

## **Challenge to Anti-Women Laws in Iran (Part 1)**

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**15th May 2010**



The Iranian women's movement is one of the key sections of the popular movement for democratic change in Iran. Women have played a leading role in the events since 1997.

Jelveh Javaheri, is a journalist and one of the founding members of the Campaign for Equality (Taqeer Baraye Barabari) which campaigned to collect One Million Signatures demanding an end to discrimination against women enshrined in Islamic Republic of Iran's legislation. She has been arrested on a number of occasions and incarcerated in the notorious Evin Prison.

She was also one of the co-founders of Hastia Andish Center, a leading women's NGO, which focuses on promoting women's rights through education.

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### **1. What is your assessment of the strong presence and role of women in the Green Movement?**

This is not the first time that women have had a strong presence in political and social struggles. Women's presence was very strong during the Constitutional Revolution. This was also the case during the 1979 revolution. Perhaps this was why after the victory of the revolution many of the policies of the Islamic Republic with regard to women were contradictory. On one hand the political leaders, particularly clerics like Ayatollah Khomeini, wanted to mobilise women for the goals of the regime, while on the hand were trying to restrain women. In another words the contradictory policy that was pursued with respect to women, stemmed from their broad presence on one hand, and the need to mobilise them, on the other.

In the Green Movement the presence of women is very noticeable too and could not be ignored. It is of course stronger than the presence in the 1979 revolution. In my view, this condition has

developed over time and it is because of the growing awareness of women and the gap between their demands and the realisation of these demands. Another form of this presence was seen in the presidential elections of 1997, when women rushed to the polling stations hoping to get closer to their demands. In all of the following elections this presence at the polls was very evident as women have had tangible demands. However, not only have their demands not been responded to, they have been openly or covertly curbed too.

This deep gap and disconnect, created between the realisation of women's demands and their real demands, has meant that Iranian women have been in continuous struggle through their daily lives in these years. As a result, the social movement of women has broadened its struggle during the past years because their issues have become broader and deeper than before. These social and individual struggles have both given hope for change to women and developed the will to resist, such that they have a strong and significant presence along with the Green Movement that is seeking change.

## **2. How is the relationship between the Green Movement and the women's movement? How is the gender struggle and the struggle for equality intertwined with the democratic struggle to deepen both and not desert the independent demands of women?**

Democracy is the outcome of achieving the rights of women, human rights, environment, etc. As a result, during the struggle to gain their rights, women will inevitably engage in the democratic struggle too. They also have to separately pursue their own specific demands and we should not think that if we are moving on the way of democratic struggles we will necessarily attain the women's demands too.

Many of the activists of the women's movement state that the demands of people have broadened and radicalised, that women's movement, particularly the One Million Signature Campaign, could not respond to the expectations of people any more. Yet some believe that due to the security pressures, circumstances for this type of work has become difficult and people may have become disappointed in change. I don't think this way. I believe that the protests after the presidential elections of 2009 in the form of the Green Movement have created a dynamic and active space that could prepare more fertile circumstances for discussions about the rights of women in the society.

Hand in hand with the strong presence of women in these broad popular protests, the factor of discrimination against women has been repeatedly brought up and emphasized. For instance, Neda Aghasoltan was a symbol of not only the discrimination against women but also the courage and resistance of women. Anyway, I believe that today the people are more attentive to their destiny. At the same time, the struggles of women over the past years has resulted in the fact that the presence of women in popular struggles reminds people of the discrimination against women. On the other hand, practically nothing has changed in the state of women, i.e. demands like the change in discriminatory laws are still on the table. Therefore, with a timely and proper

approach, this powerful potential of people for collective action could be utilised, and particularly women, who are ready to make a change in their destiny, could be drawn to this movement.

Under current circumstances, the social movements could raise the voice of their protest even higher by working together. Inevitably, this will not only help these movements expand but will also add to the diversity and dynamism of the current atmosphere and bring forward more tangible demands related to various social groups such as women, workers, students, etc. These are the demands for which people had entered the democratic struggle. If these collective actions work together, their outcome could help develop democracy. In reality, today a common point has been created between various social movements in Iran that ties all of us for common action. In fact, we all want to attain democratic means such as civil institutes, free gatherings, and people-oriented media.

**3. Do you think that the previously tried forms of struggle, like the experience of the One Million Signature Campaign or other campaigns that resulted in raising the gender issue in society, must be revisited in the current situation and replaced by alternative methods?**

In my opinion, both yes and no. Particularly in relation to the One Million Signature Campaign the previous activism could still be continued, because in my opinion, in the absence of people-oriented public media, talking face to face with people still is very efficient. We saw that this method was adopted by the Green Movement too and was even employed prior to elections. During the protests after the elections, many people notified each other of rallies through one to one communication. However, because we should never move in a hollow space, new tactics must also be employed in the new atmosphere.

