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Lack of Access to Inclusive Quality Education for Children with Disabilities in Iran

An Iranian student sits in a wheelchair in a classroom with fellow students. May 2019 Fars News Agency

For most children with disabilities in Iran, going to school is an out-of-reach dream. For the relative few who are able to attend, the experience is often a hard one.

During the 2018-2019 school year, only 150,000 out of an estimated 1.5 million children with disabilities of school age were enrolled in school; 43 percent in mainstream, and the rest in special schools. A 2017 Iranian government study found that disability was the most common reason for children to be out of the classroom.

There are many reasons for their exclusion, including a mandatory medical assessment, physical inaccessibility, discriminatory attitudes of school staff, and lack of adequate training for teachers and school principals in inclusive education methods.

In recent years, the Iranian government has adopted some measures to improve access to education for children with disabilities, including by significantly increasing the budget for their education, and establishing physical accessibility requirements for newly built or renovated schools. It has also expanded some support to children with disabilities attending mainstream schools by offering accessible education material, including in braille or audio formats.

But these measures are insufficient to ensure children with disabilities can access education on an equal basis with other children as guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Iran ratified in 2009, unless there is an overall focus on guaranteeing inclusive education throughout the Iranian education system. Inclusive education involves children with and without disabilities studying together in classrooms in mainstream schools in their communities, with support as necessary. Research shows that an inclusive approach can boost learning for all students and combat harmful stereotypes of people with disabilities.

This report is based on research including 37 interviews with people in Iran, including children with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, activists and government officials conducted by Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI, formerly the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) between June 2016 and July 2018, as well as additional research by CHRI between August 2018 to March 2019.

It follows a 2018 report by Human Rights Watch and CHRI that documented, more generally, discrimination and lack of accessibility for people with disabilities, stigmatized abusive behavior particularly on the part of some state officials, as well as barriers in transportation and access to healthcare.

The Iranian government does not allow Human Rights Watch and CHRI to enter the country to conduct independent investigations. As a

result, all interviews were conducted in Persian (Farsi) over secure messaging applications.

No child should be considered uneducable or otherwise excluded from education. International law, namely the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Iran ratified in 2009, guarantees the right to a quality, inclusive education for children with disabilities. Iran's Constitution guarantees free education for all until the end of secondary school.

The report identifies numerous barriers for children with disabilities to access a quality, inclusive education. In general, we found girls with disabilities, children with intellectual disabilities and autism, and children in remote or rural areas most likely to be excluded. One major obstacle is stigma and lack of information about the right to education among parents, who told us that they fear social judgment that wrongly attributes a child's disability to parents' sins or genetic defects, and that their children—both those with disabilities and siblings without disabilities—will be bullied in school.

Another significant barrier for children with disabilities to access a quality, inclusive education is the mandatory medical assessment for school enrollment that all Iranian children must undergo. The assessment determines whether children are educable based on an IQ (intelligence quotient) test, and whether they are allowed to enroll in a mainstream school, or if they must go to a special school. Children with an IQ below 70 are considered to have intellectual disabilities. Those with an IQ between 50 to 70 are deemed educable and must enroll in special schools; children with an IQ under 50 are considered uneducable and cannot attend any school.

One parent described learning that her 7-year-old daughter, who is blind and has difficulty communicating, had been deemed uneducable after her medical assessment:

According to Iran's Special Education Organization, responsible for the education of children with disabilities, there were 1,570 special schools in Iran in 2019; some are specialized according to disability, while others, particularly in rural areas, admit children with different disabilities. Special schools segregate children on the basis of disability and do not guarantee children's right to a quality, inclusive education.

In some cases, mainstream schools refuse to admit some children with disabilities who have passed the mandatory medical assessment. Parents must jump through many hurdles and seek out several schools to enroll their children in mainstream schools, often arguing with resistant principals.

Children with disabilities who do enroll in schools face various barriers accessing a quality education once there. These include inaccessible buildings, classrooms, and toilets, and/or lack of aides and other support, known as reasonable accommodations. Reasonable accommodation is a key component of the right to inclusive education. Accommodations may include hearing aids; braille textbooks, audio, video, and easy-to-read learning materials; instructions in sign language for children with hearing disabilities; structural modifications to schools, such as ramps for children in wheelchairs; and additional qualified staff to assist children with self-care, behavior, or other support needed in the classroom. The denial of reasonable accommodations constitutes discrimination.

For example, children who are blind and teachers interviewed said that audio and Braille textbooks often arrived late, incomplete, outdated, and of low production quality.

Inaccessibility and lack of reasonable accommodations in schools may mean that parents must attend school with their children in order to move them around the school or to provide other support. These barriers may also force some children with disabilities to drop out of school, to enroll in a school far from home, or even have no choice but to attend a residential special school, where children live separated from their families often for many months at a time.

One mother, Najmeh, described how for three years she had made herself available every day to help her 9-year-old daughter Shabnam use the inaccessible bathroom at school. They [staff] suggested that I put her in diapers, but Shabnam does not accept diapers at all, Najmeh said. Since school staff did not allow Najmeh to wait inside the school, she sat waiting inside her car. When Shabnam's father fell ill, Najmeh had to take care of him too. Because of that, sometimes I couldn't come to the school, and Shabnam had to spend the day without relieving herself, Najmeh said.

Training for teachers in inclusive education methods remains limited, also hindering full access to education for children with disabilities. Instead of mainstreaming inclusive education methods and principles in all teacher curricula at universities, special education teaching is offered as a separate program at some universities. New teachers are either trained as special education teachers or as mainstream teachers without the skills and knowledge required for inclusive education.

