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Iranian Women. Quest for Freedom and Equality

Abstract: The Islamic Republic of Iran is known in the world as a country of oppression and discrimination against women. Ironically, Iranian women are very active in public life and fulfil important social roles. Not only do women represent a majority of Iranian university students but many are respected academic teachers, lawyers and journalists.

Educated Iranian women once backed the Islamic Revolution. However, the system that ensued restricted their freedom by introducing anachronistic regulations based on literal understanding of Islamic law (the Sharia) but, on the other hand, it opened up personal growth opportunities for women from poorer and more traditional social strata.

Many of today's Iranian feminists are the beneficiaries of the post-revolutionary education system. The Islamic Republic has given them an opportunity to get education but fails to provide them with rights that would match their qualifications: women are discriminated against at courts and married women are made dependent on their husbands who are often less educated than their wives.

The Iranian regime views the quest for gender equality as a way to oppose the current political system. The proponents of equality are persecuted and imprisoned in very much the same way as dissidents who demand political liberalisation and abolishment of censorship. Simultaneously, the idea of equal rights has been incorporated into political programmes of all opponents of the current Iranian government.

Keywords: Iran; the Islamic Revolution; women's rights; modernization.

During the presidential elections in June 2009 I visited Iran as a correspondent of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a major Polish daily newspaper. Before the election day I saw Tehran greening with election posters. This symbolic colour for Islam was chosen by Mir-Hossein Mousavi in his campaign. A prime minister of the Islam Republic for many years, and a trusted man of ayatollah and revolution leader Ruhollah Khomeini, Mousavi was running for presidency as the key opponent to the incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mousavi's last pre-election rally turned into a colourful march, with thousands of people walking along the capital's streets until late hours.

As a candidate, Mousavi was favoured by the middle class, tired of the regime's restrictions in citizens' private lives and embarrassed with the proletarian image of the incumbent president who was running for another term. Intellectuals, who were more concerned about human rights violations, gagged media and failure to respect the rights of national and religious minorities, supported Mehdi Karoubi, another rival of Ahmadinejad, a religious leader and former parliament speaker.

On the election day I saw Iranians of various ages, many of them young, waiting in long queues in front of polling stations. I heard people say that if Mousavi does not make it to the second round, this will be a sign that the elections must have

been rigged. In the afternoon I witnessed paramilitary Basij troops, supporters of Ahmadinejad, attack Mousavi's headquarters. In the evening I saw the city cheer and rejoice to the rumour of Mousavi's victory in Tehran, and then, late at night, I watched public television announce the final results: they said Ahmadinejad won by a fat margin, which meant that no run-off was needed.

The day after the Friday's elections I saw the first anti-government demonstrations. On Saturday, groups of several dozen people, and then several hundred on Sunday, gathered near the building of the Interior Ministry, which was responsible for the vote count. On those very days we heard of the first killings by law enforcement officers. On Monday, I took part in a giant parade organized in protest against what the participants believed to be rigged election results. People kept flooding to the Avenue of the Revolution from all parts of the city. The crowd grew thicker by the minute. Everyone was wearing something green: a shirt, a head scarf, or at least a ribbon. The gathering attracted not only those who had voted for Mousavi but also those who had supported Karoubi or had not voted at all. A dense procession marched uninterruptedly alongside the city's main thoroughfare for a few hours.

In the evening, gunfire was opened on the already-sparse crowd marching past the Basij headquarters. Nevertheless, crowds pulled to another demonstration on the next day. Then came the next and the next, even though the government declared all such demonstrations illegal, with all the participants being aware that they were running the risk of being exposed to tear gas at best or, in the worst case scenario, of being put to prison, or even dying from a bullet shot at the crowd.

As I was leaving Iran ten days later, I was refused a visa extension and the authorities announced they would arrest all foreign journalists staying illegally in the country. Iran was abuzz with rallies, marches, demonstrations held not only in the capital city but also in most cities and towns across the country.

Back in Poland, everyone asked me about the role that women played in the Iranian protests. Indeed, I did not specifically cover this point in my reports from Tehran but it was very much for the same reason that I did not tell the readers that Iranians loved their children, drove cars or drank water when thirsty. All that seemed just too obvious and, as such, not worthy of a separate mention. Wherever I went during those turbulent days in Tehran, I would meet Iranian women. Some covered from head to toe with black chadors, and some dressed in fashionable Western-style clothes, their back-combed hair tied in buns barely covered by head scarves. Just like men, women waited for their turn to cast a vote and took part in the post-election demonstrations. There were women in front of the Interior Ministry and in the Avenue of the Revolution. And it was not just a handful of fearful women sneaking alongside the city walls. Those were courageous women, marching side by side with men, chanting slogans against the government at the top of their voices, choking with tear gas fired by the police, and bending under the blows of huge truncheons which the special police squads, hid behind their plastic shields, used to disperse the demonstrators.