**4. The hundred-year old movement of women has been successful in publicising the gender-related demands among certain social strata. How do you see the demands of working people and the possibilities of organising them to raise their awareness?**

Unfortunately not much significant work has been done in Iran about the working women. The reason might be that due to the sensitivity of the Islamic Republic to any form of labour-related organisations, no organisation has been formed to deal with the matters related to female workers which they themselves could steer. Even if such an organisation was set up, it would not be able to develop a broad and steady movement. Although in such movements as the One Million Signature Campaign the goal was to go among various classes and groups of women and to depict their pain and suffering through face to face action, but the demands of working women was not directly raised. The Campaign tried hard to engage various social forces and was successful in raising its legal demands, which were class-neutral demands, to working women, but was not able to organise them around these demands. I believe it is necessary to have independent movements developed by the working women and other social forces, including

women of other classes, should fully support this effort. In other words, somehow the practical awareness must be developed among working women.

**5. What are the urgent demands of Iranian women at present? Whether in conjunction with the recent post-election events or in general, what is the status of women's organisation in Iran in terms of the scope and extent of activities? What would be the challenges facing women activists in the new Iranian year?**

The question about the urgent demands of Iranian women at present is not a question that could be easily answered. I think that the demands of activists in the women's movement may not necessarily have priority in the demands of Iranian women. Up until the recent elections, and particularly in the last few years, the activists of the women's movement had been emphasising certain specific demands, such that you could identify various groups by their demands. For instance, those who put emphasis on changing the discriminatory laws, such as the One Million Signature Campaign, protestors against the Family Law, and No-Stoning Campaign; those who were striving to heighten the political participation of women, such as the coalition of reformist women; those who called attention to the laws related to gender segregation that systematically ban the presence of women in public events, such as the coalition against gender discrimination in universities and the campaign for the right of women to enter stadiums; and those who fought to eradicate honour-related family violence among Kurdish women, such as the committee against honour violence.

Among all of these efforts, the one demand that seems to have dominated over these years amongst various groups of women was the demand to change the discriminatory laws. For example, at the same time that students groups were pursuing the trade demands of female students, they also joined in alliances that were pursuing the change in discriminatory laws and made efforts to spread these demands among scholars. The coalition of reformist women attempted to build up the religious renaissance views and enhance the political involvement of women in order to further impact on decision making about the change in the discriminatory laws. Also, the committee against honour violence paid due attention to changes in discriminatory laws related to honour killings, while it struggled against existing traditions and conventions among Kurds, and most of its members also participated in the One Million Signature Campaign.

It seems like these groups have somewhat changed after the elections. I believe that after the elections, the women's movement, like other movements, somehow did not have adequate coherence. Maybe if this movement had adequate coherence after the elections, it would have had favourable results and achievements. This lack of coherence could be attributed to a certain degree to the unfamiliar circumstances and the excitement of events on one hand and on the other hand the widespread security atmosphere preventing the formation of organisations in the years prior to the elections. It seems that at this moment the activists of the women's movement more than anything need democratic means to express and pursue their demands. This way, some

may draft their demands mostly around attaining and establishing these means like the reformist women. Some many resort to collective action to achieve their demands and in doing so, inevitably seek democratic means, like the One Million Signature Campaign.

**6. What do you think about the intensification of some legal restrictions against women such as passing the so called "Family Protection" law in the judiciary committee of the parliament, reducing the working hours of women, etc?**

This tendency is now picking up pace. In fact, after the ninth government (Ahmadinejad's administration) took office, we witnessed all kinds of plans to practically keep women at home. This trend was faced with broad protests in the past few years but today it appears that the government and conservative forces are trying to take advantage of the current chaotic circumstances and push this trend ahead faster. First and foremost, educational institutes such as daycare centres, schools and universities are targeted, along with the laws related to the family and employment of women. That is, by promoting the Islamisation of educational institutes once again, and at the same time changing the laws towards more discrimination against women, the government is moving faster than ever toward tighter controls over women, and keeping women at home. Besides these changes we witness a grave invasion against feminism and equality-seeking movements of women in universities and through the state media, in a manner that equates these movements to the "masculinisation of women" and portray them as destroyers of the family. But in essence, it is the plans of the state and parliament that destroy women and in the long run drives families into crisis.

