

Meetings: Tuesday 12 Noon

President: Brenda Jenkins Phone: 604-816-6961  
 Secretary: Libby Nelson Phone: 604-868-4674  
 Editor: Peter Boekhorst Phone: 604-462-0377

[E-mail the President](#)  
[E-mail the Secretary](#)  
[E-mail the Editor](#)



**APRIL IS ENVIRONMENTAL MONTH**

Happy Birthday		Happy Anniversary	
Apr 26: Shashanka Vangari	Apr 28: Peter Boekhorst		

**UPCOMING SPEAKERS:**

Apr 23: Lindsey Willis Ridge Meadows Hospice Society	Apr 30: Abigail Wynberg My African Adventure	May 7:
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**LAST WEEK'S MEETING**

President **Brenda Jenkins** presided.

[Our note taker (Laurie Anderson) missed the meeting due to illness, but our speaker, Sayed Atthari, provided the notes of his presentation, which are reproduced below.]

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Program: Empowering young Kurdish Girls in Iran – Sayed Atthari

**Sayed Atthari:** We are delighted to be here to share the project I have been thinking about for a long time.



Our Story & Background: I've long been passionate about empowering young girls. I truly believe that when women lack the tools they need, society can't progress. Growing up in Iran, specifically in the Kurdish region, I witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by women in my own family. Despite their intelligence, beauty, and compassion, my sisters were denied the opportunity to pursue education and were relegated to unequal status compared to their husbands. This perpetuated a cycle of inequality, with subsequent generations bearing the consequences.

Education has always been a deeply personal cause for me. When I started my own family, ensuring my daughter received a university education was non-negotiable. While I could understand if my sons chose a different path, education was a fundamental right for my daughter. Therefore, I stand before you today, seeking your support to empower young Kurdish girls in Iran. Through education and opportunity, we can break the cycle of inequality and pave the way for a brighter future for these girls and their communities.

What is the project all about?

We are here to seek your assistance to help young Kurdish girls in Iran I've been independently assisting young Kurdish girls in Iran for some time now. Through microfinancing, I've helped them attend classes, obtain essential equipment, cover medical expenses, and provide counselling when possible. While most of these girls are family members, I've also extended support to one non-family member. However, my efforts have been sporadic and lack the continuity needed for lasting impact. I believe partnering with a credible organization like Rotary can provide reliable and sustained assistance. Therefore, I'm seeking your support in microfinancing small projects to enhance the lives of young Kurdish girls in Iran.

What are the key components or activities involved in our project? Our initiative focuses on assisting young Kurdish girls in Iran, a country where NGOs, including Rotary International, are not permitted to operate. Iranian women face systemic oppression rooted in cultural norms and legal frameworks, leading to discriminatory practices such as unequal rights in marriage, education, and employment. Kurdish women, in particular, endure additional challenges due to their ethnicity, facing double discrimination and limitations on their cultural and linguistic rights. Despite these obstacles, Kurdish women demonstrate resilience, actively advocating for their rights and striving for gender equality. It's essential to note that our project remains apolitical and non-religious to ensure the safety of the girls involved.

Where is the project going to be implemented?

**Why focus on Iran and the Kurdish region?**

My choice is simply because it's an area I know well. Having grown up there, I'm intimately familiar with its challenges and opportunities. Unfortunately, the Kurdish side of the country is among the most impoverished and underdeveloped regions. This stems from political and religious factors. Kurds, with their distinct

ethnic and religious identity, face discrimination and disadvantage from the Iranian government. This has resulted in underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure, and limited opportunities, especially for women and young people.

### **Who are the Kurds?**

Kurds are an ethnic group primarily concentrated in the mountainous regions spanning Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They have a rich culture and history and have long sought self-determination. Despite facing challenges from various governments, Kurds continue to strive for autonomy and cultural preservation within their respective countries.

### **The situation of Kurds in Iran**

Kurds constitutes a significant minority in Iran, primarily residing in the western regions. The Iranian government's relationship with the Kurdish population has been complex, marked by periods of conflict and repression. Kurds have faced historical marginalization and discrimination, leading to economic disparities and limited opportunities, especially for women and young people. The Iranian government's centralized political structure has hindered the development of Kurdish regions, with policies often favouring the Persian majority and suppressing minority cultures and languages. This has contributed to the underdevelopment of Kurdish areas, perpetuating marginalization and inequality.

### **How much it will cost?**

I believe that an investment of \$2,000.00, facilitated through a sustainable system fostering connections between two societies, could yield significant results within six months.

