

Three Decades of Iranian Women's Activism

Wednesday 26 August 2009, by [SAMEH Catherine](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2009).

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BEFORE THE JUNE elections and the protests that ensued, 2009 was hailed as a milestone in Iran for another reason: it marked the 30th anniversary of the 1979 revolution.

The revolution and recent protests shared the mass participation of women, as most media accurately reported. But the popular media's comparisons of the election protests to the revolution oversimplify both upsurges and elide the dynamic, contradictory and complex decades that followed 1979. [1] I will argue that women's involvement and leadership role in the recent protests was no spontaneous surprise, but a product and extension of both their presence in the public sphere that the revolution facilitated, and the relative personal and political agency they've gained in three post-revolutionary decades.

Women and Revolution

A broad-based oppositional movement against the corrupt dictatorship of Mohammed Reza Shah, the 1979 revolution enjoyed the mass participation of women from all sectors of society. The leading Islamic theorists of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shari'ati, mobilized women's involvement in the revolution around a "different but equal" discourse that valorized women's role in the family.

Shari'ati, deeply influenced but departing from Marxism, drew on a Shi'a model of womanhood to highlight women's central role as daughters, wives and mothers — all part of a family of warriors and defenders of Islam — while Khomeini, from a conservative Islamist view, articulated Islam as freeing women from capitalist exploitation. While Shari'ati spoke to more left-leaning constituencies, and Khomeini to more conservative elements, each articulated women's equality and political involvement as emerging from their gender-specific role within the family.

Both discourses effectively drew on the widespread resentment of religious, rural and traditional women, who had been excluded from the secular regimes of the Pahlavi shahs (r. 1925-1979). The top-down modernizing state feminism of the shahs benefited mostly elite women, and their forced, sometimes violently, secularism alienated many. As Nikki Keddie writes, "Unveiling, like other women's rights, was primarily advocated by a few elite women until it was decreed by Reza Shah in 1936, and was traumatic for many" (2009, 46).

Keddie's assessment of women's role in the revolution is echoed by other scholars of women in Iran in The Middle East Institute's online publication, Viewpoints: The Iranian Revolution at 30. Keddie

and four other scholars of Iranian women, working inside and outside of Iran, offer short assessments of women's social, political and economic position in Iran after 30 years of the revolution.

All concur that, as Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam writes, the revolution "brought masses of women to the streets and encouraged them to be politically active." Noting the exclusion of religious women from public life under the shah, Moghadam argues that "veiling undermined family opposition to female participation in public space for many women from religious families" (51). These assessments critically challenge the misconception that women enjoyed mass participation in the public sphere under the shah and suffered a dramatic retreat after the revolution.

The Post-Revolutionary Period

Broadly mobilized by the revolution, women in the immediate aftermath of 1979 found many of the revolutionary promises betrayed. The Family Protection Act of 1967-75, which had given women rights in marriage and divorce, was repealed, and women were demoted or barred from certain professions deemed unsuitable. In the decades following the revolution, however, the rhetorical promise of women's equality under Islam persisted, and it was precisely that promise that enabled Muslim women activists to push to exchange what Haleh Afshar (1998) calls the "emblem of Islamification" for actual reforms in society.

Additionally, as Valentine Moghadam (2002) argues, the need for women's labor during the Iran-Iraq war, economic liberalization under the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), and a successful family planning campaign that legitimated women's access to, and use of, contraception created conditions that would open up public space for women and help facilitate a burgeoning reform movement.

Finally, perhaps the most important legacy of the revolution was the creation of a vast social welfare state with programs and services that dramatically increased literacy rates and life expectancy for women and men, reduced the birth and fertility rates of women, and increased the percentage of women in universities. [2] The introduction of "schools, medical clinics, roads, electricity and piped water into the countryside" (Abrahamian in *Middle East Report*, Spring 2009 Number 250, 13) further contributed to the overall improvement in life conditions and opportunities for Iranian women.

It is in this post-revolutionary period, particularly in the last decade and a half, that women have emerged as key agents of many important changes in the social, political and cultural landscape of Iran. The economic and social realities and contradictions of post-revolutionary Iran, a highly politicized population, and greater life conditions and opportunities led to a vibrant and diverse reform movement in the mid-1990s.

