

Spring, 2005

Volunteer

Iran CSO's Training & Research Center

Civil Society and Women Movement









Volunteer



مركز مطالعات و آموزش سازمان های جامعه مدني ايران

Volunteer Actors

Iran CSOs Training and Research Center
Spring 2005

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Women NGOs and Iranian Perspective

By: *Omid Memarian*
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Volunteer Actors efforts to define different dimensions of civil society in Iran. Accordingly, considering the existing opportunities, we consider one of the main social issues in the society. Women and civil society is the third special issue of Volunteer Actors magazine after “Democracy” and “Information Society” which is published in English.

The reason that Democracy allocated one special issue to itself was the fact of its importance in Iranian society. Finding a strategy to apply democracy has been the major goal and concern of Volunteer Actors in Iran. During the last years, we have tried to take measures on the way to deepening of civil society through workshops, materials and training contents to raise awareness regarding this issue. Of course all these efforts have been within our own limited resources. Focus on “Information Society” was due to its influence over civil society.

The reason of choosing “Women Movement and Iranian civil society” is due to this fact that we believe women’s movement in Iran has passed its primary stages, reorganizing itself to enter a new phase. So, analyzing and discovering its different dimensions is essential to identify the opportunities and challenges and concentrate on complex issues to solve them. Such a goal is a comprehensive project and program. As we mentioned, our efforts would be within our limited resources to cover a small part of women’s movement, which will not embrace different angles. In our efforts we tried to choose some of the assumptions and approaches.

Since past ten years the women NGOs although envisaged with rise and falls, managed to have significant impact on publicizing women’s issues through out the Iranian society. Women NGO’s growth in numbers according to the statistics pronounced by authorized organizations (Women Participation Center of the President), during the past 8 years increased as high as 500 percent (although women NGO’s growth in terms of the quality of performance require some proper assessment). During this period, women organizations have gradually shaped different trends and preferences where in the passage of time, more clear outlines of intellect and expertise is evident. Women NGOs demonstrating clear frameworks of diverse ideas and perceptions, ultimately, brought about social positions and diverse activities with respect to their future programs. As such, as we go further from the initial years of the Revolution; more diverse groups of women



are able to participate actively in social sphere or have their voice heard through social activity. Such environment was accelerated throughout the phase of economic renovation of 70s and the following years of Mr. Khatami's presidency. Women NGOs has worked with people where they paid more attention to the needs of beneficiary groups. Therefore they have attracted the participation of academia, and the community in certain activities. Simultaneously women's organizations were represented in some international events as World Summit of Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, World Summit of genocide in Durban and World Summit of Information Society. They participated in different training courses and workshops and gained valuable experiences. Papers and reports were translated providing back ups of today's knowledge for women active in society, to further increase their capacities and quality works in their social activities. Representation in public spheres and establishing connections with key players like the Government are among other impacts of the expansion of women organizations. Among other affecting factors of women NGOs are further networking and short or long term coalition buildings, in addition to strong representation in public media. In some cases female activists could manage to lobby and advocate closely with MPs to further rise awareness for revision the acts of law, pertaining to women and children.

Despite the numbers of women associations who were left out of their activity at the beginning of the road, there were others who succeeded to pave the way to sustainability. In sum, great numbers of social activists believe that women NGOs, proportionally, made effective impact in advocating women's issues. Although the impact with respect to relatively small number of voices is not too outstanding, yet it is considered a step forward. Paving through the path, women NGOs were faced with further challenges. This edition, meticulously through the reports, interviews and articles highlights many concerned issues. The reports elaborate on cultural and historical presence of women's associations through their differences in views and right based approaches. The role of social/political changes of Iranian society could be added to what was mentioned to further change the status of women NGOs. For all that was mentioned the approach to women NGOs in civil society is one of significant factors. Doubtlessly, this part of civil society requires further study for clear projection of various options facing women. However the new changes in political society after the presidential election will create a new perspective for women NGOs that needs more time to judge

At the end I would like to thank and appreciate the efforts of people who cooperated with us in preparing this special issue of Volunteer Actors Magazine. People who interviewed and provided articles. There many others that we have not been able to cover and we hope that in the future we will be able to have their point of views. We would highly appreciate to hear your opinion.

Editor in chief



Women's Movement as a Social Project

By: Dr Sohrab Razzaghi



Introduction

Interview of Dr. Razzaghi, board member of University of Allameh Tabatabaie for Political and Legal Science and Head of Iranian Civil Society Organizations Training&Research Center. In his article for Special Issue of Volunteer as "Women and Civil Society" analyses the dominating discourses over women's movement. Dynamism factors, characteristics, achievements, challenges and barriers that women's movement is facing are covered in this article. Also, Dr. Razzaghi provides some strategies to deal with the challenges. He believes: "Women's movement is a meta-class, meta- ideological, and democratic movement. Activists and supporters of women's movements in Iran shouldn't destroy themselves by making this movement an ideological one. Since it will weaken and kill the movement".

Women's movement is a social, political and historical movement that started centuries ago in the west and has experienced inclusions and exclusions in different periods of time and has covered itself in different colors and passed through various waves all over the world.

Some activists and supporters of women's movement have liberalistic attitudes toward it and consider liberal thoughts and approaches to be an appropriate cover for organization and feminist ideas while some others chose Marxism to define feminist thoughts and some others prefer existentialism philosophy, post structuralism and post modernism approaches.

In spite of existing differences and variety of feminist ideas and diversities in women's movement, we can identify basic principles that majority of activists and intellectuals in women's movement agree on, which are as follows:

- Believing in equality
- Believing in equal opportunities
- Women and men's status in the society
- Efforts to eliminate sexual dominance
- Elimination of exploitation and oppression, discrimination and violence against women.

Iranian Society and Discourses of Women's Movement

Along with the first efforts to define Final Vocabulary in Iranian society, signs of emergence of women's movement could be seen. In other words, passing historical stops and moving towards the first actions, interactions of Iranian society with Modernity Meta-narrative, Iranian women sought for glory of identity.

Later, modernity meta-narrative imposed itself as a vital and undeniable fact over Iranian society, disturbed and agitated traditional discussions and invited every body and every thing to a deep change. It invaded into the political, social and cultural arenas and surpassed demographic geography and built itself over their final vocabulary and women's movement found a new pace.

In this process, many radical theoretic and political tensions starting from Constitution Revolution up to Islamic Revolution, from "Modernity of Pahlavi" to "Occidentalism of Al Ahmand" and from "Alavi's Shia" up to "Progress Thinking" all were efforts towards, influence, transformation, balance or even hindering Feministic Discussion in Iran.

So, during the last century, women's movement in Iran has been in an association, succession, concurrent relation with other social movement has formulated different discourses.

The first discourse belongs to women who in general doubt traditional, final vocabulary and truth regime and express that discussions and issues produced and reproduced in their current and past discourses is not responsive to their questions. Moreover, this group of Iranian women accepted that modernity meta-narrative a far closer to reality compared to traditional discourses in thought, philosophic interaction regarding truths, experiences, utopia and identity and discourse elements. So they build the basis of their discussion over apparel, dignity and identity of modernity. This discourse can be called "The Discourse of Secular Modernist Women".

Some other Iranian tried to reconcile and make knowledge peace among two discourses of modernism and Islam through diminution, decrease and squeeze of these two discourses. This discourse of some Iranian women is called "Joint Discourse".

Some other Iranian women formulated another discourse searching all the basis of their discourse and plans in the dominance of West in "Return to Political Islam". These women considered Islam as a nodal point in socio-political issues and tried to interpret Modern Discourses out of Western Modernity by offering a

Deconstruction interpretation from Islam. This discourse is called "Islamist Discourse" of some Iranian women.

Another discourse that currently has been formulated in Iran is post Islamic discourse that is in fact suspensions and lack of hegemony of Islamic Revolution Project to create a new society. The nodal point of Post Islamic Discourse is breaking the basis of Islamists discourse and rejecting fundamentalist theory of religion and announcing failure of the system established after Islamic Revolution to meet the political and social goals. It would be appropriate to call it the "Discourse of post Islamist women" but due to the fact that post Islamist is a very complicated phrase so we call it "Post Islamic Discourse".

Dynamism Factors of Women's Movement

During the last two decades there have been significant changes and transformations in the Iranian society. These changes created social mobility and attitudinal and cultural mobilization in women's status in Iranian society and has accelerated women's movement in Iran. It is due to this fact that Iranian women put their efforts in creating a new system, reinterpretation of public issues and influencing power focal points and process of changes.

Some factors involved in mobilizing and promoting Dynamism of women's movement in Iran in the recent years are as follows:

One of the main factors is the economic and financial situation of the society. After the excitements of revolution halted, moving away from populist approaches and ideological perspectives towards public issues, emerging necessities after war and return to development discourses led to the glory of Dynamism of women's movement.

In new social and cultural context, Iranian women have been able to organize themselves and initiate creative methods in confronting power structures in the society and established many civil organizations and institutions to achieve their rights and express their demands and needs.

Losing ideology in the society and moving away from ideological perspectives and emergence of cultural middle class, had a crucial role in acceleration of women's movement in Iran.

Changes and development of international communications were another factor in accelerating women's movement in Iran. International seminars and meetings regarding women's issues from Mexico to conference in Copenhagen and from there to Beijing and

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Women's movement in Iran is searching justice and suffers inequalities and discriminations of patriarchal society in political, social, cultural and economic arenas and dominance of patriarchal narratives

from Beijing 1995 to Beijing +10 had everlasting impact over women's movement in Iran. These meetings created unique opportunities for Iranian women to explore, learn and take part in intercultural and among civilization discussions.

Characteristics of Women's Movement in Iran

Considering that Iranian women's movement is part of a developed social movement, understanding the wider social movement is essential in understanding women's movement in Iran. Iranian women's movement is a new social movement and doesn't fit in the classic movements.

Some elements and features that make Iranian women's movement different from other social movements are as follows:

Iranian women's movement is not ideological. It is not following a special utopia and goal and doesn't follow any ideology. One of the main characteristics of this movement is tendency towards diversity and multiplication of thoughts. Iranian women, after experiencing two decades of mass society and disillusion from other meta-narrative were not interested in them and emphasize on defending women's rights and demands without any political and ideological tendencies. So, women's movement in Iran is a human rights movement.

This movement is against using force and violation in social campaigns and tries to achieve its needs and women's rights in peace. The nodal point of this movement is liberty and they are fighting to gain negative liberty.

Women's movement in Iran offers a non-orthodox interpretation from tradition and religion and tries to integrate gender perspective in all aspects of social and political life. They are pluralists and support transparency.

This movement supports social participation and association life to establish democracy in Iran. Their main motto is democracy for all.

Women's movement in Iran is searching justice and suffers inequalities and discriminations of patriarchal society in political, social, cultural and economic arenas and dominance of patriarchal narratives.

Finally, this movement is not Centralist. Historical experiences show that centralism and oppression are two main features of Iranian social groups and forces. Also, this movement is trying to preserve Iranian identity but think universally and be Iranian along with being universal.

Achievements of Women's Movement

Although Iranian women were facing restric-

tions and barriers during the recent years, showed an unexpected Dynamism and awareness. Iranian women battled and passed all imposed patriarchal boundaries with wisdom, initiatives, creation, implicit and explicit resistance. They have an active role in gradual transformation of power relations especially gender relations and dominating patriarchal values, though they are facing economic, legal and cultural pressure.