**We struggle for progressive change! (Part 2)**

**Following the publication of the first part of the CODIR's interview with Jelveh Javaheri, one of the well known activists of the Iranian women's movement, we are pleased to publish the second instalment of that interview. In this part Jelveh answers a number of important questions about the state of the women's movement inside Iran. We encourage all supporters of human and democratic rights to study this important interview. For the first part of this interview and a short biography of Jelveh Javaheri please visit the following link: <http://www.codir.net/editorial.html#51>**

**22nd May 2010**



**7. What is the central slogan of the women's movement at the current time?**

In my opinion, the women's movement does not have a central slogan. However, the course of post-election actions indicates that some of the women's movement

activists are more than anything pursuing non-violence and citizens rights, and as such, their slogan is to avoid violence. There are many groups that are after the elimination of discrimination against women. Their slogan remains that of equality between men and women and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Nevertheless, there is no solid boundary between these groups and in general the slogan of equality and the elimination of discrimination could be seen implicitly among most of these groups.

### **8. Is the One Million Signature Campaign still active?**

Yes it is active, but somewhat in shadow. Since 2 years ago, the pressure on the Campaign has been such that even if a meeting was organised over the phone, police and security forces would appear at the location of the meeting and interrogate the owner. This situation practically forced the large body of the Campaign to split into smaller groups. The organising tasks were split between these groups. This situation intensified after the recent elections. Nonetheless, we have been able to advance our work during this period by keeping a low profile and without media publicity. Whenever the connection between these groups was cut off or weakened, the Campaign moved more sluggishly but was able to restore its actions through reviewing and re-assigning tasks. This model, i.e. making the groups smaller and networking amongst them, had a significant impact on the continuation of the Campaign. I believe the Green Movement could utilise this model too because any one of these groups has an institutional role and after the completion of the Campaign goal, they will remain in place. Even today they could get connected with other networks. This is what happened when the mothers in the Campaign approached and expanded to Mothers of Peace and Mourning Mothers.

### **9. Were there any 8th March celebrations this year in Iran?**

I wrote an extensive article about this subject. Prior to the 8th March a number of activists of the women's movement were trying to promote their demands in one way or another. However, on this day we were not able to publicise our demands as loudly enough as we should and act appropriately according due to the atmosphere after the election. This day could have become one of the protest days after the election, with its women-specific slogans, in which case it would have helped both the Green Movement and the women's movement. For whatever reason, this unity did not exist among women, and even the Green Movement did not consider this day in the list of its days of protest. That was how the opportunity of International Women's Day was wasted amidst the current Green atmosphere. Perhaps this was a reminder to think about re-uniting the movements.

It is true that the ambiance has changed. However, if we are thinking of completely abandoning the previous actions and starting fresh movements all over again, we will not only lose the experience we have gained in the past, but would not be able to properly organise our new actions. We will jump from one branch to another. I believe that the post-election events to a certain extent drove the women's movement into some sort of disarray. Many of the activists of

the women's movement believe that, considering the new circumstances, the demands have to change. However, I think that demands must be pursued consistently in order to get results otherwise, if we keep shifting direction like this, we will have to go back to square one every time. In my view, the demands could be broadened but the previous demands will remain until they are attained. In particular, the demand to change discriminatory laws, which I believe is both a strategic demand which has the potential to mobilise the public and is also urgent, since the existence of such laws leads to broad violence against women and their lack of independence. Therefore, our demands should not change so swiftly and become isolated from the everyday lives of women. The modes of action, however, should be adjusted and it is these modes and methods that should be kept up to date.

#### **10. What is the status of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Iran today?**

I can definitely assert to the fact that during Ahmadinejad's administrations, NGOs were gradually silenced. Right from the inception of Ahmadinejad's administration, NGOs were put under pressure. First it was the state order that the permits of NGOs must be re-validated. One had to live in Iran and go through the NGO registration and the obtaining of permits during Khatami's government in order to understand what it means to renew the permit during Ahmadinejad's. I was active in one of these NGOs during Khatami's term. In those days, when the talks about the expansion of civil society and NGOs as wings of the state was going on, it took us two years to get our permit, and it was only a year after that it expired, only because the members of the central council of this NGO attended a peaceful gathering and demanded a change in the laws. The order to revoke our permit came directly from the Intelligence Department; even during the interrogations later on, they alluded to this fact. As such, during Ahmadinejad's administration, the permits of NGOs that were able to register, were revoked and those NGOs were simply shut down. In this period, the remaining NGOs are either dreadfully neutral and do not criticise any policies, or are state-related and in fact only carry the name of NGO.