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which monitors countries' compliance with their obligations under the CRPD, found in its 2017 review of Iran many of these same concerns. The committee criticized the low prevalence of special education, the low number of children in mainstream schools, and the gap between girls and boys with disabilities attending mainstream education. It also expressed concern about the lack of measures to train teachers, education personnel, and parents about inclusive education, as well as the lack of reasonable accommodation and support for students in mainstream settings.

The Iranian government should transform its approach to education of children with disabilities, replacing the current approach focused on medical assessments, exclusion, and special education with a human rights-based approach. The government should formulate all policy-making, planning and monitoring activities in a way that ensures all children, regardless of disability, can benefit from inclusive quality education on an equal basis. To fulfill this obligation, the government should end discriminatory medical assessments and ensure reasonable accommodations and accessibility in schools. The education system, including teachers, the school environment, and education methods should be reformed to meet needs of diverse learners. Failing to do this can mean thousands of children in Iran left out of education and cut off from one of the key pathways to participating in and contributing to society throughout their lives.

The initial research of this report was conducted during a joint project by Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI, formerly the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) between June 2016 and July 2018. Additional research was conducted by the Disability Rights Division of CHRI between August 2018 to March 2019.

One researcher conducted 37 interviews with people living in Iran for this report, conducting all interviews in Persian (Farsi) over secure messaging applications. We interviewed 14 parents of children with different disabilities, and 4 children with disabilities all above 12. Interviewees also included: 9 teachers; 7 disability rights advocates, and 3 officials of the Special Education Organization, responsible for the education of students with disabilities.

This report uses pseudonyms for all interviewees except one and withholds other identifying information to protect their privacy and security. Locations of interviewees are also obscured for some interviewees to safeguard their security. Childrens ages are at the time of the interview.

For the last 30 years, the Iranian government has rarely allowed international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and CHRI to enter the country and conduct independent investigations. Irans record on independent criticism and free expression more broadly has been dismal, particularly over the past decade. Hundreds of activists, lawyers, human rights defenders, and journalists have been prosecuted for peaceful dissent. Iranian citizens are often wary of carrying out extended conversations on human rights issues via telephone or email, fearing government surveillance, which is also widespread across social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and the Telegram messaging application. The government often accuses its critics inside Iran, including human rights activists, of being agents of foreign states or entities, and prosecutes them under Irans national security laws.^[1]

Where available, Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran incorporated government statistics and officials statements into this analysis.

The researcher sought to interview people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds; however, most interviewees we were able to contact lived in urban settings in relatively good conditions, meaning they did not face significant economic hardship, often due to family support. Due to communication and security barriers, persons who are deaf and persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities are less represented among the interviewees compared to people with other types of disabilities. Persons who are deaf were interviewed in writing through secure messaging applications.

The researcher asked interviewees to suggest a time slot and asked them to feel free to interrupt the interview any time if they felt uncomfortable either with the questions or due to any perceived threat to their security.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the interview and the ways in which the information would be used and were assured anonymity. None of the interviewees received financial or other incentives for speaking with the researcher.

In February 2017, Human Rights Watch sent a letter to Irans Special Education Organization requesting information and response to questions about access to inclusive education for children with disabilities in Iran. At time of writing, it had yet to respond. The letter is annexed to this report.

The education system in Iran includes preschool, elementary school, lower secondary education, and higher secondary education. There are separate schools for boys and girls, and schools can be public or private. The Ministry of Education is responsible for basic and secondary education, including teacher-training programs.^[2]

The Ministry of Educations Special Education Organization (SEO) oversees the education of students with disabilities in special schools and mainstream schools.^[3] The SEO has the responsibility to implement a mandatory school enrollment assessment, known as the School Beginner National Health and Educability Assessment (Educability Assessment); draft and publish educational material for children with disabilities in different formats; and employ, train and retrain teachers.^[4]

As of the 2018-2019 school year, there were 1,570 special schools in Iran, including 28 boarding schools and 24 private schools.^[5] In populated areas, special schools can be organized based on disability, such as for children who are blind, or for children with intellectual disabilities. A special school can also enroll children with all types of disabilities. This is common in smaller cities. Special schools that segregate children on the basis of disability do not guarantee childrens right to a quality, inclusive education.

In addition to providing education and rehabilitation services to students with disabilities, 800 special schools, known as supporting schools, support the education of children with disabilities who attend local mainstream schools. Each of these supporting schools support a few mainstream schools in their area with registering children with disabilities, including through assigning special education teachers (known as resource teachers) to support children with disabilities a few hours per week and providing educational materials in different formats, for example Braille or audio books.^[6]

Not all mainstream schools enroll children with disabilities. Those which do are known as admitting schools. In our research we were not able to identify official data on the number of admitting schools. In some mainstream schools located in remote or rural areas, children with disabilities are educated in separate classrooms known as annex classrooms.

During the 2018-2019 school year, more than 14 million children were registered in primary and secondary schools in Iran.^[7] That same year, according to a senior Iranian official, only 150,000 children registered with disabilities were enrolled in school. There are an estimated 1.5 million school-age children with disabilities in Iran.^[8] Approximately 65,000 children with disabilities attended mainstream schools and 85,000 attended special schools.^[9]

There are no reliable official statistics on the number of out-of-school children in Iran, including children with disabilities. A 2019 report by the Iranian parliaments research center found that different government reports estimate the total number of children out of school to be as low as 130,000 or as high as 3 million. There is no comprehensive data on children with disabilities who are out of school.^[10]

A 2017 research study led by the Ministries of Social Welfare, Communication, and Education identified 130,000 children ages 5 to 11 across Iran who were out of school. In interviews with 80,000 families of these children, parents indicated that disability is the main cause of children being out of school, primarily due to lack of physical accessibility in communities.^[11]

Disability rights activists have found out that children with disabilities living in remote areas and small villages, especially girls and those

living in poverty, are most likely to be excluded from education.[\[12\]](#)

According to the CRPD, governments should collect information, including disaggregated statistical and research data disaggregated by age, sex, gender, ethnic background, and migrant, asylum seeker and refugee status to enable effective policies to implement the convention.[\[13\]](#) Iranian law also requires the national census to collect data on people with disabilities, including the type of disability.[\[14\]](#)

Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran identified numerous barriers for children with disabilities to access a quality, inclusive education. One major obstacle is the School Beginner Medical Assessment, a mandatory medical assessment for school enrollment that determines whether children are educable or not, and if they are deemed educable, whether they can attend mainstream school or must go to a special school only for children with disabilities.

