

# Against All Odds: The Building of a Women's Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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## Introduction

Few would disagree that the question of women and gender has become amongst the most frequently discussed and highly charged and politicized in post-revolutionary Iran. Such debate in itself is viewed as a challenge to the Islamic Republic since it has made its own gender vision a central part of its identity as an Islamic regime. In its view, God has ordained women to be wives and mothers and to dwell primarily in the private sphere; and they are to be part of their father's and husband's fiefdom with very limited rights. An ideal Islamic society for many of the regime's ideologues is a completely segregated society where women and men will not intermingle outside their immediate family.

## The Context

Immediately after the overthrow of the Reza Shah Pahlavi by a popular movement in 1979, the new Islamic regime introduced a series of discriminatory laws, annulling the meagre rights that women had secured in the previous seventy-five years. This was done despite the massive participation of women in the revolution bringing about the newly established regime. Although there was some protest on the part of middle class women, mostly in Tehran, the unbelievably discriminatory laws were passed with ease. Among other things, the value of women's lives legally became half that of men; two women witnesses became equal to one man; women were banned from becoming judges; and a notoriously misogynistic orthodox Muslim family law was introduced (Paidar 1995, Hoodfar 1998). All this indicated that while women had acted as political agents, the regime's leaders were not politicized regarding the specific concerns of women.<sup>1</sup> This realization became the starting point and a

building block for those promoting gender equality and social justice for women in Iran.

Iranian women of various ideological tendencies have challenged the state's vision and its legal manifestations. Women activists have made a careful analysis of the political context and have set an agenda based on their diagnosis of the rights and the wrongs of women. Accordingly they adopted a multi-pronged strategy that has created one of the most dynamic women's movements in the region (Hoodfar 1998, Najabadi 1998, Mir-Hossinie 2001). They have given new meaning to the lexicon of social movements in the MENA region.<sup>2</sup> It is a movement that is organizationally ephemeral and in a constant state of flux -- and thus hard to suppress. It is decentralized and its advocates view it as a movement with a thousand-and-one thinking heads, with many thousands ready to replace those who have been arrested or who needed to take a break or had grown disillusioned. This movement is not only multi-generational but also cuts across class and ethnicity.

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1. Hundreds of thousands of women remained in the street after the success of the revolution and participated in various demonstrations to support the regime, particularly in its confrontation with the American government. Thus it would have been hard for the regime to introduce such laws if it had meant a change of heart and alienation on the part of women. However, most women did not understand the implications of these laws, at least for themselves.
  2. For a comprehensive discussion of the new social movement in the MENA region see Wickham (2002).

The irony is that the regime desperately claims there is no women's movement but only a few who have been bought or charmed by the western powers and, as such, pose a danger to the security of the state. With this logic, the authorities justify the arrest and harassment of the more visible women leaders. Similarly, many of the opposition leaders, while competing for women's votes, find it hard to overcome their patriarchal tendency to devalue women's achievements, not unlike what men have done regarding women's domestic contributions for centuries. They, too, insist that there is no women's movement in Iran.<sup>3</sup> They claim that, politically, women have not yet "come of age" in terms of forming their own movement. Thus, by implication, they should support these opposition parties. Conventional scholars argue that a movement needs an organization, leaders, and a membership (Bayat 2007, Moghadam 2002, 2003). Since in the context of Iran that is not possible, they then claim there cannot be a women's movement. Rather at best they would say that there is a woman's "non-movement", the very terminology of which belittles and, even if unintentionally, disempowers the movement (Bayat 2007).

In this paper we outline how women advocates, through two decades of decentralized, informal and semi formal activities, and by reclaiming traditional women's social institutions; have worked toward mobilizing women and building a robust women's movement. We examine the evolving and diverse, multi-pronged strategies that focus on politicizing the everyday forms of social and legal discrimination against women -- and render them unacceptable. While the 1979 revolution enhanced women's consciousness as political actors, advocates of women's rights guided them into becoming gender conscious and rights-bearing persons who are united in their demands for legal change and gender justice -- if not in their ideological perspectives.



## Historical Development of the Iranian Women's Movement, 1900-1978

Despite an ideology of gender segregation that views women's role as lying almost entirely within the family and private sphere, addressing Iranian women's rights and roles has been part of the modernist project since the 19th century. Iranians also participated in the early modern urban political protests against the British monopoly on tobacco in 1887, and the constitutional movement that sought to end to the despotic rule of kings in Iran and build a representative democracy (Keddie 1966, Afary 1996). However, following the constitutionalist triumph in 1906, the coalition of religious leaders and modernists refused to give women the right to vote, arguing that this was against Islam. It was at this stage that women tried to organize as a constituency to struggle for their rights, focusing on education for women as a primary tool in the fight against discrimination.

The establishment of the modernist Pahlavi dynasty (1924-1979) brought an expansion of education and promoted women's labour market participation (Amin 2005, Paidar 1995). However, despite introducing a range of modern legal reforms in many spheres, based on European models, the new regime codified the conservative Muslim marriage laws giving men total authority over their wives and daughters, unilateral right to divorce, and custody of children at divorce after a minimum age (2 for boys and 5 for girls). Men were allowed to marry up to four permanent wives without the consent of their previous wives, and the mobility of married women became subject to their husband's permission. The only major change was the introduction of a minimum age of marriage and prohibition of the practice of temporary marriages.<sup>4</sup> In a controversial move the new regime also out-

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3. This discussion became so central to the public sphere discourse that Zanan, the most popular feminist magazine in Iran, ran a series of interviews with outspoken male opposition leaders and scholars in general to examine the question, "Is there a women's movement in Iran" [see Zanan number 89, XX]. The male political leaders tended to give a negative answer while feminist scholars, who had been well versed in the theoretical debates on women's movements, viewed the women movement as a social movement, unconventional and very vibrant.