The number of women who were tired of patriarchal functions joined social forces and groups with different discourses to find new, independent and special methods for themselves. Gaining a deeper understanding of democracy and social justice, they are looking for solutions and responses so that women's role will not be considered as a marginal and unimportant issue. These transformations and split of dominance pillars, collapsed the one-dimensional, and static interpretation of women's issues, movements and feminism.

Of the main characteristics of political and social attitudes of the recent decade is that Iranian women have understood that ear of giving mottoes, collective thinking, and sole thinking is over and changing attitudes, reinterpretation in all approaches, thoughts and discourses and necessity to walk over ideologies can be traced in their agendas.

Legitimacy of political, ethnic and cultural pluralism, necessity of having a productive and happy civil society, governance of law, respecting rights of citizenship and human rights and finally equal rights for men and women and elimination of gender discrimination are the least demands of women's movement in Iran. Iranian women are not only interested to be involved in all arenas but also are gradually trying to reevaluate the qualitative and quantitative nature of this presence in different social arenas. They are involved in assessing the close relation of gender with other historical bases of power such as ethnicity, race, nationality, and class and in different social arenas are trying to reinterpret and reform the status and role of women in power.

The other issue is that one-dimensional interpretation and understanding of feminism and women's movement, resulting from arrogance of some Iranian groups, gradually is being replaced by reflection, providence, and courtesy towards the changing facts of Iranian society. Ultimately, Iranian women understood that although women's issue is a universal issue, methods to combat and access equal rights and other demands can vary based on historical and social contexts, level of development,

Iranian society is a divided, restricted society that lacks efficiency, is shallow and lacks strategy and social project. So it can't act in social campaigns

political and cultural situation of Iranian women.

Challenges of Women's Movement

Along with the abovementioned achievements, there are challenges and barriers that these movement is facing.

One of the main issues reproduced during the last decade and has surpassed different levels of Iranian society is the phenomenon of Clientalism. Although clientalism is a phenomenon going back to the era before modernism, it can be obviously seen in all aspect of social, political, economic and cultural life. Women's movement has not been secure from this social problem and it has been influenced and reproduced itself in different arenas.

The second challenge of women's movement is the meta-narratives. Meta-narratives are the stories, thinking themes and macro definitions that step over and give meaning to the history, individual and collective identity of human beings. One of the main features of meta-narratives is its truthfulness. They claim that they reflect the reality of the outside world and consider their claims to be "Obvious Truth". The other obvious and fundamental dimension of meta-narrative is being other. Meaning that there is an absolute other defined in a far image.

Meta-narrative considers a very high and transcendental status for same and reflects the status of same and others in it. These meta-narratives have surpassed socio-political life of Iranian society and are the main challenge of women's movement in Iran. The women's movement considers them invalid and doesn't have any trust regarding them and views them with extreme pessimism. This movement doesn't believe in the existence of one unique narrative and offers a variety of narratives that can't be summed and placed in a collective and unique story.

The other challenge is weakness of Iranian civil society. Iranian society is a divided, restricted society that lacks efficiency, is shallow and lacks strategy and social project. So it can't act in social campaigns. Iranian society has not been able to achieve a powerful, productive and happy civil society. Fragile civil society is a main problem of Iranian women's movement that can't have civil society in its social campaigns. In some cases it hinders actions and activities of women's movement and is opposition point acting against any change.

A dominating government is another challenge of women's movement in Iran. A dominating government is the one that surpasses all the aspects of social and political life of women in

Iran and swallowed any breathing space. Civil spheres that remain outside the dominance of such governments are also very limited and is the main cause that women's campaign is not productive and happy.

The other challenge is the phantom of violence and war. Violence has always been a rule in Iranian society. Phantom of violence is present in three arenas of family, school and political structures and women and children are the victims of violence and wars. This has prevented women's movement in Iran to grow along with other women's movements.

Some Strategies to Overcome Challenges

Considering the achievements and challenges that women's movement face in empowerment process, we have to take into account some issues. The first step is elimination of taboos from women's issues. Since women and gender issues are the main complicated problems of Iranian society. So all female activists and intellectuals should have activities in their agendas to eliminate taboos and advocate women's issues and try to reflect gender and women's issues in different political, social and cultural arenas and redefine public issues.

The other point is that activists and supporters of women's movement should avoid exclusion and sectorism and move towards multiplication, expansion and diversity to develop social campaigns to achieve common and specific demands.

The third point is the crucial duty of activists and supporters of women's movements to define the former inheritance. Since they are the main barrier that this movement is facing. For Iranian society, definition of former inheritance is the introduction for any other definition. They can break the bases and redefine the concepts and relations and create a glorious structure.

Women's movement is a meta-class, meta-ideological, and democratic movement. Activists and supporters of women's movements in Iran shouldn't destroy themselves by making this movement an ideological one. Since it will weaken and kill the movement.

Activists and supporters of women's movement in Iran should have a defined strategy considering their social, political and cultural context to face challenges and problems and avoid marginal issues.

At the end we should consider that if women's movements in Iran do not define any strategy and will follow the strategies of other social groups and forces and will not be able to accomplish its duty and mission. ■

Violence has always been a rule in Iranian society. Phantom of violence is present in three arenas of family, school and political structures and women and children are the victims of violence and wars



The Iranian lawyer and human rights activist Shirin Ebadi was born in 1947. She received a law degree from the University of Tehran. Both in her research and as an activist, she is known for promoting peaceful, democratic solutions to serious problems in society. Ebadi is an activist for refugee rights, as well as those of women and children. She is the founder and leader of the Association for Support of Children's Rights in Iran. Ebadi has written a number of academic books and articles focused on human rights.

I am not a Pattern

Shirin Ebadi

The Interview of Shirin Ebadi is not related to the Nobel Prize and you will not see even a question on this matter. We interviewed her as one of the women that had so many experiences in associations and NGOs. In these last years she had many effective activities in the "Association of defence of children's right". The last time that I saw her was before the Nobel Prize and in the meeting of Criticizing the NGO's laws that more than 10 NGOs were Participating. In that meeting she talked about this law very clearly. as well as she wanted to travel to Italy the day after the interview she had a little time, but she accepted the interview and answered all our questions. She mentioned that " if people see an organization working and it is democratic and effective, they will come and work." Also she said "one of the reasons that NGOs can not grow up in Iran, is the interference of the State".

This is her interview with *Volunteer*.

During the last few years, women NGOs have developed a lot. In your view what are the main objectives for this?

The most important objective is that these NGOs have reached a level of understanding that they believe themselves. They are aware, while in the context of law, culture and society that their situation is not satisfactory. They are in the process to gain their rights back. In general these are the most important factors for these NGOs and that is why they are protesting.

What about their performances?

As I have said earlier they believe in themselves. They know that they need to live better. Some are very active some have stayed at talk level.

What are the exact protests?

Protest to their situations with regard to law and their placement in the society. For instance 63% of our university students are girls; however their presence in the job market is very low. The unemployment for women is very high in comparison to men. Women are not happy about these inequalities, so they protest to this variation with regard to law.

Are you saying women NGOS are active to gain back there rights?

Yes – if women in the society did not face prejudice and discriminations such NGOs would not have formed

How about women charities?

Yes – they are women who believe in themselves. They know that they can be useful. Instead of spending their entire time at home cooking “Ghormeh Sabzi “, they have achieved this perceptiveness that they can have a more useful lives. While looking after their families, they can also help others this is very important.

What are the factors for women to believe in themselves?

They are many factors, one is education, and fortunately women in Iran are highly educated. Second factor is about freedom from homes. I remember it was said: “modernism is born in the street”. A woman who does not have permission to leave the

house can not find her qualities. But a woman, who comes out, goes to the front to work and sows seeds, and a woman who sets up charities for assistance of the market would change the world.

Despite the fact that women NGOs during the last few years have developed both in terms of quantity and quality, they were not successful to get the support of the women societies’ .Do you believe on this issue?

NGOs in Iran do not have long history, the eldest NGOs are charities .This also goes for Cultural NGOs in Iran. It takes time before these organizations get people to know them. This colorless success is because they are newly established. Nonetheless I do accept that they have not been very successful to attract women.

What do we have to do in order to overcome this issue?

What is important is that when people see a good democratic organization, They will definitely observe it. We have good experience with regard to organization working for the rights of children. To begin with we were not many and we did not have enough money. But now we have five hundred members

You do not refer to the point that last year women NGOs played a pretentiousness and acting role, that consequently resulted in not having a solution for the society.

Their activities were limited to workshops. It is true that such activities may result in capacity building, but is it a real solution?

They were more talks and less actions, what I would like to say is why they have produce less practical work. Is it because women did not work enough? Or is it because they didn't have opportunities? If you want to celebrate the 8th March, one needs to start making arrangement at least 3 months before, you need to get permission from different authorities, so next year you would get tried and you might not organize the occasion at all, Therefore, more talk and less action is not just because

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if few individuals gather to offer a service or do some charity work with no budget from the authorities why do they need to be approved by the government

of women's organizations.

One of the factors for organizations like women's that plays a role is the government. The country is resourceful and what they do might be influential.

During the last few years what the civil society have said is what the government Said .however some believe that what it has been said was at conversation level rather than any action. What is your view regarding this matter?

one of the reasons of lack of NGOs work is the interference of the government. Based on the current law when an NGO is going to be setup, first the government needs to approve it. They consider the establishment of such NGO in accordance to their standards. For instance it had taken the Society for the Rights of Children 4 years to be established and obtain the relevant permission, this is a long way for an NGO, not to mention that any changes such as change of management committee needs to be reported and agreed by the government.

I am surprised, if few individuals gather to offer a service or do some charity work with no budget from the authorities why do they need to be approved by the government? The meaning of NGO is full independence; this is contrary to what is taking place. For registration of a NGO, individuals must be finger printed and be approved by the government. Is this very necessary? These people are not government employees; they use their own money and have commitments, so why do they need to be approved? These issues are rooted from the laws and must be reviewed to ensure that real NGOs are active in Iran.

This process that you are referring to, has it been took place during the last few years?

Yes- Always, it has been like this.

It means that the change of government and emphasis on civil society has no result ?

Nothing has been changed.

The government has written a protocol?

I have seen it. The Study and Training Centre had organized a seminar to this effect, where the Ministry of Interior, the Councils and the Civil Society

Organizations attended it. In this seminar I have pointed out my concerns regarding this protocol. If all the works of NGOs have to be channeled through the Government, then these would not be NGOs or Civil Society Organisations, these will be the governmental bodies.

When does the government can establish an NGO or otherwise? In fact is NGOs' work going to be disturbed if such situation happens?

We would be grateful if the government would not get involved. The NGO term means Non Governmental Organisation. Of course NGOs may have different definitions. For instance when one opens up a Super Market, by definition is not connected to the government, but it is not an NGO. I describe NGO as peoples' organisation which is set up for people and by the people. People's organisation is in contrast and can not be managed by a management committee. A part from government interference, having a management committee is another factor for NGOs not being developed further. This is not true for my family and I to set up an organisation and act as management committee, with such view that individuals in the form of being members must do the work for us. This will let people down. It is only correct if every two years members elect the management committee- they should be in that position for no more than two year in position- , such organisation will develop.