Staff of some mainstream schools refuse to admit some children with disabilities who have passed the medical assessment. Stigma, as well as a lack of information about the right to education among parents, also result in the exclusion of many children from education. Girls with all types of disabilities, children with intellectual disabilities and autism, and children living in remote or rural areas are the most likely to be excluded.[\[15\]](#)

Ahmad Medadi, a former teacher and teachers rights activist, described some main features of Iran's education system:

As a prerequisite for enrollment in primary school, every 6-year-old child in Iran must undergo the mandatory School Beginner Health and Educability Assessment jointly administered by the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and the Special Education Organization.

At local assessment sites, a doctor and a nurse first examine the physical health of the child. Then medical professionals assess the child's vision, hearing, cognitive abilities, and overall health. Five professionals are involved: a medical doctor, a nurse, an optometrist, an audiologist, and a psychologist. If they believe that the child may have a disability or health condition, the child is referred to a different assessment site for a secondary assessment.[\[17\]](#)

The secondary assessment includes an IQ (intelligence quotient) test. Children with an IQ below 70 are considered to have intellectual disabilities. Of these, children with an IQ between 50 to 70 are deemed educable but must enroll in special schools.[\[18\]](#) Children with an IQ under 50 are considered ineducable and can attend no school whatsoever. They are grouped as trainable (IQ of 25-50) and care-needing (an IQ below 25). Children with autism, regardless of their IQ, who are found not to have control over urinating and defecating functions are also not allowed to attend any school.[\[19\]](#) Children with an IQ below 25 are categorized as care-needing and may be placed in State Welfare Organization (SWO) residential institution.[\[20\]](#)

In recent decades, education experts and some scientists have criticized the legitimacy and usefulness of IQ tests, arguing that they are fundamentally flawed and have contributed to discrimination on the basis of race, socioeconomic status, and disability.[\[21\]](#) IQ tests have been used, among other things, to claim the intellectual superiority of whites and to justify sterilization of people with developmental disabilities in the early to mid-20th century.[\[22\]](#)

For children with disabilities, IQ tests have been used to segregate students in special education programs, rather than including them in the general education system.[\[23\]](#) Additionally, academic research has shown that autism and intellectual functioning are independent of one another, and that IQ test scores are a poor indicator of intelligence of people with autism.[\[24\]](#)

Iran's Special Education Organization under the Ministry of Education is responsible for the education of children considered educable. The State Welfare Organization is responsible for children deemed ineducable. Children with intellectual disabilities or autism with an IQ below 50 may access rehabilitation, education, speech therapy, and occupational therapy in SWO's day centers and receive preparation to join the special education system. Some children manage to pass the test [Educability Assessment] in subsequent years and end up doing well at school, one SWO official in a 2018 television interview said.[\[25\]](#) Upon turning 14, those children categorized as trainable may also join vocational training centers to learn simple skills such as carpentry, handicrafts, and gardening.

Those who pass the so-called educability threshold during the medical assessment are categorized in two main groups. Those with so-called mild needs are allowed to attend mainstream schools. This typically includes children with sensory or physical disabilities or those with learning disabilities. Children whose needs are considered to be high must attend special schools specifically for children with disabilities. This includes children with intellectual disabilities as well as children with moderate to high emotional-behavioral issues.[\[26\]](#)

Parents of children who were excluded from education described their disappointment and anger at learning their children would be denied education. For example, Sudabeh, mother of Rojin, a 7-year-old girl who is blind and has communication challenges, explained:

Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran could not identify any data on the number of children with disabilities identified as ineducable and excluded from education. Some local advocates working with children with intellectual disabilities and children with autism confirmed that many children are left out of education as a result of the medical assessment.

One activist in Tehran who has promoted the rights of people with intellectual disabilities for over 10 years said:

Another activist, Mona, manages an organization for people with disabilities in a city in eastern Iran. She interviewed dozens of children with disabilities excluded from education in 2018 and 2019. She described her findings:

A high-ranking official of a provincial Special Education Office described how their local offices determine placement of children with disabilities in mainstream or special schools:

Children with autism are among those frequently excluded from education. Based on World Health Organization estimates, there should be at least 118,000 children under 15 with autism in Iran.[\[31\]](#) However, only 7,000 school age children were registered with autism in Iran in 2018.[\[32\]](#) Of these, only 2,442 attended school: 2,264 in special schools, and 178 in mainstream schools, according to the

governments official figures.[\[33\]](#)

Regulations on education require local mainstream schools to admit children with disabilities who have passed the health and educability assessment. However, Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran found that some mainstream schools denied children with disabilities entry, even after a medical assessment authorized mainstream school enrollment.[\[34\]](#)

Some parents we interviewed described their efforts to enroll their children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Several parents had to seek enrollment at several different schools and argue with reluctant principals. In some cases, schools also required families to bring a special reference letter for their child from the local education office. In other cases, school officials forced parents to sign a waiver assuming liability for any injury or harm to their child or other children as a condition of enrollment.

