

The Women's Movement in Iran; Challenges and opportunities

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For many years Iranian women have been deprived of their fundamental rights. Throughout years of struggle and resistance under different governments, they have accessed some of their rights and face less discrimination, although at times they have lost ground in this fight. Their struggle and resistance has assumed various shapes and forms in accordance with changing times. The twentieth century was the age of women's struggle against male-centred ideologies that espouse a range of anti-female clichés ranging from deficient mental capacities, the lack of a right to vote or family rights. However, women have continued to play an influential role in freedom movements throughout the history of Iran. For instance, women played a significant role to bring about the Constitutional Revolution (1905-7) however, along with mentally handicapped citizens they were denied the right to vote. Again, women's participation in the 1979 revolutionary efforts and victory attracted much attention, but history repeated itself and not only did their oppression not come to an end, but it actually intensified.

Women's rights was not a standalone issue in the formation of the revolution. Pre-revolutionary slogans referred to justice and equality. Iranian women who supported the revolution were not considered an independent group whose rights were among the primary goals of the revolution, their aims were among the overall aims of the entire body of revolutionaries. However, after the revolution succeeded, the presence of women in the revolution was used for other ends. In effect, their presence was used as a sign of support and approval for misogynistic policies. Although from the outset women demonstrated their opposition to violation of their rights, starting with the anti-hijab demonstration in March 1979, during the following decade there were no NGO or independent organisations that reflected their demands. The persistent historical pattern following the two great Constitutional and 1979 revolutions offered an important lesson to women, that they must pursue their aims in an independent and organised fashion, otherwise following victory, their male counterparts would marginalise them.

Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran have been subjected to long-term oppression and changes in government have meant changes in their situation too. With the establishment of the reformist presidential administration under President Khatami from 1997-2005 and expansion of activities by feminists, women's rights activists succeeded in securing access to some rights for women. In addition, during this same phase, the authorities issued a higher number of permits to publish feminist books and cultural resources. There was a rise in the number and calibre of organisations and NGOs focused on raising awareness and providing a range of resources to protect and promote women's rights. However, the feminist movement, women's rights activists and their strategies are not areas of interest that are prevalent in discourses among Iranians today. This may be due to Iranian society's longstanding patriarchal structure and the distance between a significant segment of the women's movement and the masses in Iran. The women's movement in Iran is mostly composed of students, educated, middle class and upper class women. Although this movement reflects women's demands and needs in pursuit of ending discriminatory laws against women, it continues to face the criticism that it remains unaware of the fundamental needs of the masses at the grassroots level and instead focuses on the demands of middle class women. During the reformist era and presidency, a number of impactful NGOs and campaigns managed to make, although somewhat trivial, but nevertheless changes for the better. The cultural results and women's rights achievements were no longer exclusive to upper and middle class women; they reached women in villages, homemakers and those living in the lower strata of society. Although this was not a widespread phenomenon, compared to previous presidencies, it made greater strides. Just as over many years women and their bodies served as the centre of state power and the symbol of the rulers' ideology and power, with the change in administration and Ahmadinejad taking office, civil society and demand-driven activities, especially women's rights activists, faced a difficult situation. The entire foundation of the movement that women had begun to establish was entirely destroyed. Almost all permits for women's NGOs and organisations were cancelled and they were forced to cease their operation.

Following the events surrounding the rise of the Green Movement, in which women played a significant role, many women's rights activists were arrested and others left the country. The challenges women faced after 2009 increased dramatically and activists both inside and outside Iran faced a single challenge. Some believed efforts by activists outside the country worsened the conditions for those inside Iran, while others advanced that activists overseas must follow and support efforts by those in Iran. Others asserted that both groups must complement each other and activists overseas must continue each line of action initiated by their colleagues in Iran where, due to repression, the cause could not advance any further. Yet another group denied the need for any connection between the two. The dichotomy between once colleagues now inside and outside Iran, due to the difference in their geographical positions and perspectives, in addition to the

government crackdown, censorship, imprisonment and the patriarchal structure of society presented a huge range of challenges for women's rights activists.

Following the conclusion of Ahmadinejad's presidency and moderates taking over the administration, a number of women's rights activists formed various campaigns and re-established activities aimed at increasing the rate of women's political participation, monitoring parliamentarians and adding to the number of parliamentary seats occupied by women. Many activists expressed their support for the campaign. Iranian women who played an important role in both the Constitutional and the 1979 revolutions but were pushed aside and their rights displaced deserved more than a few seats at the parliament. The continuation of the campaign with a great beginning was met with widespread disqualification and an intelligence agenda designed to further repress women. Although the parliamentary election campaign and the 'Pink Campaign', a campaign for free breast cancer detection tests and assessment for thousands of Iranian women, offered hope and new boost to the women's movement in the stifled political climate following the collapse of the Green Movement and sanction-driven economic downturn, and had the potential to open doors to more and varied engagement.

In general, women's rights activists have faced many complicated challenges that are influenced by a complex society that has passed through many ups and downs in the recent past. Many challenges in the women's movement are due to the nature of issues in focus at particular points in history. But others are shared characteristics of different phases. Lack of a balanced focus on demands made by women of varied socio-economic backgrounds is among such challenges. In addition, a significant segment of the women's movement in Iran have separated sexuality from other dimensions of public identity, including class and ethnicity, forgetting that discrimination based on ethnicity, class, religion or languages imposed on Iranian women is not only distinct from sexual discrimination but in fact adds to it.

In conclusion, it can be stated that, through many years, Iranian women have not abandoned their resistance and struggle. Highly patriarchal societal and familial structures and misogynist laws have failed to stop women. In fact, women have managed to raise the standards of political and civil activism. For instance, the post-revolutionary forced hijab is a political characteristic of the Iranian state, and those who resist it are subjected to punishment. Despite such consequences, the number of urban women who over the years have taken a stance against such forced covering has increased. Women have continued their resistance towards such forced measures and gradually forced the government to stand down. Although the hijab is the main symbol of the establishment which has used every measure to repress women, through adjustments, bright colours and new styles in their type of clothing and coverage, women have not only stood up against this law but also challenged the state's patriarchal discourse against women.

Last but not least, oppressive measures against women's sexuality, have received insufficient attention among women's rights activists. The time is ripe for the new generation of activists to not only focus on this issue but also pay greater attention to economic and earning power among lower class women, as well as their access to health and security. Women who are in marginal communities, particularly non-Persian or non-Shia, face greater repression. Among them are those who over the years have remained less visible. The women's movement is a movement for those who are marginalised; it is time to pay greater attention to those who face greater degrees of repression.