Some women in order to seek speedy changes may choose political organizations to work with. In your view, is it better to get involve in NGOs or political organizations?

I can not give you an exact answer. This is depends on peoples approaches. Some may choose political approach because this is nearer to their beliefs and some no. It is not possible to say which one is more correct than others. For me it is much more appropriate and is more akin to my belief to work with NGOs.

My question is in connection to the history of political groups, and the sensitivity that women rights contain. In your view which one is more appropriate?

It is difficult to judge. This is like asking some one is "Ghoremeh Sabzie" is better or





I describe NGO as peoples' organisation which is set up for people and by the people

"Gheimeh"(1). I can only talk about my personal choice. Some might not like it, which is ok.

You have been involved to work internationally at all levels. How important is to use international experiences for women?

This is very important. We can learn from their ups and downs. Of course we can use their experiences , but can not use it as models.....we have to use them in conjunction with our culture, religion, economic situation , we should not forget this.

Have you ever come across successful experiences that Iranian Women Organisations used in connection to foreign models?

This depends in your definition of success. Success might be a change of law. One might say success is if your manager gets changed, and others might believe that success means trainings....

During the last few years some women organisation have been formed and run by Government. The Formation of such organisations has created a false civil society or a right one?

This is both right and wrong. If someone's spouse with an import position in the government, uses her/his power to set up an NGO, this action indicates that there is connection with the government. But if at the same time it just happens that the husband works for the government and it is just a coincident that the wife works for an NGO, does it mean that we have to draw a red cross on the woman's activities? I believe we need to be able to separate the two. We have to see how individuals perform.

How do we deal with competition.....?

NO. This is not what I have mentioned. There is a possibility not to abstract equal opportunity. One might find a lady Minster who is not using her influence. I mean we should not pre judge. Every situation needs to be considered on its own merits.

Once you were offered the Nobel Peace Prize lots of people both internally and externally believed that this prize might provide energy to women movement and solve women issues. Do you see a relation between these two?

This prize could encourage women to believe in themselves. However I have said it repeatedly that this prize do not belong to me only. This belongs to the freedom movement of Iranian women and Muslim women. When the Nobel Committee insists to introduce me a Muslim woman, this indicates that there is a meaning behind it. This is to demonstrate that Muslim women are not happy about their situations and are hoping to change their situations through non violence activities. So I believe this prize does not belong to me, it belongs to Muslim women such as Iranian women. And I hope it would encourage us to believe in ourselves.

Can organisation use your style.....?

This is not my aim that individuals use my model. Coping could be dangerous; heroism is the worse thinking system. Each individual needs to assess her/his situation and track down all the possible obstacles on the way forward, then start his/ her activities. I am not a model for anyone, not even for my daughters.■

Each individual needs to assess her/his situation and track down all the possible obstacles on the way forward, then start his/ her activities

(1) "Ghormehsabzi and Gheimeh are too different kinds of Iranian stews".



Iranian NGO: A Glimpse of the Development Paradigm

By: Soudabeh Amiri (Ph.D.)



Dr. Soudabeh Amiri is one of the Social activists and the board member of the *Noavaran* Organization. She had work on Capacity building of the NGOs during last years. This is her article about women activities and NGOs.

An Overview:

Over the last two decades, many women organisations, predominately charity-based and welfare oriented have been proactively involved in “women only” projects. Similar to their sister organisations elsewhere they have aimed at women’s empowerment but, usually within the stereotyped framework limiting themselves to women’s reproductive function. For example, many activists in women’s NGOs provided and are still conducting training schemes for women heads of household in sewing and canning.

These women organisations that are usually run by women within a secluded women only environment, interestingly follows the early stages of the development paradigm and have stayed behind the trends over the past decades. For this purpose, an examination of models of gender development planning is illuminative.

Development Models:

Of the main approaches to gender-related planning, the first can be categorised under what can be termed as “separate but equal” approach or what is commonly known as the “Women in Development” (WID) model (Women Only: Welfare/efficiency). The second approach is the “equal but different” or “Gender and Development” (GAD) model (empowerment: Roles/access/control). The third is the post-Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW)¹ approach of “gender mainstreaming” which is fundamentally emphasising on institutionalising gender concerns in all aspects and levels of planning and development. Recently, the latter model is being questioned by some NGO activists as being counterproductive. Each will be discussed as applied in the Iranian setting.

“Separate But Equal” – Women in Development (WID) Model

In the early 70s in many developing countries it was believed that the way towards advancement of women is through implementation of projects targeting women as separate entities from their family and community at large. Consequently, early efforts to overcome the disadvantaged position of women in developing countries were directed at the women themselves with projects designed specifically for women known as “women only” projects.

Often, these well-meaning projects actually increased women’s workload. “Women in development” focused on women only, without looking at the relationships between women and men, or the reasons for glaring inequalities and inequities. These projects were primarily welfare-hand out oriented and in many instances were seen as ways to alleviate poverty stricken women. Though essential and considered necessary to get the women involved, this model was not sufficient as it usually was not sustained. Particularly within the Iranian context the WID model has not proven to be effective for many reasons. First, the family plays an important role within the Iranian context. Capacity development of one of the mem-

bers of the family and not paying adequate attention to the rest of the members is a great hindrance and needs to be properly tackled.

Establishment of women cooperatives and strengthening such schemes is an excellent example of such activities supported by many NGOs and the traditional planners and policy makers. By 1997, some 30,000 women-headed small-scale cooperatives were established in the country. At best, using the efficiency approach, women were encouraged to maintain their reproductive roles with a limited emphasis on their productive role within “suitable” stereotyped areas of work (e.g. canning, pickling, tailoring, etc.) However, as many lacked the support of their male folks, they ceased to continue and the sustainability required was missed.

“Different But Equal” – Gender and Development (GAD) Model

Based on the global experience, the results of the projects using the WID model proved to be ineffective and many women around the world were more marginalized than in the past. In fact, the men, being ignored in the development scheme, stopped their women from becoming economically active and in some of the remote areas in the country even broke up the cooperatives for which their wives had worked so hard to run. In cases where the men reluctantly allowed their women to continue, all the income was collected with no say/control being exerted by women themselves.

The transition to Gender and Development (GAD) model was a result of the obvious lack of progress made over time in lessening gender inequality. GAD recognised that men and women do not necessarily benefit equally from development activities. In practice, GAD empowerment strategies were developed to adjust to the differing needs, both practical and strategic, of women and men based on their roles with a view toward change. So, specific gender issues were addressed in all the stages of project planning and implementation. The GAD model introduced and sensitised

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both women and men to gender differences emphasising on how gender roles are not innate and natural, but socially construed and subject to change. It emphasised on differences between men and women and different types of needs – practical needs (e.g. education, health, etc.) and strategic needs (access, credit, control, etc.). It called for gender analysis prior to planning. The target here was gender equality and equity. Men were not seen as barriers but were fully and equally involved in the development process minimising “women only” projects. The successes of some of the gender-focussed community based organisations working on land and water management projects for rural development and the poverty alleviation schemes in Baluchistan province are examples of development projects using the GAD model.

“Gender Mainstreaming” – Institutionalising Gender Concerns

Mainly being introduced around 1990s and advocated at FWCW, gender mainstreaming emphasises on deep-rooted gender-biases at the institutional levels or of the “system” of a society. The “system” is the dominant ideas and practices and institutions of a society, which determine access and control. The institutions of the mainstream are those of governance; government ministries and administrative agencies, the legal system and the political structure – the decision-making system.

Under this model it is argued that the dominant ideas and practices of a society are those which are accepted as the norm, even though those ideas and practices may be discriminatory against a stratum of that society. For example, if the dominant ideas in a society say that women do not need to own agricultural land, like in Iran, because men are the ‘natural’ agricultural landowners, then it is obvious that women are at a disadvantageous position economically leading to gender imbalances. Those who recommend that women can own agricultural land are considered “outside the mainstream” – and seeking to change a practice which is discriminatory, but accepted as the norm. In brief, gender mainstreaming is such a

strategy to assist overcoming discriminatory practices. In this strategy the issue of gender is placed within the mainstream. This is in contrast to WID and GAD that at best functioned at the project level sees gender concerns above operational planning at the project level. Hence, gender mainstreaming takes the ideas of WID and GAD one step forward pointing out that women-specific projects do not address the fundamental issues that maintain gender inequality. It is a strategy to highlight women’s concerns and experiences illustrating that these concerns often differ from “the mainstream” – the institutions which have historically determined ‘who gets what’.

In short, gender mainstreaming was introduced to serve as a strategy to ensure that the decision-making institutions and systems become sensitive to issues of gender. This in turn meant that the government (the state sector) will design their policies, programmes, plans and budgets so that benefits are distributed equally between women and men. It also aimed to gear towards gender concerns being integral to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes at all levels, so that women and men benefit equally. As a consequence, women would not be disadvantaged by policies and practices.

Gender mainstreaming emphasises on women’s equal participation in the “mainstream” in order for their voices to be heard. This in turn meant that strategies aimed at promoting gender equality must encompass political or governance spheres as well as social, economic and political domains. Capacity building is the objective of gender mainstreaming model through which women are empowered to take their own lives and develop their potentials together and along the side with men.

In Iran, gender mainstreaming is a new phenomenon. There are some attempts by different prominent research institutions in Iran to undertake gender mainstreaming as their main strategy, but these efforts are in their infancy and need further examination.

Recent trends globally is questioning gen-



der mainstreaming as it requires Government's institutional and infrastructural support and commitment to mainstream women in the development process. With the globalisation policies, many governments have once again failed in their efforts and disregarded gender and even WID concerns altogether, hence gender mainstreaming is also being considered as counter-productive.

Enabling Environment:

Fortunately, the Iranian experience during the past few years shows an enabling environment predominately created by gender-focused advocates both in the NGO community, and the civil sector as a whole. Gender-focussed women are contributing much more to their well-being. The young, both women and men are committed in trying to maintain greater presence in all spheres. They have a higher impact within their family and, indirectly, the society. Gender-sensitive youth, both female and male activists are promoting new measures to enhance women's status and rights. However, there is a long way ahead.

It seems appropriate to suggest that within the Iranian context the following mottos are

essential in the path to gender equity to be advocated by gender-focused NGOs.

Mottos:

Development is a right for both women and men. The right to live in a violence-free society, receive health care, participate, be supported, have freedom of speech, developed and be empowered. Gender equality is only achieved with a balanced and sustainable development.

Women together with men should be involved in decision-making. Access to education and equal opportunities in all walks of the society is Vital.

Improvement of women's situation is improvement of the society as a whole. Gender-sensitive planning and programmes will have a positive impact on women as well as men and therefore the entire family structure as well as the future generation.