Mani is a 10-year-old boy with low vision living in a town in western Iran. His mother, Mahtab, told us about the difficulties she faces registering him at school each year:

Because of the mainstream school denials, Mani has been forced to go to special schools for three years. Mahtab said that Mani does not like the special school because there are few children in a mixed-age classroom, and he misses attending school with his peers and neighbors. She also sees that the special school does not challenge him academically. He is not happy in the special school and no mainstream school accepts him. All this has caused him [to] hate school. He keeps crying and telling me that he doesn't want to go to school anymore, which is really heartbreaking for me, Mani's mother added.[\[36\]](#)

Farideh managed to register her then 7-year-old daughter, Bahar, in a primary mainstream school in May 2017. Three other schools had refused to enroll Bahar, who uses a wheelchair and has difficulties using her hands. Farideh explained:

Later, after taking Bahar out of school for some time due to the inaccessibility, Farideh and her husband managed to register Bahar in a school with accessible wheelchair ramps for the 2018-2019 school year. However, the school is far from their home, and they pay for transportation, which is a financial burden for the family. The principal of the new school also required Farideh to sign a document releasing the school from liability for any potential harm that might happen to Bahar at school.

Other parents of children with disabilities interviewed also said that mainstream schools required them to sign a document releasing the school from liability.[\[38\]](#) For example, Fozieh signed a release form in order to get her 14-year-old son Hatef registered in a mainstream school near their house in a town in northern Iran. Hatef has low vision and rickets, a condition that causes softening and distortion of bones. Fozieh explained:

A high-ranking official of a provincial Special Education Office stated that he is aware of many instances in which principals denied children with disabilities admission to schools. He said that in justifying their denials, Sometimes school staff say very inappropriate things about children with disabilities to their families.[\[40\]](#)

Mahrokh, who works as special education officer in a city in northern Iran, also confirmed that school principals frequently refuse to admit children with disabilities, even those deemed eligible for mainstream schools by the medical assessment. This is on us as special education officers to find a solution. We always try to solve the problem through negotiation. Sometimes we manage to convince the school to admit the disabled child. In other instances, we find another mainstream school willing to register the child. Mahrokh said that as a result of these denials and the lack of nearby special schools, some children with disabilities remain out of education.[\[41\]](#)

With regards to the obligation of mainstream school to enroll children with disabilities, in 2017 Ali Rabie, Minister of Labor and Social Welfare, was quoted in a news outlet saying, Only children with intellectual disabilities are not able to attend mainstream schools. Other than that, school principals have the obligation to register children with physical [and sensory] disabilities.[\[42\]](#) Rabie added that, if reported, school principals who denied education to children would receive a warning for the first offense and be held accountable in case of recurrence. He did not provide any further information on the type of punitive measures taken against principals nor the number of principals actually held accountable.

Our research did not identify any regulations stipulating penalties or disciplinary measures against school principals who refuse to register children on the basis of disability. Mahrokh, the special education officer in northern Iran, confirmed: I am not aware of any legal penalties for principals refusing to register disabled children, and I have never heard of any principal punished for refusal.[\[43\]](#)

Disability-rights advocates interviewed across Iran confirmed that many children with disabilities do not attend school because of pervasive social stigma and stereotypical beliefs about having a child with a disability. Parents whom we interviewed said they fear the bullying of their child with disability and the bullying of their other children. Some parents fear social judgment that attributes a child's disability to parents' sins or faults. Some families are also concerned that some individuals will consider that families with a child with a disability might have a genetic deficiency in the family. This could impact their other children's prospects of finding a spouse willing to marry and start a family with them.

Parental stigma particularly affects girls with disabilities living in rural or remote areas. Sudabeh, mother of Rojin, a seven-year-old girl with communication difficulties who is blind living in a small town in western Iran, said that her husband does not support her efforts to enroll Rojin in school, and wants to keep Rojin at home:

Ehsan, a disability rights advocate in a town in western Iran, said that he knows many children with disabilities in his province who are currently out of school due to stigma:

Amin has worked as teacher in special schools in different towns near Tehran for more than 10 years, and confirmed that many children with autism do not access education due to stigma:

Mona, the disability advocate quoted previously, indicated that forcing children to enroll in special schools drives some parents to keep their child with disability out of school altogether. For some, this is because they don't want to be known as having a child who is not able to go to mainstream schools. For others, they [wrongly] believe that by going to a special school their child would learn inappropriate

behavior from other children, she said.[\[47\]](#)

According to activists and parents interviewed, some children with disabilities do not attend school due to the governments failure to inform parents, government workers, and the public-at-large about the importance of education, as well as the potential and abilities of people with disabilities to learn. This is particularly the case for children with intellectual disabilities, autism, or other developmental disabilities.

Reza, who lives in a small city in western Iran with Sahand, his 13-year-old son with autism, said that even social workers from the State Welfare Organization office do not have much information about autism. Public awareness about autism is very low in our town. Even staff of the Welfare Organization and Special Education offices know little about it. They dont speak to parents about education of their kids and refer them to schools or services. They dont bother to guide us, he said.[\[48\]](#) Reza said that in their city, 25 children with autism are registered with the government, but only five go to school. He said: Most children with autism are kept at home by families and hardly seen in public.[\[49\]](#)

Mona, the advocate in eastern Iran quoted previously, also confirmed that parents frequently keep their children with disabilities out of school due to fear and lack of understanding. She said, My colleagues and I have done a lot of research on this, and I can tell you that a strong majority of children with disabilities, I can even claim 90 percent, are not attending school. I have talked to many kids between 7 to 18 who have never gone to school because families were not aware that they could be educated.[\[50\]](#)

Public national radio and television channels are the most widely available source of information for many families, even in rural and remote areas. If properly managed, these channels could play an essential role in raising public awareness about disability and combatting stigma and misconceptions about children with disabilities, including in education.

