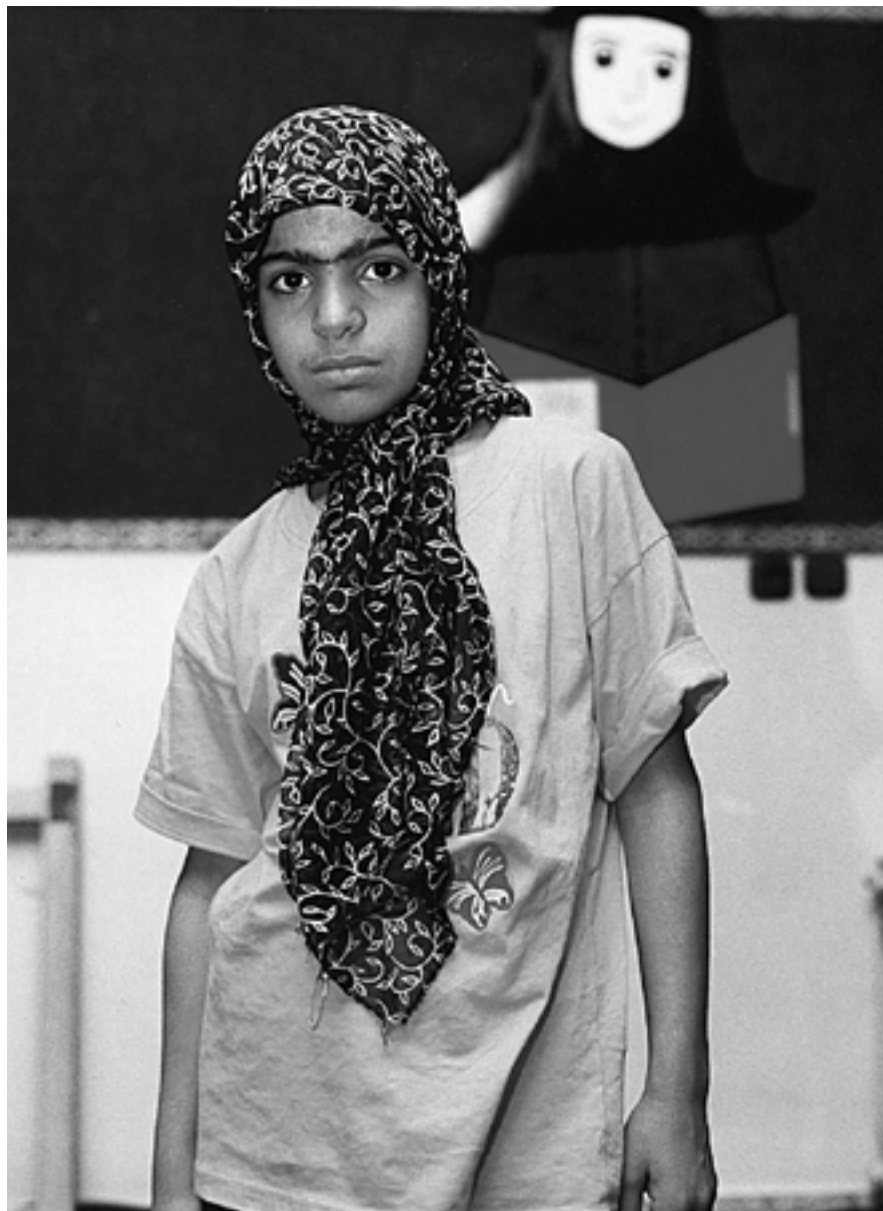
The film portrays the courage and resourcefulness of the rebellious new generation of Iranian women. It opens with Monireh, a teenage girl who has run away from home. She is not new to Rayhaneh nor are her grievances unique: they are shared by many teenage girls in contemporary Iran who feel that they have little freedom to do what they want in life, that their parents do not understand them.

Then come the stories of the film's five main characters. Maryam, a boisterous 12-year-old, comes from Doroud, a small town in the west, far from Tehran. She ran away from her abusive brother. Setareh's family broke up after her mother's death; her father became a drug dealer and prostituted her to feed his addiction, then disappeared, most likely arrested. Setareh became homeless, was picked up by the police, then after some time in prison was sent to Rayhaneh to rebuild her life. At the shelter, 19-year-old Setareh starts to reinvent herself, and becomes a source of strength and comfort to other girls. A close friendship develops between her and 17-year-old Parisa, who, the counsellors suspect, is not revealing her true identity. Indeed, it turns out that far from being without family as she claimed, Parisa is engaged to be married. She ran away because she failed her exams and was frightened that her father would beat her. Atena, already twice divorced at 18, was first married off at the age of 12 by her mother, who no longer wanted her at home. Her first husband kept her chained up, but Atena managed to get a divorce and returned to her mother. When her stepfather tried to rape her, she escaped. The film ends with a second Parisa, an 18-year-old who ran away from her abusive father and brother – both drug addicts who deprived her of basic rights and took out their anger and frustration on her. After a week on her own in the park – surrounded by 'wolves' – Parisa turns herself in to the police. She is sent to Rayhaneh, where she is offered a chance to continue her studies and start an independent life. But Parisa decides to go back to her family, who desperately need her, despite having abused her.