The advancement of women is the precondition to the advancement of society as a whole. As the saying goes, "if you want to see how developed a society is, look at the ways they treat their womenfolk". ■

¹ 1995-Beijing

Fortunately, the Iranian experience during the past few years shows an enabling environment predominately created by gender-focused advocates both in the NGO community, and the civil sector as a whole. Gender-focussed women are contributing much more to their well-being



IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN: Women, Gender and Religious associations

By: Dr. Kathryn Spellman



Kathryn Spellman received her MSc. and PhD in Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research interests include transnational migration movements, immigrant cultural productions and transformations and Iranian Studies. Her doctorate thesis focused on the ways in which Iranian Muslims living in Britain negotiate their identities against the changing backdrop of Iranian politics and their circumstances in Britain. Her forthcoming book is entitled: *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational networks in Britain* (Berghahn Publishers, Oxford). She is also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Migration Studies at the University of Sussex.

This article introduces the historical and contemporary developments of women's religious gatherings and associations in Iran and Afghanistan. It presents the ways in which national and Islamic state led projects and movements, at different historical moments, have shaped and coerced women's voluntary associational life in both locations. While considering the unintended and paradoxical consequences of state led approaches to associational life, attention is also paid to the interrelationship and levels of cooperation between informal, seemingly private religious women's gatherings and grass roots religious associations in the public domain. It will demonstrate how religious gatherings and associations have been vehicles to both reinforce and challenge national and Islamist movements with their strictly delineated gendered norms of behaviour. They have also served as pathways to participation in public matters and have enlarged women's scope of action to tackle harsh social, political and economic realities. Women's religious associations are heterogeneous and must be considered in relation to the interplay between specific national and regional contexts, as well as women's socio-economic, religious, ethnic and political orientations. Particular consideration should be given to the increasing exchanges and linkages with global movements, international women's associations and human rights groups around the world.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It has been customary in Iran and Afghanistan for Muslims to gather together in gender-specific groups for religious instruction and practices. Whereas men's religious events are usually held at mosques or local shrines, women's religious activities, such as women-only gatherings called *Sofrehs and Jalasehs*, are usually held privately in women's homes or in front of mosques in order to provide food and welfare for the disadvantaged. Social service activities stemming from religious traditions, which have a

long history in Iran and Afghanistan, reveal the interchange between religious commitment and civic participation. While women's religious associations vary greatly in terms of their specific agendas and priorities it could be argued that their entrance into public space in the beginning of the twentieth century signified a new sense of public presence for women that alters the distinction between the public domain of employment, governance and culture – reserved for men – and the private domain of the family, reserved for women.

In Iran, middle and upper class women from Tehran and the provinces started to form a number of *anjomans* (grassroots associations) during the period around the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. This movement, which was marked with an unusual and diverse alliance between the merchants of the traditional urban bazaars, the secular intellectuals and the Shi'a clergy, called for a constitution and the protection of Iran's national interests. The few women who emerged onto the political stage turned their informal religious and social gatherings into political meetings, where they would discuss and circulate political news. A number of independent women's associations, which were influenced by different nationalist and religious ideologies (including the Babi movement, Sufism, as well as Armenian, Assyrian and Protestant strands of Christianity), actively promoted women's advancement in education and politics and made concerted efforts to raise funds for schools, health clinics, and orphanages. The following associations, amongst others, were formed by women of different faiths and affiliations: The Iranian Women's Charity Society; The Association for the Freedom of Women; The Central Council of Women; and The Secret Union of Women.

In Afghanistan the foundation for women's associational activities were laid in the late 1920s when King Amanullah and his wife Queen Soraya, influenced by European ideals and the modernisation model set by Ataturk in Turkey, introduced a programme of new reforms for women. For example, in the early 1920s, the Queen's sister, Kobra,

created the *Anjoman-i Himayat-i-Niswan* (Organisation for Women's Protection), encouraging women to express their political and social grievances. However, Tribal and religious opposition to the reforms led to the overthrow of the King in 1929 - and it was not until the reign of Zahir Shah (1933-1973) that moves towards women's advancement in the public domain were observed. Nevertheless, women continued to exercise political and social influence through informal and less visible community support networks.

RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS AND NATION STATE BUILDING

In Iran the newly formed women associations were appropriated by Reza Khan (1925-41) as a result of his ambitious programme of centralisation and modernisation. Women's appearance, behaviour and involvement in public life - seen as signifiers of national identity - were also shaped by western norms and Ataturks model of reform. He developed a government-controlled women's umbrella association (*Kanun-i Banuan*) which assumed the responsibility for vocational training, education and welfare services. During the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi the state continued to institutionalise women's issues and address them as social welfare concerns. In 1966 he formed the Women's Organisation of Iran (WOI) making his sister Princess Ashraf the president. Within the parameters set by the government, a series of laws and reforms improved the status for women from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. The Women's BIDAR (Awaken) Society; the Charity Association of Armenian Women of Tehran (1961); the Assyrian and Kaldani Women's Society (1963); and the Jewish Women's Society (1947) are some of the many associations that were created by the Pahlavi dynasty. Under their strict control, however, independent women's religious and secular associations were largely silenced and did not have the freedom to assemble their own agendas.

During the late 1960s and 1970s a coalition of Iranian opposition groupings, comprising of men and women with sundry Islamist,

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nationalist and Marxist leanings, challenged the Pahlavi's western-oriented approach to modernisation and their monopoly over political activity. Women spread political information through informal religious networks stemming from mosques, bazaars, and women-only religious gatherings, *Jalasehs* and *sofrehs*. Women activists, endorsing diverse religious and political platforms, joined forces and played an important role in overthrowing the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979.

In Afghanistan the period between the 1950s and the Soviet invasion of 1979 saw the formation of a number of secular women's groupings, such as the Democratic Organisation of Afghan Women (DOAW) (renamed All-Afghan Women's Council in the 1980s) and, in a very different vein, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). These groupings consisted of urban-based, educated and affluent women who aimed to protect and advance the human rights of women. However, women's independent political and religious associational activities were restricted and controlled by the rise of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the Soviet invasion in 1979. The Soviet styled approach to modernisation was challenged by an array of local and international political and religious groupings that fought against communism, the changes to women's legal and economic status, and the authoritarian nature of the state-led reforms. After a decade of internal power struggles, the *Mojahedin*, funded by the US, Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia, took over Kabul in 1992 and thereafter declared Afghanistan an Islamic state.

THE RISE OF ISLAM

In Iran, after two years of revolutionary transition, Ayatollah Khomeini and Islamic forces eradicated internal political opposition and dominated the revolutionary process and its outcome. Article 26 of the 1979 Iranian constitution limited the freedom of association in a novel way by stating: 'The formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognised religious minorities, is permitted provided they do not

violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic' (Namazi 1999). In 1979 and 1980 unsuccessful attempts were made by groupings such as the Women's Solidarity Committee to express discontent with the strictly defined gender roles and the segregation of public space. Many campaigns against the version of political Islam purported by the Iranian government were forced into exile. For example, the controversial political opposition group, the Mojahedin Khalq, presided over by Mariam Rajavi, have organised a number of Iranian women's religious associations outside Iran.

The 1980s witnessed the development of 'official' women's Islamist religious associations, such as 'The Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution (WSIR)', renamed in 1987 as 'The Women's Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran' which has been administered by female relatives of Khomeini. However, many women who were not involved in the 'official' religious associations have organised themselves through women-only religious gatherings, co-operatives, grassroots religious charities, mosque networks and the growing number of service-oriented NGOs. Paradoxically, the governmental policies controlling dress codes and gendered access to public space have made it possible for women, particularly those from families that customarily isolate and alienate women from public activity, to work and learn in the public arena. Inadvertently, women's public involvement has shed light on the impracticality of many governmental policies.

Women's religious gatherings and associations - in addition to feminist magazines and women's publishing collectives - have become platforms for secular and religious feminists to debate and negotiate legal status and social positions of women and to deal with harsh social, political and economic realities. It is important to note that many associations, including those that actively question the dominant role of Islam in public life or do not have a strong commitment to the regime, have acquired religious overtones in order to frame their grievances in the public sphere. Feminist debates extend

Nevertheless, women continued to exercise political and social influence through informal and less visible community support networks

to and are informed by women's associations that are organized by women who live outside of Iran. Women's religious gatherings and associations – often linked to mosques, schools and charity foundations – are a few of the many spaces where some women living in the diaspora become involved in welfare concerns and political matters. For example, *Kahrizak* international Women's Charity Group and the Cultural Association of Muslim Women in the UK.

In Afghanistan, in the latter part of the 1990s the theocratic dictatorship, known as the Taliban, came to power and instituted a severe gender regime that prohibited women's freedom to work, move and be educated. Under brutal conditions, some Afghans exercised their informal religious and social networks and organised underground schools and health services for women. The world learned about the dire conditions of Afghan women largely through communication links forged between refugee and diasporic networks, the internet, and women's associations such as The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), (which includes women who are religiously observant and those who are not), as well as the Afghan Women's Network. Through these levels of cooperation women and men have successfully bridged with feminist and human rights groups across nation-state borders and invoked international attention. Since the removal of the Taliban in 2001 it is essential to nurture the mechanisms of coordination between women's local and global women's association, both secular and religious, in order to help rebuild the war torn infrastructure that currently exists in Afghanistan today.

To conclude, taking an historical approach, while also recognising the specificities of Afghanistan and Iran, this article has surveyed the linkages and barriers between women's informal and seemingly private religious activities and associational opportunities for women in public life. Local and global women's religious voluntary associations – in a range of political and religious shades - have multiplied in Iran and

Afghanistan in the beginning years of the 21st century. While both Iranian and Afghan local and nationally-based women's religious associations are increasingly linked to international women's associations, the political and economic situation in Afghanistan has generated greater involvement of international associations, such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and Womankind Worldwide. As we move forth in to the 21st century it is through collective endeavours, expressed through spaces such as religious gatherings and associations that women will continue to deal with the pressing social, political and economic realities in Iran and Afghanistan. ■

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In Afghanistan, in the latter part of the 1990s the theocratic dictatorship, known as the Taliban, came to power and instituted a severe gender regime that prohibited women's freedom to work, move and be educated





VIOLANCE AGAINST WOMEN: The failure of the International Community



By: Elaheh Akbari

Elaheh Akbari has lived in England for 26 years. She recently moved back to Iran. She has 22 years of experience of working in various sectors, and in particular 18 years of working with international NGOs abroad. She has obtained her Master Degree in Forced Migration and International Law, from the university of east London-England. She worked with many women's and ethnic minorities' organization at global level. She also has 12 years management experience. Elaheh has made numerous international study visits to gain knowledge of other operatory systems and provisions in N.G.Os sector. In this article she would like to look at issues related to women at international level especially in crisis like situation and compare it with the current human rights conventions.

Women face discrimination, suppression and violence in every corner of the world. The acceptance of the violation of women as a "norm" in some societies, indicates that they are not yet being considered as human beings, and often their problem, at best, is seen as second rank priority. Since there have been many articles and papers written on issues concerning Iranian Women by my colleagues and professions working in the field during the last few years, in addition knowing the fact that issues around woman in Iran is not isolated from the Global prospective, I have therefore decided to concentrate on women's issues and concept from an international point view, especially with regard to displaced women in a Crisis Like Situation. I hope this is going to be an interest to those who are dedicated to the rights of women as a whole.

The effect of the problems forced by women is very serious. This is relevant at domestic, local, international and displacement levels. Women Situations such as civil wars, political unrest, ethnic cleansing and domestic violence have forced many women to become easy targets. For example mass rapes in Bosnia, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda or being forced to get involved in the sex trade in Colombia. It appears that only such a crisis may spark action and may attract the attention of the International Community, otherwise the special needs of women to receive protection are often overlooked and largely they are left to deal with their own fate.