According to parents interviewed, the programs broadcast about children with disabilities are infrequent and mostly focused on drawing public empathy or charity, often viewing disability from a moral or religious lens. For example, Reza said:

I really want to support students with disabilities in my class. But its just me and 30 to 35 students, 90 minutes class time, and a challenging curriculum to teach. Schools in Iran are generally very poorly equipped to fulfill any needs. We even lack suitable tables for left-handed students. With limited facilities and no training for me as a teacher, I am not able to do much. I must allocate my time fairly to all my students and at the same time show an acceptable class record to school principals at the end of the year.

Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran found that children with disabilities enrolled in mainstream and special schools face various barriers accessing a quality education. Barriers include inaccessible buildings, classrooms, and toilets; a lack of sufficiently trained and qualified staff to teach children with disabilities; and/or the lack of aides and other reasonable accommodations.

Inaccessibility and lack of reasonable accommodations in schools may mean that parents attend school with their children in order to move them around the school or provide other support. These barriers may also force some children with disabilities to drop out of school, to enroll in a school far from home, or even be forced to attend a residential special school, living separated from their parents, often for many months at a time.

The CRPD requires the government to provide reasonable accommodations, or the necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure people with disabilities access education on an equal basis with others at all education levels. The denial of reasonable accommodations constitutes discrimination.

Under the CRPD, Iran is also obliged to ensure that schools are accessible to students with disabilities.[\[52\]](#) Facilities should be physically accessible to students, as should the education schools offer. This includes, for example, teaching materials and methods accessible to students who are blind or have hearing disabilities.[\[53\]](#) Iran is obliged to develop accessibility standards for the design of new facilities, products, and services and to take gradual measures to make existing facilities accessible.[\[54\]](#)

The Iranian educational system has an insufficient number of teachers overall. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2018 there was one teacher per 35 students in Iran. The student-teacher ratio is worsening, with many teachers scheduled to retire within the next few years.[\[55\]](#) In 2018, 23,000 special education teachers, the only educators trained in teaching children with disabilities, supported 150,000 children registered with disabilities in special and mainstream schools.[\[56\]](#)

Iran has a system of placing resource teachers, who are trained as special educators, in mainstream classrooms to provide individual academic support to children with disabilities. However, the government openly acknowledges that there are insufficient numbers of resource teachers available. According to a senior Special Education Organization official, referring to the situation in 2016 in mainstream schools:

This is a ratio of 134 students per resource teacher.

Ministry of Education standards stipulate four hours of support per week per student in mainstream schools on average. Thus, a single resource teacher can only support 11 students a week within their 44-hour workweek. This means that only about 4,000 students with disabilities in mainstream schools receive support from resource teachers; those that do may only receive four hours per week, which may not be sufficient to support their academic achievement.

Ahmad has worked for a few years as a resource teacher for blind students in a major city in southern Iran. He described his experience: I am a resource teacher for 10 blind and visually impaired students attending three different schools in different areas of the city. I have to split my time in a way to allocate four hours to each student [per week].[\[58\]](#)

Sahar, a 17-year-old high school student who is blind and attending a mainstream school, shared her experience with resource teachers:

According to disability rights activists, parents, and media interviews quoting government officials, schools in Iran, including special schools, are mostly inaccessible for children with physical disabilities, particularly those who use wheelchairs. Many have stairs at the

entrance and inside, and no ramps, elevators, or wheelchair lifts. Toilets are inaccessible, often partly because of a lack of commodes that allow a person to sit down, which is a common problem in public buildings in Iran. Due to the lack of aides in school to support children in this environment, parents described how they felt they had no choice but to spend all day at school or pay frequent visits during the day to move their children with disabilities around in the school, including carrying them up and down the stairs, or help them use the bathroom.

For three years, Najmeh made herself available every day to help her 9-year-old daughter Shabnam use the inaccessible bathroom at school. She said that sometimes school staff even failed to help Shabnam call her mother to take her to the bathroom. Her legs do not bend, so I have to hold her in my arms above the toilet. They suggested that I put her in diapers, but Shabnam does not accept diapers at all, Najmeh explained. School staff didn't allow me to wait inside the school. So, I waited outside [in my car]. Last year, Shabnam's father got sick, and I had to take care of him, too. Because of that, sometimes I couldn't come to the school, and Shabnam had to spend the day without relieving herself, she said.[\[60\]](#)

Najmeh had to give up taking Shabnam to school and decided to educate her at home for the 2018-2019 school year. I realized I can't do this anymore, she said. We had to sell our car, and so now I can't get to the school two to three times a day. I have other kids and other responsibilities. So, I will teach her myself with help of her older brother. I might also hire a private teacher for math lessons.[\[61\]](#)

Ghasem has been teaching in different boys high schools in Tehran for almost 20 years. He remembers a boy who used a wheelchair whose mother and school custodians helped carry him up the school stairs each day when he arrived at school. He had to spend all day in the classroom, including during the break or exercise time. He didn't drink or eat at school, so that he wouldn't have to use the toilet. If he needed to, then he had to call his mother and get her to come help him. I could see in his face how disappointed and shameful he felt, Ghasem said.[\[62\]](#)

In some cases, school directors refused to move the classroom from the upper floors to the ground floor to accommodate a student with physical disability. For example, Farideh told us that she had to carry her 7-year-old daughter Bahar, who uses a wheelchair, up and down stairs in the local school. According to Farideh:

Farideh developed serious back problems from carrying her daughter and a heavy wheelchair up and down the school stairs a few times a day. With no other option, she withdrew her daughter from school: My doctor said that I should immediately stop carrying heavy loads and start physiotherapy. So Bahar could not finish school last year. This year, [2018-2019 academic year], I found a school with ramps. But the new school is far from our house, and we have to pay for expensive transportation she said.[\[64\]](#)

Physical inaccessibility of schools is a general problem, according to government officials and non-governmental activists. For example, Mohammad Ali Afshari, head of the Board of Directors of Hamedan Society for Disabled Persons, a leading disabled persons organization in Hamedan province in western Iran, said in a media interview that he was not aware of a single school in the province that is physically accessible.[\[65\]](#)

There are 28 residential special schools in Iran where most children with disabilities in rural areas may end up due to lack of accessibility in the community or lack of accessibility and reasonable accommodation in local mainstream schools.[\[66\]](#) In some cases, added costs of accessing local mainstream schools have compelled some children to attend residential schools.

