

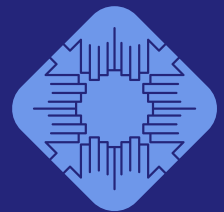
Labor Rights in Iran

Poverty and Exploitation: Looking at Baluchestan and the *Sukhtbar* Masses



A SPECIAL REPORT

March 2023



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As part of Zamaneh's workers' report series, this special report titled "Zamaneh's Special Report: The *Sukhtbars* in Baluchestan" focuses on *sukhtbars*, or fuel carriers. In other words, it addresses the exploitation of Iranians to the east rather than *kulbars*, or border porters, in Kurdistan to the west. *Sukhtbars* and *kulbars* constitute a significant portion of the informal labor force, left with no choice but to do precarious work in order to make ends meet.

Amidst the protests in December 2022, a new slogan appeared among the myriad of handwritten signs, addressing socioeconomic demands rather than religious or ethnic issues: “No to Sukhtbari (carrying fuel), no to Kulbari (transporting goods on the back), freedom and equality.”

While there are currently no official statistics of the number of sukhtbars and kulbars, Baluch activists estimate the total number of sukhtbars between 80,000 and 100,000. According to domestic sources, media, and governmental statements, roughly 20,000 cars transited the Baluchestan-Pakistan border in 2020 to engage in what the government deems to be fuel smuggling. Assuming that each car contains a driver and a passenger for each car, this estimate means that at least there are at least 40,000 people involved in transporting fuel by vehicle. This group is in addition to the sukhtbars that carry fuel without cars.

Why fuel-carrying?

“Working as a sukhtbar is not a matter of choice, but a matter of force.” Sistan and Baluchestan representatives in the Islamic Consultative Assembly and local activists have echoed this sentence repeatedly. Based on official government reports, Sistan and Baluchestan is the most disadvantaged and deprived province in Iran. According to the latest report by the Statistical Center of Iran, there is a 34.4% economic participation rate and a 12.2% unemployment rate in this province. These statistics make Sistan and Baluchestan the province with the third lowest economic participation rate and the fourth highest unemployment rate in Iran.

The real unemployment rate, however, is much higher than the official rate. In May 2020, the Zahedan representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, Alim Yarmohammadi, stated that the unemployment rate in some parts of this province is 40 to 65 percent:

Up to 60% of the population in Chabahar and Nikshahr, 50 to 60% in Ghasr Ghand, around 40% in Iranshahr, and 20 to 25% in Zahedan is unemployed. This evidence shows the lack of industry or agriculture in those regions.

The unemployment rate in Chabahar stands at 40%, while parts of this port city are free-trade zones that host multinational companies.

In previous years, the Chabahar representatives in the Islamic Consultative Assembly shared similar narratives of unemployment in the region. In 2016, MP Hosseinali Shahriari stated, “More than 45% of the workforce in six cities in the region are unemployed; but in reality more than 50% of the population throughout the whole province is unemployed.”

The same year, the head of the Parliamentary Employment Faction at the time, MP Gholamreza Kateb, reported the official unemployment rate as 26%, up from 11% in 2005 and 17% in 2015.

Geography of the Marginalized

According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the service sector accounts for the highest share (47.2%) of official employment in Sistan and Baluchestan. Industrial employment stands at 38.2% in this vast province, which holds a small share of distribution of industrial units. The employment rate in the agriculture sector is reportedly 14.6%, despite serving as a source of income for a significant percentage of the population before the continuous drought.

The GDP of Sistan and Baluchestan province was announced as nearly 123 billion tomans, which is almost 1.4% of Iran's total added value. The average share of added value of this province from the total added value of Iran between 2011 and 2021 is estimated at 1.3%.

Small service businesses, particularly wholesale, retail, and motor vehicle repair, have the largest share in the province's added value production at 21.9%; agriculture accounted for 18.3% of provincial added value and industry comprised 13.7% in 2021.