Traditionally women have had (or have rather been expected to have) the role of taking the responsibility to care for their family especially when husbands or the 'head' of the family is either dead, in prison or fighting at war. Furthermore their lack of involvement in the "development" of the society results in their exclusion from political structures, powers and the decision-making process as a whole. This leaves millions of women unable to fully benefit from the protection and assistance that they are entitled to, and which is considered as part of their basic human rights.

With the understanding that the protection of women remains central in the contemporary human rights argument, the purpose of this paper is to examine whether the existing International Human Rights Instruments and their standards fully address the many problems women encountered in crisis-like situations. In addition it shall also be assessed whether the violation of women's human rights and their marginalization within the international framework is gender related. And finally there shall be an attempt at identifying whether there is a need for the whole concept around persecution to change by way of adopting new definitions, to ensure that women enjoy the same right and protection as their counterparts.

In an era where political upheaval in many countries is responsible for some of the gross and most violent crimes against women and humanity- particularly since 1980s and the post-Cold War years - it is very difficult to remain neutral. Why do we,

in the year 2004, need to open up this debate about women rights at a universal level?

The answer is that women's rights are **not yet** considered as human rights. The definition of human rights is very narrow and traditionally mainly applies to male political prisoners. In addition, for generations the law of the land was developed by men. Inevitably the end product of the law was a reflection of their view and resulted therefore in the invisibility of women in the power structure. It appears that there is a slow growing acceptance that behind the neutrality of the law and the absence of women in any standard works lies the stereotypes, limited interpretations, stigmatization, discrimination and finally exclusion.

The establishment of United Nations (UN) on 24 October 1945, and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the General Assembly on 10 October 1948, were in a large part a response to the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The aim was to ensure the prevention of such atrocities in the future. Article 1 of the charter of the UN 1945 lists the purposes of UN, one of which is stated: "To achieve international co-operation ... in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion." Fifty years on, it is not hard to observe that only few people in the world enjoy from the rights that the declaration intended to offer to all.

Traditionally women are not very mobile. This is due to their domestic/child-care responsibilities, social culture and hierarchy of their society. Women in general strip from power, having failed to receive protection from the country of origin, due to lack of commitment from the policy-makers and are made to become the most neglected victims by the international community, while their grim images capture our TV screens from time to time and their horrifying stories become headlines in our daily newspapers.

The UDHR of 1948 and other Human Rights Conventions serve to highlight the fact that the women migrant phenomenon must be seen as an integral part of human rights pro-

With the understanding that the protection of women remains central in the contemporary human rights argument, the purpose of this paper is to examine whether the existing International Human Rights Instruments and their standards fully address the many problems women encountered in crisis-like situations

tection, regarding both civil and political rights and social and cultural rights. However many studies suggest that the majority of western countries are not using the Conventions correctly. In addition, the emergence of a new Global situation, the decolonization in Africa and Asia, the end of the Cold War era, wars and so on, indicate that Conventions are outdated and are no longer able to address today's world issues. Suhrke noted that: "A pattern of violence and ... which interacted to create a self-reinforcing vicious cycle, appeared throughout the developing world. When the Cold War ended these conflicts mostly subsided or followed a local dynamic. Elsewhere, local conflict dynamics similarly prevailed, giving rise to a more disconnected and heterogeneous pattern of refugee flows." (Suhrke 1997:221)

It is widely documented that women in every corner of the globe are subjected to rape and other forms of abuse and sexual violence by the very authorities who have responsibility to protect them from such degrading action. The aim of this form of violence and abuse is to exploit the family values, relationships and bring humiliation on the family. Furthermore to intensify the torture, ill treatment and physical harm are also methods used. Some times an attack on a female member of the family is perceived as an attack and a shame on the whole family or ethnic group and illustrates the ability of the particular community in demonstrating power. For example Bosnian, Liberian and Rawhide women were victims of such barbaric action.

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Rape is not the only form of the trauma that women experience when they are in prison or caught up in wars, but by far it is one of the hardest to deal with. It is document by International Health Organizations, local and International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), for instance the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and others that the experience of rape usually takes years to heal and on many occasions it goes unreported. History has shown that during wartime, rape of women and girls is commonplace and has become an accepted feature of wartime torture. It is reported that the horrifying experience of mass rape in refugee camps in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Somalis in Kenya (when they had to go and

collect fire wood and Water), in the years of civil war in Liberia, all indicate that there has been little commitment shown by the International Community, as well as UNHCR and other humanitarian assistance groups to ensure that women are protected and their basic human rights are respected.

Rape as one of main causes of flight: "whether part of a massive military campaign or an individual act of violence that can result in death, permanent physical injuries, ... suicide...years on, the attacks continue , with rape and assault a daily reality for women of all ages...During the first five years of civil war in Liberia ,nearly half the women and girls interviewed for a study on wartime violence against women, reported they were subjected to at least one act of physical or sexual violence by soldiers or fighters...when the International Rescue Committee found that an estimated 26% of women and girls had experienced sexual violence since displaced... along the Tanzanian Burundi borders". (The Migrant Experience, Sexual violence, CD ROM, file://M\RSP-TRE/student/Gender/Gen-06.HTM)

It is a well-known fact that women who have been raped may often never admit and their memory may very often be suppressed due to anguish and fear. It is also possible for them to be forced to remain silent for cultural reasons; in order to protect the honor of the family or more seriously still, the rapist continues to threaten and torment his victim. The victim may be in fear of many things; not being believed and being accused instead of being at fault themselves and indeed by not fully knowing their rights, are liable to afford no protection from the state under their domestic laws. In some cultures women who have been raped are considered as disgraced, sullied and even as guilty as the offender and are subsequently rejected by the community. All of these possible scenarios are observations about which nothing has been done because they are not as perceptible as they should be in our modern world.

Gungwu noted: "Although technological development made it possible to transmit globally almost instant images of unfolding disaster, humanitarian concern had not reached the same level of global visibility."

(Gungwu 1997: 232). For instance The Independent Women's Organisation in Iraq and other International NGOs reported that from September 2000 the Iraqi regime has openly launched a campaign, under the control of Saddam Hussein's eldest son, against women in Iraq under a pretext of cleaning some cities from "prostitution". So far fifty women have been publicly beheaded. It was reported that most of these women were not prostitute. They were wives, mothers or sisters of families opposing Sadam.

The horrifying experiences of these women all indicate that there are indeed millions of women who are routinely at risk of being abused and are exposed to these crimes because of their gender. Yet there has been limited progress, or in some areas none at all, in addressing the problems (see Steiner and Alston 2000:168-173). In essence, the legal neutrality of international law for the protection of women constitutes such violation and aggression as they continue to prepare the ground for more Honor Killing, domestic violence and other forms of aggression to take place.

Steiner and Alston noted: "Of the several blind spots in the early development of the human rights movement, none is as the movement failure to give to violations of women's (human) right the attention, and in some respect the priority, that they require. It is not only that these problems adversely affect half of the world's population. They affect everyone, for a deep change in women's circumstance and possibilities produces change through social, economic and political life." (Steiner and Alston 2000:158-159). In such environment, is this a coincidence that the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW; known as the Women's convention, the comprehensive international human rights instruments for women, adopted in 1979, effective from 1981 and has 166 states parties) has received the highest reservations of all Human Rights treaties. These reservations, in essence are clear indications of the lack of interest and unwillingness of "government to undertake a commitment to eradicate discrimination against women in all its forms, which is the aim of the convention." (Symonides 2000:237)

CEDAW'S committee in 1992 issued a recommendation (General Recommendation N.19), stating that "gender-based violence is a form of discrimination which seriously inhabits a women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on an equal basis with man..." (Crawley 1977:81) As yet the international community has not come up with any consensus at a universal level regarding the gender-related persecutions and violations, however from 22 December 2000; women whose human rights have been violated under the Women's Convention will be able to take their complaints to the UN to seek justice. Thus far, there was no right to an individual petition under the Women's Convention, nor any inquiry procedure into grave or systematic violations. With the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the Women's Convention, these remedies now exist. (Amnesty International, AI Index IOR 51/007/2000- News Service Nr.237)

There are several controversial arguments in which the trend is to undermine the human right abuses of women. That is the notion of Cultural Relativism. Cultural Relativism implies that peoples' rights are dependent on their nationality and culture. Individuals choose to live the way they want to and are not forced to. It says that the human rights of someone born in such countries as Afghanistan, Somalia, Kenya or Sudan, where bride burning, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and so forth are being practiced are different from those belonging to someone born in the UK or USA.

The advocates of Cultural Relativism believe that we must respect people's culture and belief and their identity. It was reported by some human rights organizations that in Germany, in August 1997, an 18 years old woman was burnt to death by her father for refusing to marry the man he had chosen. A German court gave him a reduced sentence, holding "he was practicing his culture and belief". It seems that there is a misconception of preserving culture, cultural identity and religion. The argument of preserving ones culture and belief appears to be totally misunderstood. This is quite unacceptable that in the twenty-first century, in some societies under the context of "culture" many young girls/women are mutilated routinely

There are indeed millions of women who are routinely at risk of being abused and are exposed to these crimes because of their gender



and killed to save the family "honor" or allow practices such as the *KHOLA* to continue. *Khola* means that in the case of a divorce, the woman has to pay the husband to get out of the marriage. This brings the period of slavery to mind. A slave had to pay to become free. In Egypt *Khola* has been incorporated into their domestic law.

The question is: can we just preserve culture for the sake of the culture? After all, racism and fascism also have their own cultures. Is it not a fact that the majority of human rights instruments were initially drawn up to ensure that humanity would not experience what it had experienced during the World Wars? It is believed that a culture that can not defend and respect human beings' right to live a better life is worthless. Steiner and Alston observe: "Advocates of cultural relativism claim that (most, some) rights and rules about morality are encoded in and thus depend on the cultural context, the term "Culture" often being used in a broad and diffuse way that reaches beyond indigenous traditions and customary practices to include political and religious ideologies and institutional structures. Hence the notion of right (and wrong) and moral rules based on them necessarily differ throughout the world because the culture in which they take root ...themselves differ."(Steiner and Alston 2000: 366-7).

The concept of difference also appear to be the fundamental principle of a racist agenda. The defeat of Nazism and its biological theory of difference largely discredited racial superiority. The racism behind it, however, found another accepted form of expression for this era. Instead of an expression in racial term, *difference*, they tend to be portrayed in "cultural" terms. In essence the concept of "culturalism" could be seen as a fancy name for refusing to engage in healthy discussion around issues like FGM, domestic violence and violation of women's rights in general. "It attaches an important consequences to this diversity: That no transcendent or transcultural ideas of right can be found or agreed on, and hence that no culture or state (whether or not in the guise of enforcing international human rights) is justified in attempting to impose on other culture or states what must be understood to be ideas

associated particularly with it. In this strong form, cultural relativism necessary contradicts a basic premise of the human fight movement." (Steiner and Alston 2000: 367).