4. In Shia Islam men are allowed to marry up to 4 permanent wives as well as to enter into unlimited "temporary" (pleasure) marriages which can last as little as one hour or as long as 99 years (Haery 1987).

laved the veil, a traditional head cover - often head to toe - for women (Hoodfar 1997).

Given the despotic nature of the regime, it was not possible to build and promote an independent women's movement, even though none of women's demands contradicted the overall goals of the state. The few active women's organizations were co-opted by the regime and ultimately reconfigured in 1966 as the Iranian Women's Organization, headed by the sister of the Shah. Nonetheless, reform of Family Law and the enfranchisement of women remained the major foci of all those interested in women's rights. It was not until 1963, against the strong opposition of religious leaders, that national electoral rights were extended to women. In 1967 the first Family Law reform, known as the Family Protection Law, brought minimal changes whereby divorce and custody cases had to be decided by a family court and polygamous marriages required either the court's permission or consent of the previous wife/wives (Sanasarian 1982). These reforms (as it happened short-lived) were the most radical legal changes in the status of women in Iran.

## 1979: Women and the Iranian Revolution

The booming oil economy in many ways allowed the regime to act independently of its constituents, thus increasing its despotic nature. Dissatisfaction with political developments in the 1970s fomented widespread anti-government sentiment leading to revolution and the fall of the regime in 1979 (Haliday 1978). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the Iranian revolution was the massive participa-

tion of black-veiled women in the daily demonstrations. For many women of the non-veiled middle classes, the adoption of the veil was a temporary action that symbolized their rejection of the shah's regime and all it stood for (Yeganeh 1982, Betteridge 1983). Veiled women protesting became icons of the revolution; the veil itself a symbol of the people's movement, yet there was little real engagement with women's demands, *per se*, as participants assumed that a real democracy would prevail and women, along with all other constituencies, would ultimately benefit. However, despite their role in the success of the revolution, Iranian women were among the biggest losers with the advent of the new, theocratic Islamic Republic's regressive gender ideology.

Within two weeks of coming to power, the supreme leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, annulled the Family Protection Law. Temporary marriage was not only legally sanctioned, it was openly encouraged.<sup>5</sup> The most dramatic change, however, was lowering the legal age of maturity to 9 for girls and 14 for boys, and enshrining this in the constitution. This was interpreted to mean that girls may be given in marriage at the age of nine, the legal age at which they are punishable as adults for any criminal offence (Kar 1994).<sup>6</sup> Within a month of his return to Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that in accordance with Islamic tradition women were barred from becoming judges and two female witnesses were equivalent of one male, thus legally enshrining the lower status of women.<sup>7</sup> A few days after this announcement, Khomeini declared that women should wear the veil (hijab) at the workplace. Shortly after, the beaches were segregated. This was followed by the segregation of all sporting events and then of public transit.

5. For a discussion of temporary marriage in Iran, see Haeri 1987.

6. The age of marriage had been previously increased to 16, and in 1976, to 18. In the early stages of the revolution the Shah's government lowered the age of marriage to 16 again in an attempt to mollify religious leaders. While many women and men opposed the Islamic Republic's lowering the age of marriage, criticisms were ignored until some years later when newspapers and magazines began to publish reports of the negative consequences of child marriages. At this point the age of marriage was defined as puberty, which in Iran is understood to be 13, though 9 remained the age of majority for girls.

7. The regime also introduced a body of retribution law, "qesuss", which officially established 'blood money' for women as half of that for men, which has considerable implications for women and children. Although it has now been revised, such a law treated homicide as a private act between citizens/families. That is to say that if a husband has killed his wife, her family would have to pay half of his blood money to his relatives if they want him to be punished for murder.

There were also unsuccessful attempts to segregate hospitals and higher education institutions.

This unexpected turn of events resulted in spontaneous demonstrations, which continued for several weeks, and a rally of several thousand of women on March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Day. Women lawyers, backed by secular as well as some Islamist forces, organized several sit-ins at the Ministry of Justice (Tabari and Yeganeh 1982). Most political parties, including the left, as well as state-controlled national radio and television, boycotted the women's protest. Nonetheless the demonstrations attracted public attention and support, as well as attracting mobs of religious zealots and paramilitary forces, which under the protection of security forces attacked and injured many protesters.

Secular and some Islamist women activists tried to organize an independent women's organization to fight against these developments (Paidar 1995). However this was an uphill battle in the context of rapidly diminishing political space, activists' lack of experience in building alliances across ideological camps, and the pressure from political parties discouraging women from joining independent women's organizations (Shahidian 1994). By the start of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) many of the women who had remained active were jailed or forced into exile. By 1981 the regime had dismantled nearly all the rights that women had secured between 1900 and 1979. In an attempt to confine women to the home, the regime closed child-care centres and introduced early retirement packages and related policies, such as the full transfer of women's incomes to their husbands, if the women agreed to give up their jobs. The only major right women retained was the right to vote and participate in elections, which the regime reasoned would work to its benefit since it still exercised a considerable religious hold over a large segment of women.