In addition to accessibility and reasonable accommodations, Iran should provide compulsory, free primary and secondary education to all children on an equal basis, including through financial assistance for those in need.[\[67\]](#) Children and families should not pay additional costs to reach school or to secure reasonable accommodations in school.

For example, Sahar and her sister, both blind, attended a residential special school for one year. We moved to a new city where the special school was far from our house. The school did not offer transportation to our neighborhood, and my father said that he couldn't give us a ride to school, nor could he afford taxi fees. So, we had to stay in the dormitory.[\[68\]](#)

Sahar described her boarding school experience in a sad tone:

Sahar and her sister faced difficulties remaining in contact with their family:

The government's efforts to improve physical accessibility in schools have not consistently met the actual needs of people with disabilities. The national Schools Renovation Organization (SRO) under the Ministry of Education and its provincial offices are responsible for monitoring and implementing any school construction or renovations.

According to government regulations, any newly built or renovated school must meet accessibility requirements including elimination of hazards, adjustment of blackboards to be visible to children sitting in wheelchairs, and making school hallways, entrances and bathrooms accessible including by installing ramps. The SRO must ensure that at least three schools are made physically accessible in each education district under the plan to extend barrier-free schools.[\[70\]](#)

We did not identify any government data on the number of new schools built in compliance with the official accessibility standards, nor on the measures that would be prescribed in case of failure to meet these standards.

Ehsan, a man with a physical disability living in a small town in western Iran, said that the single special school in his town where students with all types of disabilities enroll is not physically accessible. Once they built an entrance ramp, but it was too steep and useless, he added.[\[71\]](#)

In another case, Ahmad, who is blind and has worked in several mainstream schools as a resource teacher, said, When the authorities specify a certain school as an admitting school in big cities, they try to pick those which have better physical accessibility. In two out of the three schools where I work, officials had installed ramps to make entrances accessible for wheelchairs. Unfortunately, the ramps were too steep and students who use wheelchairs told me they had difficulty using these ramps independently.[\[72\]](#)

Many blind students in Iran enroll in mainstream schools, but they face many barriers to accessing a quality education. These include a lack of or low quality of education material in alternative formats, little opportunity to choose the preferred format of material, and inadequate support from school staff and teachers.

According to our research, teachers in Iran primarily rely on the remaining eyesight of children who have low vision by using larger fonts rather than teaching them to read Braille. This risks their future education and literacy should they lose their eyesight and are no longer able to use large font materials. In addition, Amin, an experienced special education teacher, explained, This may cause extra pressure on children and sometimes damage their eyesight. Teachers may also fail to work on improving touch capabilities of younger children which can make it difficult for them to read Braille with their fingers if they wish to do so in future.[\[73\]](#)

Blind children also face multiple barriers accessing quality educational material. Students and teachers interviewed said that both audio and braille textbooks often arrived late, incomplete, outdated, and are of low production quality.

Sahar and Nadia, two high school students who are blind, said that the content of standard textbooks is often updated, and had to rely on outdated audio or Braille versions of textbooks. Sometimes changes were so significant that they found the old audiobooks useless or even confusing. Sahar explained that in one recent school year her audiobooks arrived late. I got some Braille books in the third month of the school year, and some more halfway during the year. The second volume of some books never reached me.[\[74\]](#)

For students who are blind, books are provided either in Braille or as audio books. Children who are blind should be able to choose the book format most accessible and preferable to them, although schools in Iran do not always ensure a choice. Sahar said that she cannot read the Braille format of some textbooks. She explained, I cant read Braille contractions [short form of words to save space and reading time] in English, so even if I get those textbooks, I would still have difficulties. I requested to get an English textbook in ordinary Braille type instead of contraction form, but the local Special Education Office said it was impossible.[\[75\]](#)

Ahmad, a teacher experienced in teaching students who are blind, explained that since producing Braille books is more expensive, the Special Education Organization produces them only for subjects for which a book is required in the classroom, such as math, literature, Arabic, or English language. For history, science, geography, and other subjects for which books are not considered essential for classroom learning, schools provide only audio books, which the student can listen to at home.[\[76\]](#)

Many children who are deaf or hard of hearing attend mainstream schools in Iran but do not receive sufficient support to achieve their academic potential. The CRPD requires States Parties to facilitate the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community. Education of deaf children should be delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.[\[77\]](#)

Iranian sign language is not part of the school curricula for deaf children. School subjects are taught in Farsi only, not in Iranian sign language.[\[78\]](#) Children who are deaf or hard of hearing should receive education in both Iranian sign language, which allows them to communicate easily with others, and Farsi, to ensure they can read and write.