Sistan and Baluchestan-based industries are largely process and food industry-related. This sector produced 7.5% while mining industries produced 2% of the added value of the industrial sector. The share of other industries in the added value of 2021 is less than 5% (more precisely, 4.2%).

Sistan and Baluchestan's agriculture sector has shrunk due to drought in the region over the past few years. Farmers are left with no choice but to migrate and reside in the margins of bigger cities, working in what governmental institutions refer to as "pseudo-professions."

In 2021, MP Shahbakhsh Gorgij announced, "Most of the village populations have migrated. The migration [rate] is continuous. A village that previously had 100 families now only has 40 because the rest have migrated. Forty to fifty percent of the villages are being abandoned; this phenomenon will not stop until the sources of this issue are resolved."

The Chabahar representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, MP Moeinoddin Saeidi, also confirmed the drought-induced migration. He stated that the city of Chabahar is one of the main centers of informal settlements and slums; 56% of the city's population are slum-dwellers who have largely migrated from nearby villages. The droughts have severely challenged the livelihood of these people, forcing them to live on the city's outskirts.

The largest concentration of slums and marginalized settlements in Sistan and Baluchestan are located in the province's capital, Zahedan, and its free trade zone, Chabahar. In June 2021, Hamshahri newspaper estimated the number of slum-dwellers in the cities of Zahedan, Zabol, and Chabahar at one million, equivalent to one-third of the province's population. In 2022, the governor of Zahedan reported that migration to this city continued despite the fact that 44% of the population were slum-dwellers. The slum-dwellers in Zahedan and Chabahar are deprived of basic necessities, relying on temporary daily wage jobs for income and living in settlements subject to continuous destruction by the government.

Geography of Poverty

According to Alim YarMohammadi, only approximately 20% of the workforce in Sistan and Baluchestan have insurance, and 80% of them do not have access to any form of employment contract.

On 22 February, the General Director of the Social Security Organization (SSO) of Sistan and Baluchestan reported: "27% of the population the province is covered by the SSO. The number of retirees covered by SSO amounts to 93,000, while the main insured individuals add up to 234,000."

In terms of insurance coverage and "Elderly Watch" indicators, this province has the lowest rank in the country.¹

According to a report published by an Iran-based media outlet, the per capita poverty line in Sistan and Baluchestan is 3.2 million tomans, which is only one-fourth of this index for Tehran. Based on this figure, Sistan and Baluchestan was the most impoverished province in 2021.

In a 2021 economic poverty monitoring report, the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare declared Sistan and Baluchestan as the most deprived province with a score of 5.88. Based on this report, approximately 50% of the residents of this province fall below the poverty line. However, the parliamentary representatives of Sistan and Baluchestan claimed that 70% of the population lives below the poverty line.

This province falls in the last (67th) place in terms of deprivation. Nonetheless, in the most deprived province of Iran, economic inequality is also higher than in other regions. The Gini coefficient, which measured the unequal distribution of wealth in Sistan and Baluchestan in 2021, is reportedly at 0.49%, which is 12 percentage points higher than the national average.

Widespread economic poverty, geographic distance to schools, religious rule, and monolingual education have made this province have the highest education deprivation and school dropouts in the country. The Center for Parliamentary Research claimed that in the academic year 2021-2022, 145,000 individuals were deprived of an education, and 4% of students dropped out of schools.

Vice President of Planning and Development of People's Participation of the Renovation Organization, Alireza Rashki, named economic poverty and inadequate educational spaces as two of the main obstacles leading to education deprivation among school-age children in Sistan and Baluchestan. According to Rashki, the "appeal of the border" is a fundamental element contributing to the education deprivation for school-aged children, marking the first time the appeal of working as a fuel-carrier was acknowledged as a leading factor in school dropouts. "The appeal of the border leads to their lack of interest in school education. Why would the kids spend time at school when they see they can make a (considerable) income at the age of 10?!"