## 1980-1988: Changing Conditions and New Forms of Resistance

### Secularist Forces

The end of organized resistance was not the end of women's opposition to the discriminatory treat-

ment of women by the new regime. Many secularist women continued to hold meetings in their homes. In particular, they were interested in methods that could mobilize women broadly against the new measures. Clearly issues of family law would cut across class and ethnicity and had disadvantaged all women and thus could be a rallying point for mobilization. They continued investigating how the new Family Law and its sanction of male authority would impact women, especially concerning documented cases of domestic injustice and spousal abuse by husbands.

The secular women had strong links with many activist women in exile and through them access to the international media, which could expose the Islamic Republic's gender apartheid system. They also sent published accounts of cases of injustice to popular Iranian women's magazines under assumed names, questioning the alleged Islamic justice and dignity that the regime had promised to bestow on women. Many of these activists viewed Islam as so patriarchal and misogynist that it could never be expected to deliver gender equity and confirm women's human rights. They thus advocated a completely secular state and legal system and looked to international instruments such as Charter of Rights and Convention of Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as a foundation for their claim. It is important to note that secular women, like their Islamist counterparts, run the political gamut from left to liberal, and for Islamist women, the right; but the majority of secular activists belonged to the highly-educated middle classes.

### The Birth of a New Islamist Gender Discourse

While the secularists focused on critiquing the regime's discriminatory gender ideology, which was justified through religion and divine prescription, most women in the country were willing to give the regime a chance to build the truly just Islamic society it had promised, in which women were treated with dignity and respect. There was however, a small group of women; many of them highly educated in both Western and Islamic discourse, who, despite their commitment to Islam, saw the regime's policies as misguided and repressive - the old patriarchal system in new clothes. The true Islam they

envisioned was woman-friendly and gender balanced. In contrast to the regime, they spoke not of the glorious past but rather of a glorious future, to be realised if a more woman-centred understanding of Islam were pursued. The conservatives in power quickly alienated the voices of these liberal religious women, many of who had been part of the active opposition to the pre-Islamic regime. However, they continued to write and preach this egalitarian vision of Islam at least among other Muslim women who were open to these ideas. They particularly tried to reach women's religious leaders who had access to a large circle of women particularly in low-income neighbourhoods.

However, a second constituency of religious women, while critical of the leaders' conservative vision, were willing to work within the regime's framework, hoping to achieve gradually shift its position on women. While continuing to re-affirm their commitment to the Islamic Republic at every opportunity, they also warned against the excesses of the Republic's gender ideology and its incompatibility with existing social realities. Knowing there were few sympathetic ears among the leaders, these Islamist activists took their case to the public, using whatever modern and traditional institutions were open to them. For example, they published stories of women divorced by their husbands after 20, 30 or 40 years of marriage, without alimony or support, due to the new, religiously justified law whereby husbands may divorce at will and are obliged to pay only three months of upkeep to the former wife regardless of the length of marriage.

Many young widows of war martyrs also joined in critiquing the regime, highlighting the injustice of losing their children to their husband's father or brothers, in accordance with the Muslim law.<sup>8</sup> After losing their husbands to war, the further catastrophe of losing their children was more than they could bear, said these women, sharing their trauma through the media, at gatherings with neighbours and political leaders. If this was truly the regime's approach to promoting a just Islamic society, they wondered aloud if Islamic justice was meant only for Muslim men and not for Muslim women (Mir-Hosseini 1996).

Thousands of stories about the unfair treatment of women -- wives and mothers the regime purported to view as honoured participants in a proper Islamic society -- were circulated in the public sphere through newspapers, women's magazines, and women's religious gatherings at home and in the mosques. Lacking any formal political or legal clout, these were the only channels for these women to cultivate public support against these injustices. Given that the new regime was shunned by the international community, and gained its legitimacy from support of the public at large, political leaders were conscious of the significances of public opinion.

Another, simultaneous, strategy on behalf of the increasing numbers of alienated and suffering women, including widows of war martyrs, was the launching of a large-scale letter-writing campaign to the leaders of the revolution and to magazines - especially women's magazines. Some of these were subsequently printed and made their way into the public discourse on justice for women. Clearly the regime was facing a crisis; while it remained committed to its gender vision, there was no denying the contradiction between what it had promised and its rank discrimination against women. At least some members of the political-religious leadership began searching for a solution.

By the mid 1980's, one of the major women's magazines, *Zan Roose*, initiated a new strategy, inviting the more liberal religious leaders to respond to the questions of some of its readers in a column, or to be featured in interviews concerning women's questions. The reality of centuries of discourse amongst only themselves meant that, in fact, religious leaders had rarely, if ever, had to engage with or respond to women's questions. Thus the initiative itself introduced an entirely new trend. These dialogues in fact continue to this day and have become increasingly prominent and widespread in various media, encouraging at least some of the religious leaders to think outside conventional religious arguments and become amenable to a more liberal interpretation of women's issues (Mir-Hossieni 2001).

The initial indication that these strategies were achieving some impact came when Ayatollah Kho-

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8. Whereby children belong to their fathers and paternal kin.

meini finally announced in 1985, that widows of martyrs might retain custody of their children, even if they remarry. While women activists had hoped for a general ruling that would give this right to all women, nonetheless the announcement was a major success in that it clearly illustrated that such issues were not in fact divinely dictated and carved in stone, and new interpretations and directions were possible. A second victory was the introduction of a new marriage contract specifying situations whereby women could apply for divorce and leaving room for stipulating other conditions such as the right to work or to continue their education.