### **What are the limitations and challenges associated with this project?**

How will the implementation work? Implementing the project poses significant challenges, primarily because there are no NGOs or Rotary clubs operating in Iran. Even larger organizations like the Red Cross struggle to reach smaller communities, such as Kurdish ones, during times of disaster. Recent earthquakes in Ilam and Kermanshah have highlighted the government's interference with relief efforts, hindering aid distribution. Given these obstacles, traditional implementation methods are impractical. Instead, we must adopt an unconventional approach. We'll collaborate with trusted local partners and start with smaller-scale projects. To ensure accountability, we'll establish an ongoing verification process. For example, if a group of six girls is participating in English classes, we'll request periodic updates on their progress, supported by video clips every six months for objective evaluation.

### **What are we requesting this club to consider?**

- To serve as a credible platform to assist these young Kurdish girls in Iran.
- To identify and engage with girls living in Canada who have been affected by injustices originating from their experiences in Iran.
- To help organize a cultural day celebration to kick start this event

### **How do we plan to circumvent the problems?**

#### **Addressing Challenges and Advancing the Cause:**

In order to navigate the challenges faced by NGOs working in Iran, especially in supporting young Kurdish girls, several strategies can be considered. Firstly, establishing direct contact with credible individuals on the ground is crucial to ensuring the legitimacy and effectiveness of the organization's efforts. This approach helps minimize the risk of interference from government infiltrations and ensures that assistance reaches those in need. Furthermore, to overcome verification issues, NGOs can implement robust monitoring and evaluation systems. By maintaining transparent records of their activities and engaging local communities, NGOs can enhance accountability and demonstrate the impact of their work. NGOs in Iran face significant challenges, including restrictive regulations, limited funding, and governmental interference. When working to support young Kurdish girls, it is essential to establish direct contact with credible individuals and implement strong monitoring mechanisms. Despite the obstacles, NGOs have the potential to contribute to positive change in Iran, promoting social development, advocating for minority rights, and empowering marginalized communities.

#### **The classic way of going directly to people**

Establishing direct contact with grassroots communities in countries with dictatorships can be challenging due to the repressive nature of the regime and the restrictions it imposes on civil society activities. However, NGOs often employ various strategies to overcome these challenges and establish meaningful connections with local communities. Here's why and how NGOs might do this.

#### **Here are some ways governments might attempt to infiltrate NGOs:**

1. Co-opting or Infiltrating Members: Government agents or informants might attempt to join an NGO under false pretenses, posing as genuine members or volunteers. They could use this position to gather information, monitor activities, and report back to the authorities.
2. Surveillance and Monitoring: Governments may use surveillance techniques, including electronic surveillance, wiretapping, and monitoring of digital communication, to keep tabs on NGO activities and members.
3. Pressure and Intimidation: The government might use intimidation tactics, threats, or coercion to compel NGO members to share information, collaborate, or provide access to sensitive data.
4. Creating Counterfeit NGOs: Authoritarian regimes may establish their own seemingly independent NGOs that mimic the activities and goals of legitimate organizations. These counterfeit NGOs could be used to gather information, spread propaganda, or undermine the efforts of genuine NGOs.
5. Regulatory Control and Legal Measures: Governments may enact laws and regulations that require NGOs to register, disclose their funding sources, or provide detailed reports of their activities. This can allow the government to exert control over NGOs and gather information.
6. Cyber Espionage: Governments might use cyber espionage to infiltrate NGO networks, databases, and communication

channels in order to gather information and monitor activities.

7. **Manipulating Funding:** Governments could influence or manipulate funding sources for NGOs, either by providing or withholding funding, to gain leverage and control over their activities. **Informants and Spies:** Dictatorships may recruit informants or spies within the NGO community to provide information about the organization's activities, members, and plans. It's important for NGOs to take measures to protect their integrity, independence, and the safety of their members. This can include implementing strict vetting procedures for new members, safeguarding digital communication, utilizing secure data management practices, and being cautious about sharing sensitive information. NGOs can also seek support from international human rights organizations, legal entities, and diplomatic channels to raise awareness about any attempts at government infiltration and to ensure their continued ability to operate independently and effectively.

Potential areas in which Rotary can contribute to the project:

- **Education and Skill Development:** Supporting educational initiatives such as language classes and vocational training programs.
- **Awareness and Advocacy:** Raising awareness about the challenges faced by Kurdish girls in Iran and advocating for their rights.
- **Empowerment Programs:** Implementing programs aimed at building self-esteem, leadership skills, and resilience among young Kurdish girls.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Promoting and preserving Kurdish culture and language through cultural events and initiatives.
- **Safe Spaces:** Creating safe environments where Kurdish girls can access support services and resources.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Providing opportunities for economic empowerment through microfinance, entrepreneurship training, and job placement programs.
- **Partnerships and Collaborations:** Collaborating with local organizations and stakeholders to maximize the project's impact and reach.