Another cause for flight is poverty. Poverty pushes hundreds of women and young girls to leave their home lands and look for employment elsewhere, often as domestic helpers. It is reported widely by NGOs, that these women are routinely abused and ill-treated by their employers and receive no protection from the authoritative state. In Saudi Arabia, under their domestic law and customs, many female migrant workers are denied freedom of movement and are routinely abused. It is gradually being recognized that experiences faced by women are often different from those experienced by men, and that women are persecuted because of their gender. In relation to the misconception around the gender issues, Symonides stated that: "In human rights, that term denoted the fact that discrimination on the ground of sex can victimize both men and women, while gender discrimination victimizes women on a range of grounds alongside sex...Perhaps the most impotent accomplishment of the past decades has been the realization that women are not discriminated against because of their sex alone, and hence the change from "sex" to "gender" in standard - setting instruments aimed at the eradication of discrimination against women. Six different grounds of discrimination may deprive women of the recognition or exercise of their equal human rights: "(1)sex, (2)pregnancy and child bearing, (3)maternity, (4)marital status, (5)family status, (6)family and or household duties and responsibilities". (Symonide 2000: 232-3).The evidence that women may be able to bring forward to support their protection claim may also be different and by far more difficult to provide, prove and demonstrate, (for example in a situation where a women if forced to have an abortion or sterilisation) than that available to men. These differences need to be fully taken into consideration if women's human rights are to be respected.

The establishment of gender-related persecution globally as a basis for protection in general and protection for female individuals in particular, depend on the recognition of



Poverty pushes hundreds of women and young girls to leave their home lands and look for employment elsewhere, often as domestic helpers

both causes of flight and risks to women during flight and on arrival by the receiving states. The weakness of the protection for female refugees who experienced gender-related persecution is even more transparent when they are faced with significant obstacles on their way to seek international protection. The evidence suggest that in most cases the receiving states in western countries fail to inform women seeking protection on how to access the asylum determination process and on how to get legal advice. Male immigration officers with little or even no training at all on gender-related persecutions usually conduct interviews, particularly on arrival.

It appears that in some western legal communities, there is gradual acceptance of gender-based persecution. However the failure of some states to widen their narrow definition of persecution and move away from recognition of the existing gender neutral law, results in exclusion of many women not receive protection. This is contrary to the affirmation of the UNHCH's Executive Committee in 1990, regarding the direct linkage between a violation of the rights under the Women's Convention, and persecution under the 1951 Geneva Convention." Stating that severe discrimination prohibited by CEDAW can from the basis for the granting on refugee states. "UNHCR Note on Refugee Woman and International protection EC/SCP/56 (28th August. 1990),5.

The failure of international community in recognition of persecution by "Non-State Agents" or their unwillingness (i.e.: husbands, fathers, brothers...) also results in many women not gaining the very relevant and much needed protection. It is documented that the most danger women encounter, appears to take place within the a "private" or "domestic context", somewhere outside the reach of the international law and far from the definition of a 'refugee' under the terms of the 1951 Convention. It is also suggested that persecution of Non -States Agents can result in serious harm. Although the Women Convention in theory requires states to exercise their obligations to ensure that women are not at risk of violence, the reality of the matter is very different. In the absence of any effective mechanisms for

protection and lack of commitment from the states, the fate of so many women, are left in the hands of husbands, fathers or other relatives, with no protection whatsoever.

Despite of the existence of so many treaties and declarations, rules and regulations, namely the most central ones: the International Bill of Rights; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, and its Article 14(1): "The right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution"; The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, December 19 1966, entered in to force march 23 1976), and its Article 3: "The State parties to present convenient undertake to ensure the equal rights of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the present covenant"; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, December 19 1966, entered into force January 3 1976), with its Article 3: similar to ICCPR, ensuring that the individual's minimum standard of Human Rights are observed by the states. Nonetheless, evidence still suggests that even for all their importance, some member states fail to deliver their obligations, thus depriving many women from seeking protection and enjoying international protection.

Finally many observations suggest that the current human rights instruments are gender-neutral and in most cases are used incorrectly by many states. Unfortunately it seems that the International Community is still a long way away from a universally agreed definition to address the problem of violence faced by millions of women Globally. None the less that should undermine the very fact that there is an urgent need to extend the definition and adoption of gender-related guidelines and move away from a narrow interpretation that already exist within the context of the Human Rights Low that manly apply to men . Furthermore, The International Community needs to recognize that any violation against women is an attack on humanity and human rights standards. The human rights of women should not be considered in isolation, but as a greater human rights phenomenon. ■

The International Community needs to recognize that any violation against women is an attack on humanity and human rights standards



Summary

Iranian women are waiting for a change This is not enough

Dr Jaleh Shadi Talab



Dr Jaleh Shadi Talab is the Director of Women Study Centre in Iran. Shadi Talab has 30 years of experience, including working as an assistant lecturer in Ayova University in USA, Deputy of Program, and Budget organization. In this article, Jaleh has focused and talked about Women's NGOs, The government participation in this area , and the women movement as well as research on issues related to women concept. This is part of her interview with volunteer.

From Khordad 1376 (June 1997) we can refer and focus on 2 different forces. First, the massive votes from women that had played a major role to bring up and establish the reformed government. When 60% of the voters were women, the new policy makers could not ignore them. This clearly meant that these women had their own expectations. They voted for the new government because they wanted them to implement what they have promised all along. Women identified that what the new president had said might be beneficiary to their needs. So, the newly formed government was responsible to introduce changes (during the first stage of reform, women had play a major role). Needless to say that the forces from the whole society were complimented by women. This had led us to believe that the situation of women is going to get better. The men in our society are not against women; in fact most of them believe women's situation must improve.

The second force was the international force. In terms of women issues and other issues , we can not ignore the international exceptions and concerns in particular with regard to women's. They also emphasize that woman's conditions must improved . They have supported us during this process through consultations and thinking. Sometimes, they have taken one step further like the European Council and clearly mentioned where they wanted to see improvements. So, in my view the government management had been influenced by these two forces (A force from the bottom i.e. those who voted for the government, and

the international one.) to ensure the implementation of their ideas.

Within this concept, the mottos of the reformed government had also focused on the similar issues. So, In my view the problem during the last 7-8 years goes back to the entire management of the country that did not have the capacity and the inclination to implement the slogans. Even the cabinet did not have the same understanding of the good words that the president was saying, so whatever he mentioned had turned into mottos.

Behind this request, there was not a defined strategy. I separate these two concepts. Sometimes, one may come up with slogan with the view that it is his/her intention to do so. Based on that, he/she may say beautiful and attractive, is totally intentional. However, there is maybe an occasion that one really would like to say something in order to insure that is going to be implemented, nonetheless since there is no plan and program that won't happen. So this situation will leave us to have slogan only but not the actual policies and successful implementations of related plans.

I believe during the last seven years ago those who have talked about women issues really wanted to see changes but unfortunately because of lack of planning, they were not successful. The result of such talks is rather clear and it never becomes a reality. Or if it's because of lacking the strategic planning that they face deferent reactions from the opponent. So, they had no option but to stop the work all together or come down.

This particularly has become a wishes circle with no further developments and achievements. I believe that during the last few years the reform period was a real intention to improve women situation but that was not enough.

I believe that if government management is interested to have a proper civil society with all the relevant objectives with in the next 100 years, it needs to start from the nurseries. We have to ensure that our society is run by its people and would be under their management. If government would not do these things, then one as an active member, within the context of the civil society, needs to accomplish this work. Because you are not worried that you have to see the conclusions during your life time. ■

I believe that during the last few years the reform period was a real intention to improve women situation but that was not enough

A decade of participation

Fatemeh farhangkhah



Fatemeh farhangkhah is an activist within the women society. She is the executive director of children institute with learning difficulties (Koodakan e Tavanyab). Ms. Farhangkhah in this article will define the changes that have already taken place within the women society in recent years.

What is indicated in this article does not mean that all women NGOs have managed to achieve them without the support of other groups or even government. This is only an indication that NGOs could play a major role as a pressure group to ensure that activities are considered and implemented accordingly. It has to be highlighted that what we have achieved is rather limited but it shows that there is a continuation of efforts,



consultations and cooperation. Although this is a very bumpy road, however, we have managed to achieve the followings.

- To increase the marital age of consent from nine to thirteen. (The initial proposal of 15 years had been rejected by the Guardian Council)
- Handing over the responsibility of children to mothers, provided when fathers incapacities are proved or if the father is not around. This responsibility used to be given to grandfathers or representative of the court.
- Proposal to change the current law to parliament with regard to Violence against children both at domestic level (at homes) or public level.
- Attempts in the direction of women lawyers and their promotion to become judges in courts. (after the revolution the women in Iran could no longer judge. Nonetheless some women lawyers in the field have managed to work as advisers in magistrate court and supreme court that has enabled women to issue verdicts along with their male counterparts. Needless to say that we still don't have women as judges in Iran.)
- Attempt to change the image of women within our educational system and presentation of an appropriate illustration of women in the field, consideration of the rights of children and citizen's within the concept of education and in relation to any educational books.
- Attempt to creation of public family court.
- Attempts to clean environments and prevention of diseases by local women
- To facilitate and gathering equipments to promote the knowledge of venerable people.
- Attempt to decrease the percentage of literacy among women.(out of 854 million adults in the world,544 million are women)
- Attempt to have equal opportunities for all religions.
- Attempts to organize courts for children only
- Attempts to promote and support the feeding mothers.
- Attempts to employ single parents.
- Attempts to join women's convention, children convention and so on.
- Attempts to decrease the duration of NGOs registration
- Attempts to implement changes with regards to taxation and to ensure that donations made by individuals are not tax deductible
- Attempt to draw up laws with regards to NGOs
-

Another interesting aspect has been the creation of networking within NGOs society. After the establishment of the NGOs, it has been identified that there is a need to establish a sustainable network to exchange information, having regular consultation and cooperation in order to influence policy makers and ensure aims and objectives at all levels such as national, local and international. Further more, it has been identified to improve relationships between the governments, private sector, NGOs and so on. ■

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A quick look to

Challenges faced by WNGOs in Iran's Society



Mahboobeh Abbasgholi Zadeh is the manager of the NGO Training Centre and the Editor of the Farzaneh periodical Publication of Women Experts. Abbasgholi Zadeh is an activist in the women's NGOs in the country. What you read here is a part of her article in Persian, which indicates future challenges that may be faced by women's organizations after the last parliamentary election in February 2004.

Women's issues in Iran in particular, within civil society concept, along with political changes, will get more and more political. The politicization of the environment will result in causation for NGOs to limit their activities and its nature.

The women's NGOs have reached a point and understanding that without each other they can not influence. So they continue with their networking and campaigns. The furtherance of their campaigns may consequences in creation of some gaps or fulfillments of some gaps. For instance the distance, between NGOs closed to government's policies, organizations that are less critics or those who are critics to government and disagree with their guidelines, will widen. This may create disputes and discussions where some organizations blame others of being part of the government, or those who are closer to the government may accuse other side of being dependant on foreign policies. This topic may generate important debates within women's NGOs.

After the completion of reform period we are faced with a group of reformists' women in middle management who would now take a step backwards and would join the civil society. This phenomena could result in changes for women's NGOs in future. There are two ways around this. First some organisations may get involved in political debates, although they really would like to stay away from politics. Second these women with managerial experiences may devolve in women NGO's culture. In both aspects we will witness an involvement of these women into NGOs. One might also see confusion among these individuals who need to identify their roles between the activities in the government and NGOs.