Clearly women's strategies of mobilizing women and launching discourse in public sphere were paying off, even if much more slowly than most women activists had wished. As Risse, Ropp and Sikkink (1999) have demonstrated, the moment the state responds to a civil society challenge, even if it is to denounce them, it is civil society's first success - since the response itself is an indication that the state is listening and taking note.

### 1989-1996: Lobbying - A New Phase of Activism

These developments encouraged more women activists to organize more systematically to push for further legal changes and look for solutions from within Islam and the indigenous culture. Up until this point, both secular and Islamist women activists still operated primarily in small, informal groups where their central goal was mobilization of women and raising gender consciousness. Many of the non-secular participants viewed themselves as being part of women's religious gatherings, rather than "women's groups." Many of these gatherings discussed the women's question in terms of justice and fairness, and dwelt on women-centred interpretations of what they considered to be their rights within Islam, which stood in sharp contrast to the legal norms they faced every day.

The end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini opened

a new chapter in Iranian politics. No longer could the regime use the war as an excuse for failure to deliver promised socio-economic improvements, and it was thus more sensitive to criticism from the public.

In the assessment of women advocates, there were two factors working in their favour. First, lacking the aura of Ayatollah Khomeini, the regime would be more concerned about its legitimacy and they ought to want to keep women, as a constituency, on their side. So they should be more amenable to their demands. Secondly, Ayatollah Khomeini himself had issued a religious decree giving custody of children to the widows of war martyrs, re-introduced marriage contracts and family planning, and removed the ban on music. All this was evidence that change was possible, and so it was easier for his successors to follow his example. This assessment led to a more intense agitation for fundamental change by asserting that Islamic texts and traditions might be reinterpreted and then enacted into law.

On the other hand, the strategy of opening dialogue with the more liberal religious leaders had also paid dividends as many of them had presented women friendly interpretations of religious texts that departed from an orthodox understanding of women's role and responsibilities. At this point, some women closely related to prominent religious leaders, including the daughter of President Rafsanjani, joined the chorus of women denouncing misogyny. This brought further legitimacy to women's voices.

Perhaps the most outstanding legal reform that women achieved during this period was the passing of a bill for wages for house work, a campaign that had started in the late 1980s to compensate women who had found themselves divorced after many years of marriage, often because their husbands were interested in younger wives. Several prominent women, again including the outspoken daughter of President Rafsanjani, championed the bill and finally, despite bitter opposition from orthodox religious leaders, wages for housework, *ojrat ol-mesal*, was passed in December 1991.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Islamist women activists argued that women, like all other Muslims, are entitled to the fruit of their labour on the grounds that Islam is against exploitation. Of course, for centuries women have been denied this basic right. They pointed out that in Islamic tradition wives have no duties to their husbands beyond being faithful, and are not required to work in their husbands' home. Thus they should be entitled to the fruit of their labour.

Criticism of the government's treatment of women, whether in the labour market, the legal system or their representation in school books, finally resulted in the establishment of the Bureau of Women's Affairs (BWA), which reports directly to the president. This office coordinated the development of government policies and programs and was charged with improving the status of women. Thus, the Bureau established offices in many of the critical ministries, such as Justice and Labour, in order to examine women's issues. Although the government appointed the members of these organizations, they nonetheless emerged as a forum for women's complaints as well as for lobbying groups. It also meant that at least those groups of women advocates who worked from within an Islamic framework had a direct channel for contacting the President and other high officials.<sup>10</sup>

The then President Rafsanjani also realized that Iran had to be gradually re-integrated into the international community. Conscious of Iran's tarnished reputation on issues of rights and individual liberty, particularly on the question of women; he decided to allow women to represent Iran in various international conferences, particularly those organized under the UN umbrella. Thus, several non-governmental organizations were set up, mostly under the patronage of wives and daughters of high government officials, and they subsequently participated in international meetings, including the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). Although they were controlled and repeated the government line, these experiences were eye-openers and sowed the seeds for links with the global women's movement (Tohidi 1996, 2002).

Exclusion of women from the public arena was a strategy of the religious conservatives. Thus women were kept out of sport facilities or participation in the Olympics (on the grounds that sport gear is morally degrading and unsuitable for Mus-

lim women). Equally determined to enter the public arena, women agitated against their exclusion by asserting that Islam does not prohibit women's participation in sports, and that if international organizations do not have facilities for Muslim women, then the Iranian government should provide such venues. Finally, after considerable agitation, the International Muslim Women's Games was launched as a parallel to the Olympic Games (Hoodfar 2008). Thus, sport has continued to be a context for agitation for gender equity in Iran.

## 1997-2005

By 1997 the contradiction between the regimes' stated gender ideology and the imposition of its purportedly Muslim laws on women was one of the most widely debated issues in public discourse (Mir-Hossieni 2001).<sup>11</sup>

During the 1997 presidential election issues around public participation and the women's question became a focus of the election campaign (Kian 1998, Kar 1999). Women voters participated in the election in unprecedented numbers and the great majority voted for the most liberal candidate, Khatami, who was least favoured by the establishment. The assumption prior to the election was that women would vote in accordance with the dictates of conservative religious leaders, but this was clearly no longer the case. More than 78% of all eligible women cast their ballots, voting for the candidate who seemed to best represent their interests. In this sense, the 1997 election marked the political coming of age of Iranian women.