## Facing reality

The problem of girls suffering abuse at home and running away from intolerable situations is neither new in Iran nor confined to particular sections of Iranian society. It is an age-old and deep-rooted phenomenon that until recently was shrouded in secrecy and ignored by the authorities. But the creation of the Rayhaneh House in October 1999 as a temporary shelter for runaway girls, and the media attention this centre has received, are transforming the issue from a taboo subject into a pressing social problem.

Two factors are at the root of this transformation. First, a new generation of girls recognize that they have rights and are no longer prepared to put up with domestic



► A scene from *Runaway*.

abuse. By running away from home, these girls both register a protest and seek to change their situation. Secondly, the unexpected victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election, and the birth of a reformist movement, also brought a less ideological approach to social problems, which has gradually opened a space for a public debate on many taboo subjects.

The very existence of Rayhaneh, its philosophy and its strategy for dealing with the problem of runaway girls run parallel to the history of the reformist movement which found a voice in the structure of power after the election of President Mohammed Khatami in 1997. Since then the reformists, who enjoy massive popular support (as shown in the four elections conducted since), have been locked in a fierce political battle with their opponents, who have so far managed to block most of their legislative moves. At the heart of the battle lies one of the main ideological conflicts that is now being fought in Iran – over the very notion of 'rights'. The early discourse of the Islamic Republic, premised on the notion of duty (*taklif*) as understood and constructed in Islamic jurisprudence, is now challenged by a reformist discourse premised on the notion of *haqq* (right) as advocated by modern democratic ideals.

*Runaway* gives us a glimpse of how this wider ideological struggle is playing itself out in the lives of individuals. It is the story of a struggle for dignity, respect and human rights. As each story unfolds in front of the camera, we learn about the gender biases, contradictions and double standards of the

patriarchal culture in which these young girls live. We come to appreciate how strong and resourceful they are, how much they are needed by their families, and yet how, in the name of preserving the 'family honour' and 'fulfilling their duties', they are deprived of basic human rights. We also learn about the centre, its counsellors and their conflicting judgements and decisions about the girls; we learn about the world outside the centre, which both girls and counsellors refer to as 'full of wolves'. It is a world that is changing fast: old rules and boundaries are breaking down and the new ones are hazy and fragile.

## Making connections: shooting *Runaway*

By the year 2000 there were 22 centres for runaway girls nationwide. Rayhaneh is the only one that allows media access. The rest, mostly run by the Social Services Organization, impose a strict ban. Aware of the important role of media, Rayhaneh is keen to have its philosophy and the plight of the runaway girls publicized. But it has also had to deal with the harmful impact of media attention on the girls. Concerned about the possibly intrusive effect of a film crew on the girls, the director, Mrs Shirazi, at first agreed to let us film only for a few days. But the girls accepted us almost immediately; as they began to trust us with their stories, we – the three women in the film crew (Kim Longinotto as director and camera, myself as co-director and Mary Milton as sound) – soon became part of the healing process. It was only then that Mrs Shirazi gave us a free

hand and let us stay until we had completed our shoot. We tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, but we never filmed without the consent of the girls or their families. We filmed at Rayhaneh over a period of four weeks in November and December 2000. At the time, there were 15 girls who had been in the shelter for some time, but we sought stories structured by arrivals and departures, following the stories in between. Our decision was largely based on the fact that the emotional drama was high; and we wanted our stories to have resolutions. Once we had chosen our characters, we kept close to them and followed what was happening to them as closely as we could. When editing the film, we were concerned to place the focus on the girls and their individual stories, rather than on Rayhaneh as a centre or on the world outside.

As in *Divorce*, we were aware that we were dealing with a universal issue; the problem of runaway girls is not peculiar to Iran. We wanted our film to give a voice to these girls, to let them tell their own stories, and through their stories to show Rayhaneh, the counsellors and the dynamic and powerful director, Mrs Shirazi. We wanted the film to show their consensus approach to the problems, and how they set up delicate 'reconciliations' between the runaway girls and their families. We see these women disagreeing with each other, and giving differing advice to girls; we see them exasperated by the lack of legal support for their organization. At one point, we hear Mrs Shirazi telling Parisa's father that, if he fails to keep to his guarantee and starts to maltreat Parisa or she runs away again, she will take him to the International Court in The Hague. Perhaps it is an empty threat – certainly it is a bluff – but it tells of the extent to which human rights discourse has made its impact in reformist Iran. Similarly, the fact that unlike in the case of *Divorce* we did not have to go through an ordeal to get our permit to film tells something of the ways in which the reformist government of Khatami has been successful in creating a more open society in Iran. This time our main negotiation was with Rayhaneh and Mrs Shirazi, whose principal concern was to protect the girls from the film crew.

*Runaway* is distributed in North America by Women Make Movies (<http://www.wmm.com>) and in Europe and the rest of the world by the Royal Anthropological Institute ([http://www.therai.org.uk/film/video\\_sales.html](http://www.therai.org.uk/film/video_sales.html)).

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