If we are faced with a conservative government, knowing the fact that their beliefs are different to women issues in comparison to the past stages. There is this possibility of huge changes with regard to resources and the sustainability of women NGOs. Hence the consequences might be the closure of some of these organisations. Therefore those who are more competent and skilful may survive and those without may disappear. We can also anticipate that due to political changes in future we may not see substantial changes in the activities of NGOs, although they are there to respond to the current needs of the society. Thus if NGOs were active during the war time, in another stage in terms of development, and during the stage of democracy and the human rights, there is this possibility that during the stage that there is exceptions to become inactive, they go to the direction of new liberalism. They may concentrate on developments and set up pilots to experiments different areas and establish links at Grassroots level and reach agreement with other groups on minimum conformity. There are some women's NGOs with such ability and capacity. But there are others who have fundamental disagreement with the mentioned changes subsequently they may do otherwise. I would anticipate that in the near future the voice of women's movement would no longer come from women's NGO's, because of lack security in the sustainability of resources and the vulnerability of the social environment, but will come from various internet sists. ■

if NGOs were active during the war time, in another stage in terms of development, and during the stage of democracy and the human rights, there is this possibility that during the stage that there is exceptions to become inactive, they go to the direction of new liberalism



Populace organisations must do something to solve violence against women

Shahla Ezazie

Shahla Ezazie obtained her PhD in Social Study and Economics from the University of Vienna-Austria. She is a member of the Social Study Board of Alameh Tabatabaie University and the manager of Educational-Expertise of Women's Study of the Women's Society Group in Iran. Shahla has published 3 books so far, her second book "Domestic Violence" is currently being used in many universities. In this interview she talks about violence against women in Iran's Society and the role of Women's Organisations that they can play in this context.



...In order to deal with violence and solve this problem in our society the law needs to be changed, this may consequence in the law structures and people to have enhanced relationships. But unfortunately no one is prepared to lessen his/ her own power and increase the power of the vulnerable people.

This male set up is not going to change on its own, there are ways. Do not think that from outsiders' point of view, Iran is a closed Inland. For example there are pressures from UN that in line with other countries we need to do something, such as combating against violence, poverty and promotion of health etc .With the same token, from inside we can also put pressures via governmental bodies and women in parliament. Having said that we

should not just look at the government, violence is a phenomenon that people in society need to change.

As I have mentioned before violence is a complicated phenomenon especially in our society where NGOs are not very active. In addition we do not have enough facilities.

From 8th March last year, the International Women's Day, a group has tried with a limited recourse to campaign against violence against women and open up debates. Committed individuals produced leaflets and organised a list.... Such activities are seeds and sprouts for future changes. Yet most organisations work as governmental organisations and move in their direction.

In the interim one can have some expectations from the universities, although they face limitations. Universities have their bureaucratic system that makes them to become conservative. Needless to say that they have been engaged in their 20 years old conservatism. During the last 20/30 years so many things have had changed in world, but not in Iran. Some of this notion goes back to university students, because if they want changes that could take place. The conservatism among students is a fact. Some are not happy to work and set up organisations. When a university starts to work everything has to be line with their beliefs and procedures. During the last few years we have witnessed that some students' thesis are on violence, this is a phenomenon that has protest elements and critical views in it. When a researcher works on violence, there is no option but to be against it. When a woman is battered and says this is not important, the research has to indicate why. Is it because the women in question is used to it? Or is it because getting divorce is worse than being battered?

Although universities do open up to such issues, but the findings of researches are within the conservatism concept. For instance there are figures to indicate that the rate of illiteracy amongst women is higher than men, or the jealousy toward men could results in violence. At the same time there are suggested solutions too, like it is better for women to get married to men who are more educated than them.

This is not a solution, given that the violence is going to exist. Why a woman has to ignore her education for the sake of not being battered? These days girls go to universities, so why should they not get married to someone who is less educated than them? The success of any marriage has very little connection to educational degrees. There are not solutions for a man not battering a woman; this only indicates that the "victim" is to blame. Those who are against violence are marginalised. In reality they have no money and facilities, they can only work as academics or go and work outside universities.

Within this framework giving counselling by the populace organisations (we do not have many organisations in this field) may result in decline of violence. In dealing with violence due to lack of facilities, no support from the law and funds- some counsellors advise battered women just to bear the situation. Giving counselling is not just to study and obtain a certificate, and see clients going to them and talk, although talks might be a little help, but the whole situation has to be different. For example if a child had been beaten up, the counsellor must be able to conduct certain things. She/he must be able to make a complaint, and according to the law follow it up. There is no such provision for counsellors to inform anybody. Although the police authority has its own procedure for such complains to be made. Our counsellor do not have funds to offer accommodations to women and children who have been abused. The relevant changes in the law and culture, along with the commitment, the political and social will might be the constructive move to combat violence against women. ■

There are not solutions for a man not battering a woman; this only indicates that the "victim" is to blame



Women and the lack of communication Tools



Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani is a woman activist within women's society who is also the Editor of "Seasons of Women's" quarterly. She has published many articles on women's movement. In this article Noushin would describe the women's situation in the country and their roles.

Definitely the establishment of independent women's organisations that would create an environment of discussions and constructs a move towards the development of needs and aspirations is very significant. Usually the awareness would occur and expand within a collective framework. Contained by this context what ever assistance that promotes the gender awareness among the women may be helpful and constructive. The most important factor to promote and develop women's movement is the establishment of women's organisations. We need to enable ourselves to get involve in different groups. This associations could be around different issues such as trade union, Social, political or legislative requirements to increase these groups- of course these organisations has to be independent from government's structures- At that time we can have a strong women's social movement that could have rewarding consequences for the society .

The most important factor to promote and develop women's movement is the establishment of women's organisations. We need to enable ourselves to get involve in different groups

Unfortunately the gender awareness issue plays a big role in women's society, which seems to be despondent. It is true that by in large women are not happy with their situations and have many problems, but this issue has not yet turned into a gender awareness and feminist concept and has no theatrical backing. On the other hand women are not yet involved in groups, organisation and societies.... This proves until then, as a force, we can not influence and improve the current circumstances. Needless to say that currently there are groups in the field of environments , children , laws , employments, students, arts and trade unions that are being formed and increasing , but these is still very little. These can be possible in line with the expansions and awareness of feminism to ensure that women

are able to see their problems in connection to the society. This is possible through development of women's society, creation of an atmosphere for discussions, expansion of publications and relevant books, creation of internet sites, making educational films, art productions, and etc.

Today, the issue around gender awareness has developed a bit within the middle class women. At the same time we have witnessed that during the last two years or so there have been girls' student groups, debating on this subject or refer to this issue in their seminars. Unfortunately we do not have the relevant tools to establish connections with lower class women to talk about gender awareness, knowing the fact that that these women can deepen the situation and bring up potential changes to improve women's state of affairs. Of course the relevant tools are education and development, but unfortunately there are not enough facilities in these vicinities. Perhaps we have no choice but to wait until the middle class society would empower women's issues, we may then be able to have the relevant forces to establish vital connections. ■

The Women's NGOs and their Fractions

Dr Elaheh Kolaie, MP in the 6th Parliament and the University Professor

Dr Kolaie as a MP has worked with NGOs. In addition she has also worked closely with many women to promote their issues. She mentioned in an article in Persian section about changes within Women's society in Middle East during the last few years. Further more she refers to the reformist parliaments' activities for not finalising their work with regard to NGOs such as Women's NGOs'



Due to the internal and external changes, the formation of the 6th parliament has brought up expectations that those who came up with slogans such as institutionalizations of reform and change the situation of women, need to take steps forward in that direction to empower NGOs. Contrary to the long discussions and debates in the Research Centre of the Parliament for drawing up the initial draft for NGOs and the relevant law, this issue had never been materialised, because of the obstacles created for the reformist MPs by oppositions. To start with, this issue related to the 21 clause of the Islamic Republic Constitution that refers to the freedom of organisations for all its citizens. Although there is no particular and comprehensive law relating to the establishments and monitoring of NGOs, but there are bylaws and ratifications in relation to the activities of these organisations. In which that they all have problems and contradictions with the existence of the organisations...

The most important problems between the government and the NGOs is the lack of current laws in this area, the existence of old and out dated structures, severe monitoring system, the contradictions of laws, issues around registration of organisations and being able to obtain the relevant documentations, lack of financial support and ignoring the internal points that had the aims to overcome the above mentioned issues.

The extend of MPs activities and different obstacles on their ways from the oppositions to the reforms has prevented the establishment of a prolong relationship, between members of the reformist fractions who were aware of the importance between the them and active MPs within the civil society concept



One of the most important activities in 6th parliament was the strengthening of the relationships between the civil society and MPs who have been active in the field. Based on this there was a close affiliation between NGOs members and MPs. This had been observed in women fractions in parliament. Most of the members of this fraction were involved in organisations related to various areas such as education, culture and social activities. These organisations were working on refugee issues , publications , women, children, and environment and... This affiliation for the first time brought up closeness between civil society organisation and the parliament. Although this connection had failed to maintain a sustainable relationship. The extend of MPs activities and different obstacles on their ways from the oppositions to the reforms has prevented the establishment of a prolong relationship, between members of the reformist fractions who were aware of the importance between the them and active MPs within the civil society concept. Needless to say that this experience has opened up a way forward for civil society activists that is not going to get sealed up. ■

The classifications of women's NGOs:

Conventional and Moderns organizations need to work together



Dr Nahid Motee, is an Instructor and a University activist who has done many researches within the civil society environment on the role of women and their collaborations. She believes that modern and conventional woman's' groups must connect and find a better way to influence and use each others capacities , otherwise the women's movement of Iran would encounter serious problems.

The classification among conventional and modern women's NGOs is as such, that as if, they have been given a brand or a hall-mark. Those with conventional views use modernism as something with a negative values and those who believes in modernism says that behind conventional ideas, some negative elements rests. I believe taking to consideration the current changes, knowing the fact that our society is going through a transitional period, from conventionalism to modernism, we would therefore see the both sectors with-in all aspects of society's' structures such as women's NGO's. So based on this context it is not possible to talk about certain boundaries. The differences of opinions in these groups are not so fundamental, so in my view these are variations on the surface, but this dissimilarity has become very visible.

In my observation one of the main challenges in terms of women's movement is to improve the situation. They need to introduce changes with regards to the ways that they relate to each other. If these groups do not work side by side, we witness that the movement will suffer. In providing support to each other, their co-operations could result in weaknesses and strengths from both sides to progress. So the strengths will get stronger and weaknesses will become marginalised. Having said that I am not very optimistic.

None the less, these two sections taking into considering their objectives, can prove to be helpful in different areas resulting to support women's movement. The Morden groups have the knowledge of new and up to date information that indicates how the feminism could go forward in the new modern World, what experiences has had and what are the benefits. At the same time the conventional groups know a lot about the cultural relationships and the closeness of people.