#### **11. What images of women do the mainstream media in Iran, including TV and radio stations, portray? What layers of women are the main audiences or targets of this state propaganda?**

The policies of the mainstream media in Iran are somewhat different from each other. For instance, radio stations have better programmes than TV. Nevertheless, the unified policy of state media has become so misogynistic. Nowadays, polygamy is freely publicized on Iran's TV. Women are encouraged to stay at home [become housewives]. Divorce is considered a social problem and not a phenomenon. Female characters portrayed are far from characters of everyday life. The policies of radio and TV and newspapers such as Keyhan are very misogynistic, and in my opinion, very anti-man too. One of the recent ideas promoted by the state is pre-marital education and issuance of the marriage certificate. Imagine that during this education they portray a woman as delicate, subservient, with nice body shape, and a man as burly, rough. It is

hard for us to imagine that such images are taught so explicitly. Many objected to these policies, even from the inner circle of the regime, but it had no bearing.

**12. How is the relationship between the women's organisations with other civil movements, like the youth and student movements?**

In recent years, the women's movement and its organisations have had very good relationships with the students to a large extent, simply because about 70% of students are females. Many of these students live outside their home city, which has a significant impact on their independent thinking and actions. During the reform years, many of these students were members of women's NGOs or they helped organise women's organisations in universities. Establishing the Women's Commission of Tahkim Vahdat" [Bureau for Consolidation of Unity, a major national student organization] was just one example. They organized a student movement with female demands, such as protesting against gender quotas in universities. In particular, after 12th June 2005, the women's movement organised joint actions with the student movement. On the day of 12th June, 2006, a large number of student activists, including Bahareh Hedayat were arrested. A number of them became involved in the One Million Signature Campaign too and absorbed numerous students to this civil movement. It must be noted though that due to their struggle on two fronts, i.e. academic freedoms and the elimination of discrimination against women, these students are under double coercion.

**13. In one of your commentaries, you pointed out the silence or relative passivity of the women's movement. In your opinion, how could this be overcome? What are your recommended approaches for strengthening and harmonising the ranks of the women's movement?**

I believe joint actions must be organised. Despite the wide-spread range of demands of the women's movement at the moment, I still think that this movement is pursuing specific demands and goals. For this reason, if it could focus on the common points, it would certainly be able to organise very broadly. For instance, on the topic of protest against the so-called Family Protection bill, I believe a collective demand could be agreed upon and this could be, as I mentioned previously, organised around the change in discriminatory laws, along with proposing alternative laws. For example, some have placed the stress upon labour laws; some on family laws; some on the laws and regulations governing universities; or supportive laws to eliminate violence against women; and have demanded equality and the elimination of discrimination in each of these areas. They are all engaged in other activities too, but they could jointly act together around legal issues. I believe this will make the women's movement and its networks stronger and will link these networks together. In this case, we could become stronger in the field of interest of others too, e.g. in the field of the labour laws we will stay beside the labour movement; on the university laws and regulations we will stay alongside the student movement; and on the topic of elimination of violence we will go along the Green Movement in certain

paths. In my opinion, this movement has the capability of tying the movements together, as it is present in all of them, one way or another.

**14. Do the Iranian women's organisations have friendship and collaboration with the women's organisations in other countries or with international organisations? How is international support and solidarity with the demands of Iranian women?**

I believe this collaboration and relationship exists, and its history goes back to the years before the [1979] revolution. During the Constitutional Revolution [1906] many groups had this kind of relationships and after that, during the Pahlavi regimes, some groups, like the Union of the Women Lawyers of Iran, took part in international groups or had relationships with them. In the 1980's, when many of the activists of women's movement left Iran, they could make contact with feminist groups outside of Iran, and after the 80's and the end of Iran-Iraq war, this relationship extended inside of Iran. They became the connecting bridge between Iranian feminists and the feminists all around the world. Currently, and particularly after the launch of One Million Signature Campaign, this rapport has expanded. Since many of the Campaign groups are active outside of Iran, including in England, the US, Italy, Australia, France, Germany, Austria this relationship has been inevitably maintained. At the time of the arrest of activists of the women's movement inside Iran, we witnessed the support of many feminist and human rights groups from all over the world. These groups supported the goals of the Campaign too. In fact, this support is inevitable, because the problem of women is not an Iranian issue, but a global issue. Patriarchy is also a global phenomenon that could be overcome only through the wide-ranging support of the international women's movements for each other across the globe.

**15. Do you have a message for CODIR and its readers and human rights, democracy and peace activists?**

To follow on from my previous comments, I believe human rights, peace and democracy are global matters. We could not achieve these goals except with broad supports for each other. These three could only be sustained when they are sustained across the world. The threat is when we see that far or near countries around us are in overt or covert war, are suffering from despotism, or are directly suffering from violence. Under such circumstances, the society that we are living in will also inevitably suffer from these issues. At the end, I would like to thank you for caring about the domestic issues of Iran and publicizing them in the media.

Source: Committee for Defense of the Iranian Peoples Rights (CODIR)

<http://www.codir.net/editorial.html#51>

<http://www.codir.net/editorial.html#53>