Women, students, clerics and ordinary citizens were able to push for and win reforms by challenging the hardliners' interpretations and applications of Muslim law. [3] Muslim women activists [4] who supported the revolution but found themselves subsequently shut out were key players in this movement, which ushered in reform under president Mohammed Khatami in 1997 and formally ended in 2004, with the exclusion of reform candidates from the parliamentary elections and the hardliners' rise to power.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, a loose but vibrant new movement of Islamic feminists and their secular allies had established itself in Iran.

Social Justice or Patriarchy?

Islamic feminists, [5] such as those associated with the now-closed women's journal *Zanan*, [6] entered the public political sphere through a vast and burgeoning press by engaging in *ijtihad*, Qur'anic interpretation, alongside the "new wave" of religious reformers (Mir-Hosseini 1999). Islamic feminists in Iran, like elsewhere, argued that *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, or human understanding and execution of sacred law, should reflect the social justice vision of sharia — the sacred law, or will, of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (Mir-Hosseini 1999 and 2006). Many drew on a hermeneutics that looked to the ethical precepts of foundational Islam to "unread" past and present patriarchal Islams (Barlas 2002, Ahmed 1992). Islamic feminism in Iran proliferated in unprecedented ways precisely because the state's Islamization project, in its failure to provide gender equality, paradoxically pushed women to criticize patriarchal codifications of Islam using the very discourses internal to Islam (Afshar 1998, Badran 2006, Mir-Hosseini 2006).

Initially these discourses were articulated primarily through more elite spaces like the women's press, in which Islamic feminists and their allies, including secular feminists and reform clerics, engaged in rigorous debates with more traditionalist and conservative thinkers, leaders and parliamentarians. More recently ordinary women have claimed them as their own.

Arzoo Osanloo (2006) points to the ways in which women use "Islamico-civil rights talk" in the family courts to negotiate their rights within marriage, and to divorce, dowry, custody and inheritance. Because Islam has become the legitimating framework for understanding gender roles, rights and responsibilities, women have had to become versed in formal religious texts to secure what they see as rightfully theirs. They, too, put forward an ethical version of Islam that includes gender justice and equality and harmonizes with their notions of themselves as rights-bearing citizens.

Developing New Strategies

By 2001 a rise in conservatism [7] culminated in the hardliners control of the Parliament in 2004 and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency in 2005. Women's rights activists, like other activists, suffered increasing crackdowns on political dissent by the state. But this new conservatism forced feminists — Muslim and secular alike — to regroup. On June 12, 2005, over 2,000 women staged a sit-in in front of the University of Tehran, circulating a written declaration to revise the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Organized by women's groups and NGOs and attended by religious and secular activists including Iran's most famous living female poet, Simin Behbahani, the sit-in and its declaration also received widespread endorsement from Nobel Prize winners, including Shirin Ebadi and Desmond Tutu, the Islamic Students' Association, environmental and educational NGOs, webbloggers [8] and male supporters. Although police cordoned the women off, preventing male supporters from joining them, the protest was relatively peaceful due to a general relaxation of security right before the 2005 presidential elections (Shekarloo 2005).

One year later, on the same date, women's rights activists staged another rally to commemorate the 2005 one, this time in front of one of Tehran's busiest squares, Haft-e Tir Square. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini reports, activists raised specific reforms in Islamic law, including "a ban on polygamy, equal rights to divorce for women and men, joint custody of children after divorce, equal rights in marriage, an increase in the minimum legal age of marriage for girls to 18, and equal rights for women as witnesses." [9]

A year into Ahmadenijad's presidency, security had tightened up, and before it even began, the rally was broken up by police, and some protesters were chased off, beaten and arrested (Mir-Hosseini, "Is Time on Iranian Women Protesters' Side?," par. 1).

Two months later, in August 2006, women's rights activists launched the One Million Signatures Campaign as a "follow-up effort to the peaceful protest of the same aim" ("Petition: International Support for Women's Campaign," par. 1). Having been key actors in both the revolution and the vibrant civil society that emerged in response to the revolution's failures and paradoxes, women's rights activists who launched the signatures campaign capitalized on the last three decades of struggle that politicized them and brought them into the public sphere in unprecedented numbers.

The goals of the campaign are to collect one million signatures through door-to-door contact, meetings, and the internet "in support of changes to discriminatory laws against women," and to promote dialogue and discussion among women and men in meetings and public seminars and conferences (Campaign for Equality, Article 19). The signatures' collection is seen as the first phase of the campaign; in the second phase legal experts will draft new laws to replace unjust laws in the form of a bill.