Unfortunately, the state structure and the veto power of the Council of Guardians (comprising some of the most conservative religious leaders) over any laws passed by parliament prevented President Khatami (1997-2005) from delivering on the legal reforms he had promised. He was, however, unflagging in his support of civil society and

10. It is important to note that while women had been demanding a women's commission office, they had not thought about its structure nor its power. Therefore, when the government granted them their wish, it was mostly the government that set out the rules and authority of this office (WLUML 2007 Dossier 29).

11. In fact these debates played a major role in the 1996 election that sent Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of the president and an outspoken women's right advocate, to Parliament with the second highest number of votes (Hoodfar 1998).

women's organizations. Under his presidency non-governmental organizations expanded to an unprecedented degree, the social environment grew less strained so that women moved with greater freedom in the public sphere – holding meetings, publishing, making films, and suffering less harassment for clothing choices.

In particular, during Khatami's term the preparations for, and celebrations of, International Women's Day became a rallying point that brought women of all political and religious persuasions together. As the space for dialogue expanded, the channels of communication opened between women of different religious backgrounds and secular women. Many women's groups took advantage of Khatami's "Dialogue of Civilizations" initiative. They re-established links with the global women's movement, gaining new experience and insights by attending international meetings and conferences, particularly in Asia (Tohidi 2002).<sup>12</sup> These links proved to be of major importance when the state later tried to crack down on women's organizations by arresting their leaders.<sup>13</sup> Each time this occurred the global women's movement launched a global campaign, putting pressure on the Iranian government to release the women.

Although women had, at times, managed to sustain public debate on legal reform (particularly the reform of family law) with the participation of government and state officials, the lack of advancement in this arena frustrated and disappointed women activists. Although all political parties were eager to capitalize on women's vote, they were reluctant to announce specific programs of gender reform as part of their platforms. Even the most liberal parties advised patience, saying the fight for democracy was the first priority; women activists wondered how a democratic movement was possible within a system of gender apartheid. They posed the question to them: how can an undemocratic family structure prod-

uce democratic citizens. These attitudes reconfirmed the importance of women's organizations for continuing independent efforts in promoting women's interests.

During this period many Islamist women activists, who had imagined that new, women-centred interpretations of Islamic texts would be adopted and that gender reform would ensue, were disappointed and joined those who had been demanding change from a secular and International Human Rights framework.



### 2003 - A New Vitality: Shirin Ebadi and the Nobel Peace Prize

Although social restrictions on women lessened under the reformist government, many women were deeply disillusioned by the failure to achieve any legal reform, and questioned whether activism in the Iranian context could ever make a difference. However, the 2003 Nobel Prize for Peace bestowed on Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi, a long-time democracy, women's and children's rights activist, created a wave of pride and optimism, and a renewed energy in Iran and within the women's movement. At the threshold of apathy, the women's movement was reinvigorated by the highest international recognition of one of its own. On the night Ebadi returned to Tehran after receiving her prize, and despite discouragement by security and government forces, thousands of women from every segment of Iranian society, many who had never engaged in activism, travelled considerable distances to the airport to welcome her. They distributed tens of thousands of white flowers, symbolizing peace, to the security forces and all they encountered. The realization that the outside world was aware of the Iranian women's struggle, and could and would provide support and solidarity, revital-

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12. President Khatami believed in more dialogue between the nations and set up a center to establish interactions with the other civilizations. In many ways he viewed this as a means of opening dialogue with the west, the link with which had been severed after Islamic revolution of 1979.

13. When several leaders of the women's movement were arrested, the global women's movement launched a global campaign, particularly from within Asia and Muslim countries, to put pressure on the government to release them. See for instance the campaign to free Maboubeh Abbasgholizadeh in 2002 and in 2007, [www.petitiononline.com/mahboube/petition.html](http://www.petitiononline.com/mahboube/petition.html) - 16,

ized a flagging movement, as women gathered in celebration and to plan for achieving human rights for all Iranian women (Shahroknie 2003).

By 2004 several joint meetings between various women's organizations had taken place to discuss priorities, demands and reforms. Clearly, legal reform - especially around family law and the constitution -- were the most pressing issues bringing together a wide diversity of women activists and women's organizations. Collective actions were planned to take place close to the next presidential elections in 2005. Organisers and activists felt that the threat of police brutality would be diminished around the election, as the authorities would not want to be criticized for crushing peaceful rallies.

## June 2005: A New Turning Point

On June 12, 2005, diverse constituents of the Iranian women's movement launched their first collective action, a protest rally in front of Tehran University, a very public space and traditional meeting place for political activists. Participants from various social, cultural and political backgrounds and affiliations, and from many corners of Iran, rallied on a common platform. They demanded constitutional reform, including the removal of all clauses subjecting women's rights to vague and undefined "Islamic principles" that in practice continued to subject women's rights to the most extreme, orthodox and conservative interpretations. The coalition of women's groups and activists agreed that constitutional reform was the starting point, followed by reform of family and other discriminatory laws. Organizers had recognized that in order to have their demands addressed by the various parties' election platforms, they needed to establish unequivocally that a broad-based women's movement, involving women of all persuasions, was united in its major demands. Although the mainstream media was severely restricted in its ability to cover the event, the rally, announced by word of mouth and through Internet sites, was a success. Despite violent intervention by security forces some five thousand women managed to cross the security line and to join the rally. Among them were mothers, daughters and grandmothers, secular and educated women, and religious women from

conservative backgrounds. In the midst of the jostling and jeering security forces that at times resorted to violence, the women sang their anthem, made speeches and read out their demands for reform, before being forced to disperse by security forces.