Nevertheless, people in the West, including Poland, tend to see Iran mostly as a country where the authorities of the Islamic Republic introduce discriminatory laws

affecting the situation of women. Western audiences are accustomed to images of anonymous female figures shrouded in black chadors, commonly used to illustrate media reports from Iran. This is why it was surprising to see young, attractive, smiling women taking part in demonstrations on an equal footing with men, recording protests on state-of-the-art mobile phones and openly expressing dissatisfaction with the victory of the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Women's active participation in the public life is often used by the Iranian regime as a counterargument against those Western journalists who accuse it of undemocratic practices. 'Why do you still condemn Iran for its persecution of women? Why do you show our country as a flagship example of oppression and injustice when women represent the majority of students at our universities, whereas in countries such as Saudi Arabia women are not even allowed to drive a car on their own?' These questions were recently asked by Ali Ahani, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, at a meeting in the Iranian embassy in Warsaw.

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Ahani's questions were an example of extreme demagogy. There is probably no other country in the world that has such anachronistic social laws. Indeed, women in Iran do enjoy many more rights than women in most Arab countries. However, their legal status is incommensurate with the social roles and responsibilities which Iran's women have taken on their shoulders.

From the legal perspective, the position of women is clearly inferior versus that of men. Women have no right to file a petition for divorce and are not allowed to keep the children after divorce. Polygamy has been sanctioned. Women inherit a half of what their male relatives do. In court, testimony of two women is worth as much as testimony given by one man. If a woman has an accident, she or her family will get a half of the amount that a man would receive under similar circumstances. When an Iranian woman marries a foreigner, their children are not entitled to Iranian citizenship. A woman is considered fully accountable before the law at the age of nine, whereas a man gains legal capacity at the age of 15. The husband, as the head of the family, has the right to decide if his wife will be allowed to work or go abroad.

Some of those laws were introduced after the Islamic revolution, others had existed during the Shah's reign. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last monarch of Iran, tried to modernize the country which, during many centuries got encased in its increasingly anachronistic traditions. However, the modernization was superficial and benefited only the upper layers of the Iranian society. It is those modernised layers that become the mainstay of opposition against the Shah's regime. Many of those people were first to support the revolution but it would not have succeeded without the support of the traditionally minded masses.

Some of the changes introduced after 1979 were anachronistic and deprived the Iranian upper classes of what they had achieved under the Shah. Nevertheless, the modernisation process was not interrupted. Growing numbers of young women and men were admitted to universities. Ironically, thanks to the compulsory hijab (Muslim

dress tightly covering a woman's body) even women from more traditional families were admitted to the public sphere. Families no longer feared that their daughters or wives would be sullied by working or studying among men: after all, their honour was protected by decent, modest dress.

Many of today's activists fighting for women's rights are beneficiaries of that education system. The Republic provided them with education and knowledge, but also imposed discriminatory laws, entirely incompatible with their levels of civil awareness. For this reason, the voice of Iranian women demanding their rights is more powerful in the world than the voices of their counterparts in Saudi Arabia or other Persian Gulf countries, subject to much more severe discrimination.

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An Iranian lawyer and a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2003, Shirin Ebadi became a symbol of Iranian women fighting for equal rights. She was the first Muslim woman to have been awarded the prize. Before the revolution she got a law degree from the University of Tehran and became a judge. Like many of her educated peers, she initially embraced the revolution. However, the new laws, introduced under the pressure from traditionally-minded Shiite clergy, deprived her of the opportunity to pursue her occupation: women were not allowed to be judges in the Islamic Republic. Ebadi began working as an attorney, defending dissidents, journalists and women fighting against discrimination.

In the post-revolutionary Iran women were repeatedly sentenced for deeds they did not do due to their unequal position before the law. In many a case, when a crime was committed jointly by a man and a woman, only the woman would be sentenced. For instance, she would be the only one to have reached the age when she was accountable before the law, or her own testimony was not seen as having equal weight to that of a man.

Ebadi worked on many cases as a volunteer, charging no fees for her work. She established an association of lawyers who offered free-of charge defence for clients, also in difficult, if not hopeless, cases. Among others, Ebadi and her colleagues defended activists of the 'One Million Signatures' campaign aiming to collect the largest possible number of signatures from Iranian citizens on a petition demanding that the Iranian parliament should abolish discrimination of women before the law.