These issues are important because they can really attract people and encourage them to get involve in various activities and move them forward. But those who we call them conventional (because are not equipped with theatrical concepts), their movement may not become very serious. Therefore they may stay in their preliminarily activities and at some points move away from modern women's NGO's. ■

In my observation one of the main challenges in terms of women's movement is to improve the situation. They need to introduce changes with regards to the ways that they relate to each other



Iranian Women NGOs' Status



Soheila Baba Moradi, has eleven years of experience working with NGOs. Being a trainer she is member of Hadaf training group and has developed articles regarding NGO activities.

The article below, is the information she shared with us regarding women NGOs' status after Beijing World Conference.

The Iranian women NGOs' in Iran entered a new phase after the fourth world conference in Beijing, 1995. Until this conference, before 1995, 55 women's NGOs were identified, while till 2003, 337 associations started their activities. The increase of 512 percent represents a significant growth among Iranian women's NGOs during 1995-2003. Each of these organizations, considering the type of activities, are categorized to be institutes, foundations, associations, organizations, societies, centers, networks, groups, etc. under legal definitions. As it was mentioned before, the activities of women's NGOs are organized according to the pattern of John Hopkins and is based on 12 key pivots.

Fields of Activity of Women's NGOs

Percentage of organizations involved in cultural and recreation activities (media and communication, spectacular arts, dramatic arts, music, literature, sports, sports clubs, social) is 247%. Training and Education 247%. Health (rehabilitation, psychological health and mental problems, public health, crisis intervention) 296.8%. Environment 254.7%. Development, vocational training and employment (local organizations, economic development, social advancement, construction, training and employment) 26 7.7%. Legal- advocacy (ethnic associations, citizenship, protecting victims, rehabilitation of accused, legal services, peace and human rights) 103%. Charity and humanitarian services 766.22%. Religious associations (followers of religions) 186.5%. Professional associations and unions 84.2%. Micro-credit funds 167.4%. Social services (women, children, adolescences, family, the poor, adults, protecting refugees and displaced people, natural disaster, emergency assistance) 7422%. NGO networks (women) 72%. Total is 337100%.

According to the 12 main pivots of categorizing these organizations, there are 76 women's charity organizations in the country and which is a major group and their activities are 6.22 percent of total activities. The background of these organizations' activities is rooted in the old history of Iran and has put them in the highest rank and most favorable religions practices. Nowadays, these organizations render efficient services in the society by the efforts of people with good wills in an organized and formal frame and by the aim of addressing the needs of those seeking help and their significant number is a prove.

The number of women's organizations rendering social services is 74 which are active in the fields of children, adolescences, family, the poor, adults, protecting refugees and displaced people, natural disasters, emergency assistance and allocating 22 percent of the total activities to their organizations. It should be mentioned that in the field of health, 29 women's NGOs are active and filling 6.8 percent of activities of all organizations and they are mainly active in the field of rehabilitation (physical disability), psychological health and mental problems, public health and crisis intervention.

Development, vocational training and employment are fields that many women's NGOs focus on it and the number of these organizations reaches 26. The activities of these organ-

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izations are 7.7 from total and are active in the field of local organizations, economic development, social, construction, vocational training and employment. 25 women's NGOs are active in the field of preserving, evolving and development of environmental culture and their activities are 4.7 percent of the total.

The religious organizations are the most significant indicator of group and volunteer activities to achieve common values. In this field, 18 organizations are established and their activities include 6.5 percent of the total activities and consist of organizations of followers of different religions (Islam, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian). Eight of the oldest women's NGOs active in Iran are those established and managed by women from religious minorities. At the moment, 16 organizations are active in the field of micro-credit funds which allocated loans for income generation, providing facilities for housing, marriage and education for empowerment of women as the heads of families, affected women and those at risk and also, cover young girls.

Many believe that Iranian charity non-governmental organizations are traditional. It should be stated that although many of Iranian traditional non-governmental organizations are charities, it doesn't mean that all charity organizations, especially women's charities, lack participatory approaches and mainly support and protect the poor and deprived and other NGOs have participatory approaches with development goals. It is obvious that some of women's non-governmental charity organizations, especially those established recently, have protection and assistance approaches. These organizations adopt participatory approaches and try not to create a static and dependant target group by implementing projects where the target group is actively involved in addressing their needs, gaining independence and self-reliance. ■

Interview Shadi Sader, Journalist and Activist in Women's Issues

Politicians don't know the real meaning of NGO



Shadi Sadr, journalist, lawyer, activist in Women's issues has printed numerous articles regarding women's issues and problems in different journals and newspapers and presented them in various internal and international seminars and conferences. At the moment she is the director of an institute that give legal assistance to women and is called "Rahi". The following is her opinion regarding women's NGOs.

The matter of women governing the NGO doesn't matter and the most important point is that a women's organization should be mandatory to defend women's benefits and rights and improve their status, and their opinion or ideology is not important

We cannot expect too much from women's NGOs since the activities of women's independent non-governmental institute don't have a long history. Considering the closed sphere and restrictions that existed before the election of Mr. Khatami, most of female activists were active in environmental and children's organizations in fields that weren't dealing with politics and could get permission of activity very quickly. Their activities would face limitations and restrictions as soon as they would step further the laws and policies and would become critical. In the recent years the space is more open and they have been able to start their activities as non-governmental organizations and speak out and they can have their own organizations. This fact doesn't neglect the organizations that existed before 2 Khordad 1376 (1997), whether they have been women's organizations is to be investigated. Many of them are corporate, where women are working. Some of them are rehabilitation organizations and are rendering social services and some others are active in the field of children. Even women's mobilized group is considered as an NGO. I believe the according to this division it is not clear that what is a women's organization meant to be. In fact, a women's organization, no matter the gender of the management, is supposed to defend women's rights and benefits. The matter of women governing the NGO doesn't matter and the most important point is that a women's organization should be mandatory to defend women's benefits and rights and improve their status, and their opinion or ideology is not important. It might happen that men become members of these organizations, also. If we look carefully we will see that the number of these organizations is very rare. The open political and social arena gave women activists to start their own independent organizations or join the NGOs they liked and continue their activities there. Governmental statistics represent the significant growth of the NGO, however, this concept is very new. How much human power do you expect from an infant? Iranian civil society is a newborn baby and can't do anything without assistance and help. Iran is a silent society among the international community. The reason of this silence is not that they don't have anything to say but they don't know the presentation and speaking techniques. Most of the so called women's NGOs that have been active since long ago, in nature and in practice, have been economic organizations, and Women's Employment House in Rey is an example. However, the statistics that we have from women's NGOs, which is said to be 500, is not accurate. In fact, Ministry of Interior has put any non-governmental organization where women are active, under the category of women's NGOs. Most of these organizations exist in name only. Why they have been registered? The reason is that the founders didn't have a deep understanding of NGO and they were working somewhere else but needed another non-governmental identity such as most of governmental sector directors. They knew that after a while they will lose their organizational status and to meet their needs they should look for a special social identity to be identified as director general or manager of an organization. The other objective has been to use the allocated budgets to women's NGOs. Naturally, those at governmental jobs are aware of these budgets or are informed sooner. This led to foundation of small organization who got the money but did nothing. There are organizations that are non-governmental in nature and are doing such activities but in the conferences and meetings there is only one representative. In fact they are one-member organizations. I think an NGO should have a democratic structure, accept members and hold active members. The other problem of women's NGOs, especially those working for women's rights, is that they have not been able to attract individual or groups of women, while a large group of women are active in charity organizations. There are only a few that are recognized and independent and known among people. ■

Iranian civil society is a newborn baby and can't do anything without assistance and help. Iran is a silent society among the international community

When Mr. Khatami came, I sat at home



Shahlah Habibi, is the Secretary of Women's NGO Network, who ten years ago, was the consultant to the president for Beijing Conference. Her efforts gave 100 women activists the opportunity of presence in the conference.

The article below is her notes regarding preparation measures undertaken to send the delegation of women activists to Beijing Conference, 1995.

10 years ago a group of women from NGOs and University members and activists participated in Beijing Forum (1995). Ms. Shahlah Habibi, former deputy to the President in Women's Affairs had a crucial role in women's presence in this universal event. The following is a summary of the process of women's participation in this conference according to Ms. Shahlah Habibi, secretary of Women's NGO Network.

I was the Deputy to the President in Women's Affairs at that time and I was the Head of Scientific Board of the Delegation sent to Beijing and I understood that it is not possible to integrate governmental and non-governmental issues and there should be a separate office. In fact all the non-governmental organizations should come to a consensus, review and decide how will they be able to participate in the next conference in under the framework of Universal Conference on Women. It was very interesting for me that the only NGO, managed by an NGO, who was always present, it was Women's Islamic Society. I don't recall if this was its name at that time or it was later named but Ms. Taleghani was in charge of this organization and in universal activities we could always feel her lack of presence. I mean we couldn't take any representative in governmental capacity. At the beginning we had a broad view regarding the NGOs, and we were trying to consider international standards fully but even if 80 percent of them could be applied for them we would accept them as NGO to encourage and create a movement and activity. We even accepted those publications that had got governmental support and covered women's issues in their articles to be a reformist movement. For example Zan-e Rouz, Magazine Zanan, Farzaneh. In fact we led them towards NGOs. I reviewed the activities of women in the third world conference on women and found out that Ms. Ebtekar has been very active in this field, so I asked her to accept the coordination responsibility of NGOs and she accepted. She was officially appointed as the Head of Coordination Office for NGOs. Of course this office was to improve the presence of women in the international conference on women. When she was appointed, I gave her a list consisting 28 addresses and we prepared 55 representatives for the international conference which was a difficult task. This was their first experience. Up to the date, they were interested but had never thought of creating an organized core of function and they were not really active. They were not familiar with participation in international conferences and hearing others ideas and have a technical training. This was

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the first time at the period after Islamic Revolution that we took a delegation of 105 women from NGO sector and only 10 were men. This was a very difficult responsibility because it was the first time that an event at that level was happening and there was lack of trust regarding what was going to happen there. They were concerned if they can represent Iranian Nation and Government properly. Thanks God every thing went well. In fact, contrary to our experience from the previous conferences, the fourth conference was totally different. We had 17 thousand governmental and 40 thousand NGO representatives to participate in NGO meeting held in 70 kilometers from Beijing. There were some issues that gave a governmental form to the delegation. This was due to the fact that I couldn't accommodate them in a Hotel and I couldn't leave them to go where they can find a place to stay so we arranged a residence there. I didn't want them to be in trouble not because of talking against government as from the beginning I didn't guide them toward silence and not talking against Islamic systems. We insisted on national interests and we asked them to have a general approach in or out of the country. There will be critics and complaints it should be toward improving the plan. The issues discussed there was very new for them and they were following the topics closely since they could feel the gaps in their activities. I think this was a successful and difficult experience both the 2 years of preparation phase that we announced our willingness to take part in the conference and the conference itself. At the time that we were heading to the conference there was the approach of joining segregated organization together and coordinate to influence and be effective. After Beijing, it became more serious. This was what I wanted and after that this process should be independent from government. So they reached to a network. Ministry of Interior was not ready to register these movements and to gain recognition this movement had to start its activity as corporate. Women started their activity and the central council was established. Ms. Faezeh Hashemi, secretary of the network, Dr. Navabi Nejad is implementing manager. After 6 years, the formal activities of the network started in 1997. After two periods that I went there, they asked me to nominate and I was interested so. At the same time, Mr. Khatami was elected and I lost my Governmental posts. ■





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