Despotic regimes everywhere dismantle civil movements by arresting their leaders and abolishing their organizations. The Iranian women's movement's strength, up to this juncture, was that it had strategically evolved in a highly decentralized manner, with a horizontal network, and a multitude of groups and activists - a "many headed," movement that was less vulnerable to attack and suppression. At the same time, these very characteristics meant that it faced more challenges when negotiating with conventional political forces. In a way, the June 12<sup>th</sup> rally was viewed, at least by some, as a strategy for overcoming this shortcoming and putting the movement on the political map.

The diversity of the groups and activists coming together was highly significant. It publicly established beyond question the existence of a women's movement that included secular and religious women, rich and poor; and it demonstrated an ability to mobilize and carry out collective action for a common cause. The success of the rally inspired more women to join the demands for reform, and re-engaged disillusioned veteran activists who had come to believe that the political and constitutional context allowed for few if any effective, non-violent strategies of resistance. The period following the rally saw many meetings and the launching of many initiatives; the rally's song of resistance became the anthem of a revived Iranian women's movement, and the images from the rally its icons (Women's Letter 2005).

Despite the success of the rally, political reformists failed to make any promises or statements of support, fearing the criticism of the conservatives. As a result, large numbers of women, particularly in Tehran, decided to boycott the election. At the same time conservative forces mobilized support in smaller cities, towns and rural regions whose populations tended to be more traditional and conservative. These two factors resulted in the election of the most conservative religious candidate to the Presidency, whose position on gender roles was the most conservative and oppressive of any public or religious official since the passing of Ayatollah

Khomeini in 1988. Reformists recognized that their failure to address women's concerns had likely led to their defeat. There has since been more interest on the part of various mainstream political groups in gender issues, and some have suggested that gender issues be part of the next presidential election, though it remains to be seen whether words will translate into action (Abbasgholizadeh 2006).

Women have been the first to bear the weight of the new government's show of conservatism, particularly in terms of the re-imposition of an "Islamic dress-code." Ironically this has politicized and motivated many young women to join the movement. To capitalize on this engagement and harness some of the energy and momentum generated by the women's rally, discussion groups and meetings are ongoing to discuss how to best proceed. While differences and frictions inevitably emerge, these mostly concern strategy rather than substance, and the debate has been for the most part constructive.

While a general discourse around gender discrimination has continued, some women's groups have launched campaigns on specific issues in order to bring out the contradictory nature of discriminatory laws given the social justice motto of the Islamic Republic. These have included a campaign for equal citizenship rights -- currently wives and children of Iranian men automatically gain Iranian citizenship while the foreign-born children or husbands of Iranian women do not enjoy that same privilege. In fact Iranian women cannot even apply for residency permits for their foreign-born husbands. Another campaign targets equitable marriage and family structure wherein husbands and wives would enjoy equal partnership, as opposed to the current legal custodial status of husbands over families.

Reclaiming public space remains a preoccupation of Iranian women. Gender segregation in sport has become extremely politicized (Afzali 2005). With football a national obsession, Iranian women view their being barred as spectators from the national stadium as an indication of their

exclusion from public life. Access to the stadium has thus become the focus of another campaign launched by young women.<sup>14</sup> They have staged several demonstrations as well as 'break-ins' during various sporting events.<sup>15</sup> These campaigns have attracted the attention of international media. The blatantly discriminatory spirit of the banning and the universal appeal of sport have meant that many young women, inside and outside Iran, have been disturbed by and drawn to the story.

Various committees associated with a diverse spectrum of groups and actors organized these issue-based campaigns. In the view of many of the movement's leaders, ideological concessions are essential for building coalitions, and the consensus has been that there is no single "correct strategy" for addressing women's concern. This has been a significant development and was partly due to the success of the June 12<sup>th</sup> rally, which also launched these strategic debates among the women's ideologues and leaders.

The launching of the campaigns has not been without critics. Many have argued that the legal and political systems in Iran are so fundamentally undemocratic that it is pointless to address specific issues. In their view, nothing short of a regime change and total constitutional revision should be the focus of the movement -- but there is disagreement as to how to effect such sweeping changes. The issue-based campaigners argue that the primary need is to gain public support for legal reform by clearly highlighting the contradictions between the national ideal of social justice and the way women are treated in the context of specific issues. They argue that this will push the regime to democratize at the same time laying the groundwork for constitutional reform, which has been the most fundamental demand of the women's movement. But critics of the 'specific issues campaigns' argue that the movement's focus must be on the broader issue of women's rights generally, to ensure the establishment of basic legal equality so that Iranian women never again experience such violation of their human rights.

14. See [www.meydaan.org](http://www.meydaan.org) for further information and debates.

15. See for example [Women ejected by force from Iran stadium](http://www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=6090) *Iran Focus*: [www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=6090](http://www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=6090);

## New Strategies

Talking about social and legal injustice toward women has become commonplace among women of all social strata, particularly in urban settings. Women of all socio-economic strata have been taking steps to resist and push for change in a variety of forms. These include not wearing a full head scarf, making their overalls shorter and tighter, making sure that they excelled over boys in the classroom, going to university, joining the workforce, joining national initiatives such as the volunteer health workers in tens of thousands, turning them into a major force for social change (Hoodfar 1998), and learning how to use Islam and the Koran against those who, for centuries, had used them to deprive women of their rights. Under President Khatami (1997-2005), many women's organizations, NGOs and women's co-ops were set up and became active. However, with the new conservative government, the time has clearly come for new strategies and a more focused struggle.