Sacrificing One's Education and Life for a Red Cent

Unemployment and widespread poverty in Iran's most underprivileged province

have compelled school-aged children to work in order to contribute to their families' livelihood. Without providing statistics about the exact number of students who dropped out to work as sukhtbars, Rashki stated, "These children largely work as sukhtbars. Due to Pakistan's dire need for Iran's oil regardless of the rise in prices, oil will always be in demand (by Pakistan). Therefore, these children will always engage in this pseudo-job."

Working as a sukhtbar is not a choice. Most children and teenagers who take these jobs endure violent and deadly exploitation and have no other choice for survival, even if it costs them their lives. Over the past few years, several children and teenagers have lost their lives while working as fuel carriers. Most recently, on September 9, the Baluch Activist Campaign announced the death of two child sukhtbars close to Rask. According to this report, 15-year-old Mobin Fooladi lost his life in a car accident, and 15-year-old Hossein Molazeyi was severely injured and hospitalized.

On July 23, 2022, Haalvsh, a human rights organization dedicated to the people of Sistan and Baluchestan, reported the murder of a 17-year-old sukhtbar by state forces.

According to civil activists, the number of school children switching to fuel-carrying jobs is significantly high. Days after the February 2021 murder of a number of sukhtbars on the Saravan border, Farhikhtegan newspaper quoted Darmohammad Bahrami, a civil activist: "The [relatively] high income offered by fuel-carrying has driven many families to buy their 12-year-old sons cars by any means possible so that they can start working as sukhtbars."

However, this narrative was missing a fact: the desperation of many families and the lack of employment opportunities have left the province's youth with no other viable option than to take jobs as sukhtbars.

In December 2021, Shahrvand newspaper interviewed several school dropouts who took on sukhtbar jobs. One of these child laborers, Mansour, said, "When the pandemic started I gave up school and started to carry fuel."

Another 17-year-old sukhtbar driver, Hadi, stated that he started to work as a sukhtbar at 13 years old. He previously attended school during the day and worked as a sukhtbar in the evenings, but dropped out of seventh grade and continued his father's full time job to help with his family's expenses.

Ebrahim also followed the same path. When his dad was unemployed he began a job as a sukhtbar to make money, and he is currently a driver after assisting his cousin for two years. "Most of my classmates became sukhtbars. I have lost many friends to fuel-carrying. I lost one of them just this past year," he said.

Ebrahim perceives sukhtbari as the region's generational career, "The day after their father's passing or disablement, boys have to carry fuel, a job that costs them their lives. My sons are young now. We cannot make ends meet. They also have no choice and so must do this job."

Every three days, a Sukhtbar Is Injured or Passes Away

Carrying fuel is similar to walking through fire. Regional border guards and military forces, local racketeers, and dangerous roads leading to the border are responsible for the death of dozens of sukhtbars each year. According to reports by Baluch activists in 2022, 105 sukhtbars lost their lives; 26 of them were murdered by border guards, 47 died in car crashes, 33 in burning vehicles. Additionally, 52 sukhtbars were injured and another 6 have gone missing.

Gunfire by border guards led to serious injuries of sukhtbars; 22 were injured in car accidents and another 9 in fire-related incidents. The higher death toll of sukhtbars compared to the previous year (2021) by 23 indicates the increased violence by the governmental forces, especially since the implementation of the Razaq plan in 2020 as a means to block the roads used by the sukhtbars.