The campaign is seen as instrumental to the defeat of The Family Protection Bill, which failed to be ratified by the full Parliament in September 2008. Pushed by hardliners in the Parliament, the bill would have put a tax on women's doweries, authorized polygamous marriages without the consent of the first wife, and made divorce for women even more difficult to obtain.

The signatures' campaign, building on the last three decades of women's activism, has contributed to the shifting consciousness among ordinary Iranian citizens about women's rights and equality. The campaign seeks to harmonize Iranian law with the relatively high social and cultural status of women. An early campaign article states:

"It is noteworthy that legal discrimination ... is being enforced in a society where women comprise over 60% of those being admitted to university. It is generally believed that laws should promote social moderation by being one step ahead of cultural norms. But in Iran the law lags behind cultural norms and women's social position and status." — Change for Equality, Article 20

This is striking in many ways. First, it works against the Orientalist trope of Iranian culture as inherently backwards, patriarchal and anti-modern. Second, it speaks to the paradox that haunts the state: it was Islamization and the opening of free universities in almost every corner of Iran that brought women into higher education and literacy in unprecedented numbers. But most interestingly, this campaign frames the implementation of women's legal rights as a necessary outcome of a culture which has normalized women's equality.

The Elections

The discourses of the inevitability of the realization of women's legal rights were reflected in the recent presidential campaigns. The One Million Signatures' Campaign and its network of supporters has been successful at building on the shifting social practices, beliefs and desires of millions of Iranian women and men who have internalized a radically different version of Islam than that codified by the hardliners.

A loose network of feminist activists, including those in the signatures' campaign, decided not to endorse any specific candidate, but rather to push for reforms in the law. As the signatures campaign website reports, candidate Mehdi Karroubi "promised to submit bills to parliament intent

on reforming laws which discriminate against women" (Sara Farhang, "Iran: Women at the Forefront of Popular Defiance," par. 16). Following Karroubi's promise, candidate Mir-Houssein Mousavi "issued a comprehensive programme on women as part of his election platform, in which he also committed to reforming discriminatory laws against women" (par. 17).

Mousavi and his wife Zahra Rahnavard also emblemized a modern, Islamic couple by holding hands in public and using every opportunity to put forward Rahnavard to speak about women's legal rights and equality.

The women's movement in Iran, arguably the most dynamic in the region, has succeeded at putting women's legal equality on the national agenda. Moreover, millions of women all over the country, young and old alike, have become powerful agents of major changes in everyday life in Iran. Their presence and involvement in the public sphere and their desires for equality in all spheres of life have grounded and legitimated feminist activists' struggles for legal reform.

These realities explain women's mass participation in the election campaigns and protests that followed. While it is unclear what will happen in the coming period, we can be sure women's activism will persist in creative forms. Iran is, as Homa Hoodfar asserts, democratizing "from the inside out" (in *Middle East Report*, Spring 2009 Number 250, 60). Women's activism, facilitated by the revolution, the paradoxes of Islamization, a dynamic civil society and women's movement, will continue to be central to that project.

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* From Against The Current (ATC) 142, September-October 2009.

Footnotes

[1] Roger Cohen's op-ed in the June 27, 2009 edition of the *New York Times* is but one example of the way popular media has framed women's participation in the election protests along the "not since the Iranian Revolution" line without explicating the conditions that led to women's role in the election protests.

[2] Statistics vary, but most cite women's literacy rates at above 80%, women's average birthrate at around two children, and the percentage of women in universities at over 60%.

[3] During Khatami's presidency, female MPs, backed by the reform movement, organized to reform the Iranian civil code. For instance, the age of marriage for girls was raised from 9 to 13 in 2002.

[4] These activists ranged from conservative Islamist women to self-identified Islamic feminists. All shared a desire for reforms in favor of women's equal rights.

[5] I use this to describe women who defined themselves as both Muslim and feminists and engaged in national debates, mostly in the women's press, about women's role in Islam.

[6] *Zanan's* license was officially revoked in early 2008 after 16 years of publication. It was the most well-known and influential women's journal advocating feminism from an Islamic perspective.
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[7] Space does not permit an analysis of this new conservatism, but it was in part due to Khatami's failure to alleviate economic hardship for many.

[8] Iranians are among the most represented participants in the blogosphere. "Farsi is the fourth most frequently used language for keeping on-line journals." (Alavi 2005).

[9] Women's testimony to crimes like adultery is considered worth half of men's.