Ideologues and activists have had to think of new and appropriate strategies in order to keep the gender debate on the public agenda. In both mini conventions and in open debate, there was a consensus on the need to build solidarity among women across social classes through organic action. A segment of the activists, particularly those who were familiar with the women's movement elsewhere, e.g., India, Morocco or the UK, felt that there was a need to work on more specific issues, to train interested activists and to give them the skills and knowledge to be able to argue successfully for legal reforms, based on evidence. They argued that the price of success for most movements, but especially for women's movements, is to have to sit and discuss with the government

and their adversaries. Others were worried that too much focus on government action would distract women activists from building a new woman friendly culture which they viewed as a foundation for protecting any legal gains women ever secured. These debates have led to divergent strategies.

Efforts at building solidarity across classes were spearheaded by feminist leaders. Many had to do with income generating activities, which also promoted gender consciousness, confidence building, community building and social justice training.<sup>16</sup> Others were initiatives to help women with their legal problems, particularly in areas of domestic violence, marriage disputes and custody issues. These were designed in a feminist spirit, to provide knowledge, skills and support to women so that they might feel in control of their lives.<sup>17</sup> They have also brought the leaders, who are mostly among the educated and middle class, in touch with the problems that most grassroots women face.

Other strategies involved sustainable campaigns on specific issues such as equal rights to citizenship.<sup>18</sup> This is in accord with widespread sentiment in Iran, not only because Iran has a huge Diaspora population all over the world, but also because Iran is one of the top refugee receiving countries of the world. Tens of thousands of Iranian women are married to Afghan and Iraqi refugees. Their children are not considered Iranian and are not eligible to basic rights to birth certificates or schooling. Their husbands do not receive residence permits, so that the Iranian wives must either go to their husband's country or else divorce him, surrender their children to the husband, and stay in Iran. Although these forms of discrimination are justified by referring to Islam, but there is no reference to citizenship in Islamic theology. All Muslims belong to the community of believers -

16. For instance many women activists set up organizations that help other women to set up coops both in the city and in the rural areas. They trained them and gave them management and planning skills as well as making them aware of laws and ministries governing their activities. Others set up income-generating activities and small micro credit system but on the side they also engaged in a set of gender consciousness, self-reliance and encouraged group solidarity.

17. For instance Shadi Sadr brought together a coalition of young lawyers, and set up *Rahi*, a women's legal centre, which also provided services such as finding them social workers, training for jobs, and housing in the cases of domestic violence. In this way she simultaneously politicized young women lawyers while also supporting other women.

18. This campaign had started a few months earlier but at this time was re-enforced.

the *ummeh* - to which Muslims of all nationalities belong.

The citizenship campaign received considerable attention, particularly since several other Muslim societies, such as Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, had just reformed their laws to give equal citizenship rights to women. Enlisting the support of the global and, especially, regional women's movements, was thus both important and strategic.<sup>19</sup> The campaigners' effort was very effective and forced parliament to re-examine the situation. Although the law itself has not been changed, it has been revised to make it slightly more women friendly. The campaign also sent a message that they were a force to be reckoned with and government could not ignore them. Not satisfied with the result, however, these women are continuing their campaign.<sup>20</sup>

## March 2006

International women's day has become an important day for reiterating the existence of the movement, not just to the state but also to the public and women at large. On March 8, 2006, several programs were launched, in Tehran and several other cities, large and small. One of the major events that received wide attention was a rally organized in one of the downtown parks in Tehran. Before the rally could begin, the several hundred women who had arrived early were brutally attacked and injured, including the highly respected elder women writer Simin Behabhani. The news and pictures of the brutality of the security forces against a peaceful rally brought further attention both to the women's movement and to the regime's intolerance of any political dissent. The activists who were injured and arrested filed a collective case against the government and security forces, and Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Prize winner, took up their case. This gave international exposure to the violence against a peaceful demonstration by women.

The 8<sup>th</sup> March incident also renewed the debate among the leaders of the movement on what would be an appropriate strategy for at least sustaining the momentum of the movement. At one end of spectrum were those, many of whom were associated with the political left, who believed the only way to keep the movement energized and active was to keep women mobilized and visibly on the street and in public spaces -- even if this meant more political oppression and arrests on the part of the state. At the other were more diverse positions, running from the secular to those with religious and Islamist tendencies, who believed that the strength of the women's movement lay in a broad mobilization of ordinary women as well as activists whose lives and energies were committed to the movement. Keeping alive the politicization of every day life meant that strategies the movement adopted should not push the cost of activism so high that those ordinary women, who cannot or do not want to pay the cost, dissociate themselves from the women's cause. They argued that the women's movement was not just about legal reform, but about building ordinary women's consciousness and encouraging them to defend their inherent rights, in however small or large steps, and to feel they are part of the movement, even if they never go to a meeting or rally. They warned that advocating strategies that push the cost so high that only a small number are willing to pay it, would make the women's movement elitist, thus losing its organic connection to women generally. These months of long internal debate led to different strategies to mark the anniversary of the 12<sup>th</sup> June rally, which the movement had been adopted as Iranian Women's Day.

Among various events planned for the day, one of the committees called a rally at one of the central squares. It again met with brutality from the security forces, and a large number of women were arrested and charged.<sup>21</sup> This development brought the internal discussion much more into the open and also brought much more attention to the an-

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19. Enlisted the support of Women Living Under Muslim Laws to put them in contact with the activists who worked on the topics in other Muslim countries in order to learn from their strategies and the arguments that they had advanced.

