

Foreword
Wendi Momen

One of the most enduring dichotomies across time is that of humanity. Even more than 'us' and 'them' has been the division of humanity into 'men' and 'women'. Our relationships, our work, our thinking, our laws and customs, our language, the way we look at the world, our politics and economics, even our clothes and colour choices reflect this apparently basic separation of one humanity into two parts. Based on biological functions common to most plants and animals, the division of humanity has transcended this simple scientific fact to create an entire hierarchy of societal norms that have generally placed males in positions of power, authority and responsibility and females into roles that support that hierarchy. Possibly grounded in a simple need for physical strength at the dawn of humanity's evolution, for most peoples the hierarchy has developed over thousands of years as a way to divide work, govern, make decisions, allocate resources, extend privileges and concentrate wealth and power. Only in the last few centuries has the hierarchy been modified by some communities to include more women and to enable them to climb through the hierarchy – but the dichotomy and the hierarchy largely remain.

More recently, many have come to accept that the equality of women and men is a fundamental truth about human reality and have affirmed their 'faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person' and 'in the equal rights of men and women'.¹ While men and women display physical differences and these differences can influence how individuals experience the world, research has shown that in terms of intellectual capacity, these differences are negligible.² With this recognition has come, at the level of principle, the development of a body of human rights which are to be extended to all people³ and other international instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.⁴

It is at the level of application and lived experience that the ideal of human rights is being tested. In every country, in every culture, the role of women and their rights and responsibilities are being discussed, challenged, offered, withdrawn, undermined, supported. This is a major issue of our time. Violence against women and girls is endemic. The glass ceiling making it harder for women to rise to leadership positions, in particular the number of women on boards and who are parliamentarians, the dilemma of work and motherhood, the cost of childcare, house husbands and how to empower women – and to persuade men to enable women – to achieve equity in all walks of life are well-rehearsed, if not resolved, concerns of western-style communities. In other parts of the world the concerns of women may appear simpler – how to fetch enough water safely and without being attacked, how to access health care, how to enable girl children to go to school, how to avoid being raped as a weapon of war, how to inherit property and retain custody of children when a husband dies, how to overcome the shunning associated with widowhood, how to earn and keep one's own money, how to avoid being trafficked as a sex worker – but are powerful reminders that inequality and injustice are widespread, endemic and still not high on the world's political agenda.

This volume is dedicated to analysing and raising awareness of some of the main human rights challenges that women in Iran face today and the efforts being made to address them.

Once the poets' romantic image of doe-eyed beauties resting in the fragrant gardens of ancient Persia, today's Iranian women are well-educated, strong-minded people with talents, careers and political and economic aspirations. As the Introduction to this volume relates, their changing fortunes under the different political regimes and ideologies of the past half century or so has given them the vote and hidden them under the chador.⁵

As I write, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, has just issued to three branches of the government a 16-point list of new policies on the family, which he calls the 'cornerstone of the Islamic society'. He describes how Iran is to achieve a 'family-based society' using an Islamic model of the family.

¹ United Nations, Charter of the United Nations, June 1945, <http://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/>

² Colom, Roberto, Manuel JuanEspinosa, Francisco Abad and Luis F. Garcia. 'Negligible Sex Differences in General Intelligence', *Intelligence* 28(1) (2000): 57–68.

³ United Nations, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

⁴ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> Only four countries and the Holy See have not signed the Convention: Iran, Somalia, Sudan and Tonga. The United States and Palau have signed but not ratified it.

⁵ Also written as chador. It is a full-body-length semicircle of fabric that is open down the front. This cloth is tossed over the woman's or girl's head, but then she holds it closed in the front.

On first sight, the measures described look progressive and helpful to women and society at large: protecting the family, strengthening the family, encouraging and facilitating successful marriages, supporting single mothers and steering people away from adopting an immoral lifestyle. The overall intention of the policies seems to be to significantly increase the nation's birth rate to produce a 'young, healthy, dynamic and growing society', perhaps based on the belief that a large population will strengthen the country politically and economically.

On further consideration, some of the measures seem to be pulling women and families back to an earlier era. What will Iranian women (and men) make of 'banning the spread of programmes harming family values' (such as family planning?), the call for single mothers to remarry (they are unable to manage on their own?), the 'effective confrontation with the enemies' soft war aimed at the collapse and deviation of family relationships, and removal of obstacles and traumas as well as challenges to family strength' (a challenge to the extension of universal human rights to all Iranians?). Are women being 'protected' or 'oppressed' by such measures? This is for Iranian women to decide, if they are allowed.

The articles in this volume suggest that the rights of Iranian women are still far from recognised or embedded within their society. They, like all the rest of us – women and men – need to continue to advocate and strive for the extension of human rights to them so that they, and we, can finally demonstrate that there is only one humanity, living on one planet, that all people are to be treated with justice, dignity and equality, and that all are to enjoy the full range of human rights.