Before the most recent presidential elections Zahra Rahnaward, the wife of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, became another icon for Iranian women. In contrast with Ebadi, she comes from an entirely different background. While Ebadi never covers her head when abroad and wears a minimalist headscarf in Iran, Zahra Rahnaward always follows the strictest dress code. While Ebadi argues that women's equality derives from the rules of liberal democracy and universal human rights, Rahnaward has always stressed that equality is guaranteed for women by the faith of Islam and any attempts at discrimination mean that the Islamic tenets of belief have been misinterpreted.

Right from the start of the electoral campaign Rahnaward accompanied her husband in the same way that wives of Western politicians do. Such behaviour was

unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic. Before Rahnavard, the wives of state leaders remained in the shadow and were completely unknown to the public. Zahra Rahnavard is an artist and a recognised academic teacher. She was the first woman in the history of the Islamic Republic appointed as a vice-chancellor of a university (which she lost when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power).

During the campaign Zahra Rahnavard repeatedly spoke in favour of equality. When her husband lost in the elections, she made many public appearances, defending Iranians' right to peaceful protests. She was often much harsher than her husband in condemning persecution of activists who criticised the regime and challenged the results of the elections.

On the International Women's Day in March of 2010 Zahra Rahnavard published a very bold statement, published on many websites which support the opposition against the Iranian regime.

On that occasion Rahnavard wrote: 'We want deceit and darkness to end, we want an end to discrimination, be it class discrimination, financial, cultural or discrimination against women. We want respect for personal freedoms, and this does not mean we do not pay heed to the collective and its concerns, but that we believe the individual too has a right. And usually, in highly ideological systems, the individual is not allowed to have an opinion or desire of his own. But this is what the green movement is asking for.'

She continued: 'I would also like to talk about women. The highest ideals for women are freedom and putting an end to discrimination. This is not only specific to women of Iran, it is an ideal women across the world struggle for. In certain countries women have had more success in removing discrimination but we have not been successful. This is a reality. I have always said that the Islamic Revolution is an incomplete project. We were hopeful that the great ideals of Islamic Revolution and its great leader Imam Khomeini would substantiate in the Islamic Republic. Since the revolution succeeded very quickly we expected ideals such as freedom, rule of law, equality, public welfare, eliminating class discrimination and others will be realized in Islamic republic. But it did not happen. Pursuing these very same ideals particularly women issues is the goal of green movement.'

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Many women fell victim to the persecutions which the Iranian government unleashed against its critics after the wave of post-election protests. A young female student, Neda Agha Soltan, became a symbol of resistance against the totalitarian regime. It is not clear if she was a willing participant or an accidental victim of the anti-governmental march in July 2009. She died of a bullet fired by a sniper hired by the law enforcement bodies to suppress the demonstration but someone recorded her death with a mobile phone and posted it on the Internet. The video was so telling that the Iranian authorities tried to discredit it even six months later. The government-controlled television aired materials to explain that the woman was a foreign intelligence agent and her death was a propaganda trick of the Islamic rev-

olution's enemies. The footage contained close-ups which allegedly showed that the blood on the woman's face was a red liquid she poured from a plastic sachet hidden in her sleeve.

Women were also among those sentenced to death in political trials that took place between the autumn of 2009 and the spring of 2010. Harsh sentences imposed by courts at that time were intended to frighten the public and discourage Iranians from taking action against the government. People who were sentenced were accused of a slur of Islam and of contacts with prohibited anti-regime organisations of monarchists or People's Mojahedin of Iran. Most of the defendants were accused of inciting post-election demonstrations. The authorities did not bother to notice that some of those defendants were put under arrest long before the 2009 elections, for instance Shirin Alam Holi, a Kurdish human rights defender (imprisoned since May 2008, and executed in May 2010).

A prominent Iranian lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was a counsel for the defence in many political trials (also after the presidential elections), has been kept in Tehran's Evin prison since September. Very little is known about her current condition. She is said to have started a hunger strike to protest against the inhumane treatment she was subjected to in prison. She was not allowed to see attorneys or family members.

Iranian women are often seen as passive symbols of discrimination. One such symbol was the 22-year-old Delara Darabi who, according to all available evidence, was sentenced despite being innocent. In an attempt to rescue her boyfriend, she admitted a murder she had not committed. Her boyfriend made her believe that, as a person under legal age (then 17), she would not be sentenced. Another example is Sakineh Mohammadi-Ashtiani, accused of adultery and currently facing the risk of a death by stoning. International organisations started a campaign in her defence, engaging such famous figures as pope Benedict XVI or Carla Bruni.

However, Iranian women are more than such passive symbols: many female activists are aware of discrimination in their country and tirelessly fight for equality. Their quest is part of a wider campaign for the democratisation of Iran, of which both the government and the opposition in Iran are perfectly aware. This is why the government in Tehran views all women's rights activists on par with 'enemies of the regime.' And this is why opposition groupings have incorporated women's equality as one of their key postulates.

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