Giving One's Life for Bosses' Profiteering

The sukhtbars who gamble their lives to move gasoline and diesel from Iran to Pakistan, are the weakest link in a multi-layered network that is closely tied to government officials and clan chiefs. The fuel smuggling process is as follows:

- Trucks and buses travel from other parts of Iran to Baluchestan and sell portions of their fuel to the local fuel dealers.
- Transporters move the purchased fuel to containers under the control of Mandis/ Mandi Valas.
- The Mandis/Mandi Valas either own containers or work for a larger contractor.
- The Sukhtbars deliver the fuel to Pakistan.
- The pipeline owners (or more specifically, hose-owners or Shelangdars [شلنگ‌دار]) atop mountainous areas transfer the fuel through large hoses and pipes on steep paths to the other side of the hill or mountain and to the car owners

The most vulnerable link of this fuel transportation network are the drivers and the sukhtbars because they accept the highest risk. According to local sources, the pipeline owners and mandis earn the most profit from this process. Some years ago, a Baluch activist wrote: "Mandis and pipeline owners are usually the same. They have connections with the clan chiefs or the so-called 'Sardaran/ commanders' and the security forces based in the region, and regularly bribe them to keep their cargoes safe."

Such narratives must have some truth, as The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has used the strategy of buying off clan heads since the mid-2000s. By assigning some crossings and granting special interests to the heads of clans through this policy, these clan heads have become allies of the IRGC against local/regional discontent and dissidence. The IRGC has likely handed over some of the fuel smuggling crossings to these commanders (sardaran), since the amount of fuel smuggled from Baluchestan is several times the quota that reaches Sistan and Baluchestan province, according to government officials.

Owners of cargo vehicles in the region are the next big profiteers of the sukhtbars' gamble with their lives. In April 2021, Sharq newspaper reported: "Several of these investors buy 20-30 Toyota cars and hire drivers. They order the drivers to carry the fuel from some cities to mandis in other cities. These drivers receive only 150,000 tomans from these transfers, while the investor earns up to 300 million tomans in profit on a daily basis. The risk of transferring falls on the driver while the profit goes to the investor."

The Fragmented Image of a Protest

The extensive protests in Baluchestan are based on three pillars: religious discrimination, with "Molavis" (Sunni religious leaders) and Makki mosque (affiliated with the Darul Olum, the Zahedan-based, largest Sunni religious school in Iran) as the leader and central core of this group of dissidents; national discrimination represented by the "Baluchi nationalist" movements; and class oppression, which has been erased from the representation of the mass protests in Sistan and Baluchestan.

Breaking down the characteristics of the Baluchi dissidents who have persistently protested in the streets over the past five months can provide a clearer image of this region and the context of its dissident populace. Highlights of the Baluch protestors include the (figure) of Abdolhamid Esmailzahi (whom many hail as Molavi), the senior teacher at the Darul Olum Zahedan school, and the religious and ethnic/national identity, not the class identity.

Ethnic/national oppression and religious discrimination in Baluchestan certainly cannot be ignored. The Baluchis are one of the most marginalized groups in Iran. However, it is critical to note that this province does not have a uniform social structure and formation, and so it is simply impossible to perceive the Baluch society as a monolithic and homogenous society. What fragments this seemingly homogenous society are the exploited groups, or, [the] class [axis].

Due to the lack of large-scale industrial/production units, the number of industrial workers is insignificant and most of them are unstable temporary workers. This issue has led to the lack of establishment of workers' rights organizations. In addition to the power of Molavi and the Sardaran, who complied with the repressive forces during both the Pahlavi dynasty and the Islamic Republic, such conditions have obscured class organization in Baluchestan and assimilated the exploited groups as a homogenous Baluchi group. The slogan "no to sukhtbari, no to kulbari, freedom and equality" in Zahedan's Friday protests makes visible this erased aspect of the Baluch identity in the same vein as "Desgoهران," who amplifies the silenced voices of women in Baluch society.

1 The "Elderly Watch" is an index to measure the quality of life for retirees and the elderly. This index is measured by examining four dimensions: income security, health status, ability/capability, and environmental adaptation. In 2021, the Aging Research Center considered Sistan and Baluchestan to have the lowest rank in Iran.

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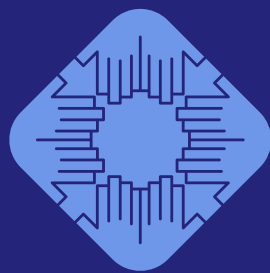
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