20. [www.meydan.org](http://www.meydan.org) or [www.womensfeild.org](http://www.womensfeild.org)

21. It is note worthy that since the government had come under-considerable criticism for their harshness on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, this time they unleashed women police officers with batons and were told to put on a show of strength if the public was to take them seriously as women police officers.

niversary.<sup>22</sup> It was clear that the government would not tolerate the organization of demonstrations and rallies, and that there was a clear need for other strategies.

There were several months of discussion and consultation that led to launching a broad campaign for one million signatures for reform of the constitution and removal of discriminatory laws, particularly regarding family law. This campaign followed the successful Moroccan campaign that had adopted face-to-face contact as the method of collecting signatures for change. The goal of this campaign was to broaden the base and increase awareness of legal discrimination against women and its impact, not just on women, but on society as a whole. It was to create a new generation of activists who would come to learn much more about their society through their face-to-face contacts. It was also to keep the movement in the public sphere even if not in the form of rallies and demonstrations. This campaign, which was officially launched on August 25, 2006, has gained considerable momentum, attracted much attention and generated much interest among young, educated, urban women as well as veteran activists. It has also meant many more arrests of activists who approach people in parks and public places to ask for signatures in favour of legal reform (Ahmadi-khorasani 2007).

While there was complete consensus about the need for legal reform, many women also felt there had to be a “collective aspiration” document which would outline the most important demands of women, especially given their tragic betrayal after the 1979 Revolution. Such a document would emphasize what women want, rather than what they are against. After months of meetings and discussion sessions in several cities, on the 9th January 2007 an organizing committee issued an open invitation to interested women to meet and participate in creating an Iranian Women’s Charter. They also invited many scholars and intellectuals to join the process and help to develop workable strategies and a methodology that would be inclusive

and allow for diversity of women’s voices and demands. This has brought women from all walks of life together who have since been working on this document. On January, 13, 2008, despite unusual snow and subzero temperatures and danger of being arrested, 150 women attended the anniversary of the Charter Initiative in Tehran.

There were also other developments that helped to mobilize women activists and bring up new questions. Among them was the revival of stoning to death for the crime of adultery. The reports of stoning, though at first denied by the government, became a rallying point for many women and created a widespread aversion among the public that further eroded the legitimacy of the state. A small committee, which included Shadi Sadr, a Human rights lawyer, was launched to stop stoning forever. This caught the eye of international media and created an even bigger embarrassment for the regime.<sup>23</sup>

## March 2007

There had been a call for a rally for gender equality in front of the Majlis (Parliament) to mark the March 8<sup>th</sup> celebration of International Women’s Day. Not coincidentally, a few days before March 8, the court cases began for many of the women leaders who had been arrested at the 12 June, 2006 rally. In a show of solidarity, many of the leaders of the movement, including prominent leaders who had not supported the street rally at the time, such as Mahbobeh Abbasgholizadeh and Shadi Sadr, organized a demonstration in front of the court on the day of their hearing to register their objection to the arrest and prosecution of women activists. They insisted that peaceful protests and the right to organize and demonstrate were granted to all citizens under the constitution. Even though there were not more than 60 or 70 demonstrators, the security forces arrested 35 of the women. The arrest became an international headline. In an attempt to sabotage the 8<sup>th</sup> March demonstration, the women were held for several days, and some for weeks,

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22. See Zanan no. 69-73.

23. As the campaign progressed, the government placed more pressure on the committee to stop its work. To overcome this hurdle, the committee joined an international campaign which also included honour killing and other punishment for the supposedly sexual “offences”. [www.stopkilling.or](http://www.stopkilling.or) and [www.stopstoning.org](http://www.stopstoning.org)

before they were charged released on bail. Ironically, the Iranian government's action wide national attention and made international headlines, including programs on Aljazeera, BBC and CCN.

In a gesture of defiance, many women went ahead with the March 8<sup>th</sup> demonstration in front of the Majlis, while others organized meetings in large and small venues, and hundreds of other women's gatherings were organized in private homes with placards and posters, photographs of which were then posted on various websites and blogs. The celebrations were especially charged and emotional, given that several leaders remained in prison. Many women renewed their vow to fight for the legal equality for women, regardless of the cost. According to one international observer, the 2007 international Women's Day had become worldwide Iranian Women's Day. Another European reporter announced that Iranian women had revitalized the international women's day for them in Europe since journalists had stopped reporting on the day's events for a decade. Iranian women, with their global networks, have become very savvy in getting around government censorship by using international media. They have put themselves on the political map and are a force to be reckoned with.

 Conclusion

The women's movement in Iran does not fit into the classic model of a centralized and coordinated organization with clear leaders. Neither does it subscribe to any grand theories. However, its diverse organizations have demands that are shared across class, ethnicity and generation, and even across ideological and secular/religious boundaries. Their priorities are the tangible issues affecting their daily lives. Their resistance however is often individualistic and uncoordinated though they follow some visible patterns –not wearing their veil properly, fighting for a divorce or custody of their children, setting themselves up as electoral candidates, studying hard to surpass male students and go to university, staying in their jobs despite harsh treatment in their work place, fighting to get into the football stadium. As the state tried to impose on them a collective religious identity, they have resisted and transformed their identities. While the women's individual acts of resistance often render state attempts to control and repress ineffective, it also carries with it the danger of women losing sight of the larger movement and its goals. Thus, creating days of celebration, anniversaries and the launching of film festivals and book readings are effective strategies for women renewing their vows and reinforcing their sense of solidarity and commitment to the cause, and to remind each other of their continuing struggle.

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