Our research found that Irans education system discourages learning and usage of sign language for deaf and hard of hearing children. Sirous, a senior official in a Special Education provincial office, said that the main method of teaching children who are hard of hearing is based on improving the remainder of the childs hearing: We use what is called auditory verbal therapy which means that we try to make the child to use his remaining hearing abilities. In this method, the therapists or teachers even cover their lips so that the child cant read lips and has no choice but to use his hearing.[\[79\]](#) Mohsen Ghafoorian, deputy director of the Special Education Organization, acknowledged in a 2017 interview that teachers are instructed not to use sign language for dictation exercises for deaf children.[\[80\]](#)

Behdad is a 14-year-old boy who is hard of hearing and attends a mainstream school in a city in eastern Iran. In a written interview with the researcher, he explained some of the barriers he faces at school. Behdad does not receive speech therapy or support in developing lip-reading skills. He relies on his limited hearing and the skills he has developed himself to read lips. He said:

Sign language is available in special schools for children who are deaf; however, as with all special schools, children are segregated from the community and isolated from their peers. A child should be not compelled to go to a special school due to the failure of a mainstream school to provide reasonable accommodations, such as sign language. For children who use sign language and attend mainstream schools where there may not be any or many other children who are deaf, schools can promote access to deaf culture and interaction between deaf children by cooperating with municipalities, other schools, and organizations of persons with disabilities.

Keyan, a 15-year-old boy who is hard of hearing, attends a special school for deaf boys but wishes to go to mainstream school. He explained, Everyone speaks in sign language in my school, my teachers and all my classmates. But I would like to go to the same school as my brother. I want to make friends with hearing children as well.[\[82\]](#)

Teachers in mainstream schools we interviewed confirmed that they have not received training in identifying or teaching deaf or hard of hearing students. Ghasem, a mainstream high school teacher said that once he found out that one of his students is hard of hearing only in the middle of the school year:

Iran is not yet doing enough to ensure quality, regular training of teachers in inclusive education. Instead of mainstreaming inclusive education methods and principles in all teacher curricula at universities, special education teaching is offered as a separate program at some universities. Therefore, new teachers are either trained as special education teachers or as mainstream teachers without the skills and knowledge required for inclusive education. The Special Education Organization will employ graduates of these programs as teachers in special schools. Since the number of teachers needed is more than these graduates, the Special Education Organization also employs people as teachers who have not received teaching training.

In a 2016 news interview, Mohsen Ghafoorian, deputy director of Special Education Organization, said:

None of the 10 teachers from different parts of the country interviewed for this research had received or heard of such DVDs. One education officer of the Special Education Office told us that even if the DVDs reach the teachers, there is no mechanism to ensure that

the teachers have really watched and absorbed the trainings.[85]

Our research found that many teachers working in mainstream schools have not received meaningful training on inclusive education methods or training on how to teach children with different disabilities. Shamsi and Ghasem, two mainstream teachers we interviewed, emphasized that the periodic mandatory professional trainings provided by the Ministry of Education do not include any information on disability inclusive teaching methods.[86]

Ahmad was working as a resource teacher for blind students in a mainstream school, when he learned that he had to teach a blind boy with autism. He described the situation:

Sahar, a girl who is blind, spent the first five years of her education in a special school for the blind and enrolled in a mainstream school in sixth grade. She described how the teacher was not prepared to support her inclusive education. In the first semester in mainstream school, the teacher kept telling me that she had no idea what to do with me. I couldn't learn anything, so my school marks dropped off a lot, Sahar explained.[88]

In some cases, school staff refrain from registering children with disabilities due to the lack of training capacity for teachers. Ghasem, a mainstream high school teacher, said that staff once refused to admit a blind high schooler in the school where he worked:

Our research also found that even in special schools, where teachers should be specialists in teaching children with disabilities, teachers also do not receive regular or sufficient training on disability-inclusive teaching methods and some teachers have no training whatsoever to educate children with disabilities. Special school teachers interviewed described the training offered to them by the Special Education Organization of the Ministry of Education as inadequate, irrelevant, and trivial.[90]

Ahmad, who works as a resource teacher, said, When I first started my job, [the Ministry of Education] gave me a general training on teaching skills which did not include much detail. They do organize some training workshops to update special education teachers and retrain them, but I have never been invited to any. Ahmad also said he did not receive enough support in his job. When they assign you to teach a class, you will be on your own. All other teachers in the school are as busy as you are, so you should not expect support from anyone.[91]

Amin, a special school teacher with experience teaching children with different disabilities said that professional development courses are only offered for teaching methods for deaf students and students with intellectual disabilities, and that he is not aware of any training available for teachers teaching children with other types of disabilities.[92]

In some cases, Special Education Offices assign teachers to special schools who have not even received training in teaching children with disabilities. Zohreh, who works in school for girls with intellectual disabilities, said:

Karim, also a special school teacher, said that he has seen philosophy, mathematics, theology, and civil engineering graduates being assigned to teach primary school children with disabilities in mainstream and special schools without proper training. Except those specifically educated in teaching kids with disabilities, no one else can be really helpful in our school. Even an education management graduate is not a suitable teacher because they do not learn about teaching methods needed here, he said.[94]

The Iranian Constitution guarantees free education for all through the secondary level.[95] The 2016 Charter on Citizenry Rights provides that persons with disabilities must enjoy education and opportunities to develop their skills consistent with their capabilities, and no one should be deprived of the opportunity to acquire knowledge or job skills due to their disabilities.[96] The government's education regulations also commit to make the mainstream education content and school environment accessible for students with disabilities. Those who register in mainstream schools should receive support from resource teachers and have access to necessary rehabilitation services.[97]

However, there is no legal guarantee of every child's right to access inclusive education. The 2015 Comprehensive Plan to Protect Disability Rights stipulates that students with severe learning, intellectual or multiple disabilities and any students who, according to the assessment of the experts from the Special Education Organization, are not able to study in regular educational environments will be placed in segregated special government educational centers.[98]

The CRPD Committee calls inclusive education a fundamental right of all learners.[99] Inclusive education is the practice of educating children with disabilities in mainstream schools in their neighborhood with the provision of supplementary aids and services where necessary, to allow children to achieve their full potential. The CRPD requires states to make education inclusive at all levels.[100]

As detailed by the CRPD Committee, inclusive education has been acknowledged as the most appropriate means for governments to guarantee universality and nondiscrimination in the right to education. An inclusive education system should focus on the full and effective participation, accessibility, attendance, and achievement of all students, especially those who are at risk of being excluded or marginalized.[101] The education system should provide an individualized educational response, rather than expecting the student to fit the system.[102]

Inclusion is different from segregation, where children with disabilities are placed in educational institutions that are separate from the mainstream education system, such as special schools, or in separate classrooms in mainstream schools. Inclusion is also different from integration of children with disabilities, where children are placed in mainstream schools so long as they can fit in these schools and meet their demands.

The CRPD Committee also notes that the realization of the right to education requires that the entire education system be accessible, including buildings, information and communication, curriculum, education materials, teaching methods, assessment and language and support services, transportation, water, hygiene and toilet facilities, school cafeterias, and recreational spaces. The Committee calls on states to establish a clear time frame for all existing education environments to be rendered accessible and to prohibit and sanction the building of any future education infrastructures that are inaccessible.[103]

To realize the right to inclusive education, the CRPD requires that states ensure reasonable accommodation. Reasonable accommodation is defined as the necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case that would ensure people with disabilities the enjoyment of all human rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others.^[104] A governments obligation to provide reasonable accommodation is enforceable from the moment an individual with an impairment needs it in a given situation in order to enjoy her or his rights on an equal basis in a particular context.^[105]

The government should provide reasonable accommodations to support individual learning. This can include assistive devices, such as hearing aids; braille textbooks, audio, video, and easy-to-read learning materials; instruction in sign language for children with hearing disabilities; structural modifications to schools, such as ramps for children in wheelchairs; and qualified learning support assistants, either shared or on a one-to-one basis, depending on the requirements of the student, to assist children with note-taking, self-care, behavior, or other support.^[106]

Provision of non-material accommodations, such as changing the location of a class, allowing a student more time, reducing levels of background noise, alternative evaluation methods, or replacing an element of curriculum by an alternative element should also be considered.^[107]

State parties also have an obligation to ensure that education of people with disabilities, especially those who are deaf and blind, is provided in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual.^[108] and to promote the availability and use of assistive devices.^[109] The CRPD Committee has noted different students with the same disability may require different accommodations.

An important part of ensuring reasonable accommodation is training teachers, school administrators, and education officials in methods to support persons with disabilities. Training should include disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.^[110]

Assessing the reasonableness of accommodations involves an analysis of the relevance and the effectiveness of the accommodation and the expected goal of countering discrimination. While the CRPD Committee acknowledges that availability of resources and financial implications should be considered when assessing whether provision of a certain accommodation poses a disproportionate burden, using the lack of resources and financial crises as justification for failure to make progress towards inclusive education violates the right to education.^[111]

Beyond their accessibility obligations, governments need to ensure that the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, are of good quality and meet minimum education standards. The aim is to ensure that no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life.^[112] According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, an education of good quality requires a focus on the quality of the learning environment, of teaching and learning processes and materials, and of learning outputs.^[113] The system should establish high expectations for all learners, without discrimination.^[114]

International law prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, which is defined under the CRPD as any distinction, exclusion or restriction which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.^[115] In terms of education, the CRPD requires that people with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability.^[116] This obligation of nondiscrimination applies to both public and private actors, and at all levels of education, including higher education and vocational training.^[117]

This report was researched and written by a Persian-speaking researcher who remains anonymous for security reasons. The researcher worked jointly with the Disability Rights Division and Middle East and North Africa Division of Human Rights Watch and with the Center for Human Rights in Iran during the research process and was working full-time with the Center for Human Rights in Iran while writing the report.

At Human Rights Watch: Jane Buchanan, deputy director in the Disability Rights Division, edited the report. Michael Page, deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa Division, Tara Sepehri Far, Iran researcher, and Elin Martinez, senior researcher in Children Rights Division, reviewed the report. Danielle Haas, senior editor in the Program Office, provided program review. Clive Baldwin, senior legal advisor, provided legal review. Diana Naoum, coordinator, and another associate in the Middle East and North Africa Division of Human Rights Watch provided editorial and production assistance. The report was prepared for publication by Fitzroy Hopkins, production manager.

At the Center for Human Rights in Iran: Hadi Ghaemi, executive director, Omid Memarian, deputy director, and Karen Kramer, director of publications, reviewed the report for the Center for Human Rights in Iran. The disability rights associate assisted with finding cover photos and proof-reading.

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[4] Constitution of the Special Education Organization, adopted by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament), August 20, 1991, <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91925>.

[5] Majid Ghadami, head of the National Special Education Organization, as quoted in Mehr News Agency, November 12, 2018, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4455643/> (accessed August 14, 2019).

[6] Mohsen Ghafoorian, Education Planning and Rehabilitation director of the Special Education Organization, addressing a news meeting, as reported by Tasnim News Agency, October 25, 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/08/03/1555770/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

[7] Seyed Mohammad Bathaie, Minister of Education: More than 14 million students in current academic year, (14) Islamic Republic of Iran News Network, September 10, 2018, <http://www.irinn.ir/fa/news/625069/> (accessed May 14, 2019).

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[13] United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted December 13, 2006, G.A. Res 61//106, entered into force May 3, 2008, ratified by Iran in 2009, art. 31.

[14] Law to Protect the Rights of the Disabled (), adopted by Islamic Consultative Assembly March 11, 2018, published in the official Gazette No. 21303, May 3, 2018, <http://www.rooznamehrasmi.ir/Laws/ShowLaw.aspx?Code=16936>.

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