

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN IRAN<sup>1</sup>

**Nayereh Tohidi**

- *An overview of how the Iranian women's movement has emerged in the face of unique contexts* •

## ABSTRACT

*The status of women's rights in Iran can appear contradictory at first glance – despite both high levels of education and low birth rates, for example, participation of women in the work force or in parliament is amongst the lowest in the world. In this summary of her chapter in the book *Women's Movements in the Global Era – The Power of Local Feminisms* (Westview Press, 2016), Nayereh Tohidi offers a fascinating overview of women's rights and the feminist movement in Iran. The author highlights how the demands, strategies, tactics, effectiveness and achievements of the movement have varied in accordance with socioeconomic developments, state policies, political trends, and cultural contexts at national and international levels. Tohidi suggests that this history can be roughly divided into eight periods from the era of Constitutional Revolution and constitutionalism (1905–1925) until the modern day under President Rouhani. Finally, despite various challenges, the author notes that the women's movement in Iran continues to grow and reminds the reader of the key role that civil society plays in guaranteeing equal rights and gender justice in Iran and beyond.*

## KEYWORDS

Iran | Women's rights | Feminism

Women's status and rights in contemporary Iran, and thereby the trajectory of Iranian women's activism and feminist movements, seem paradoxical and complicated.<sup>2</sup> For instance, how could women under a conservative Islamist clerical state, which has pursued sex segregation and many extreme forms of legal and practical discrimination against women, show impressive educational attainment, even surpassing men in higher education? But why have women's remarkable educational achievements not corresponded with their employment opportunities, economic and occupational mobility, or with their representation in political decision-making? Why have Iranian women's labour force participation rates and share of representation in the Parliament remained among the lowest in the world, even in comparison to other Middle Eastern countries?

Or how could Iran become exemplary in the world for its success in reducing fertility rates in a few decades by more than two-thirds, from 6.6 births per woman in the mid-1970s to about 1.8 births per woman in 2010, and to 2.1 even in rural areas?<sup>3</sup> How could this have happened while the Islamic government dismantled Iran's national family planning soon after the 1979 revolution because it was viewed as a Western innovation? What factors changed the earlier pro-natalist policy of the conservative state to a widespread support for family planning and birth control? And why in more recent years, has the state (or at least the more powerful and more conservative faction of it) shifted again to natalism and yet is not really succeeding in its attempts to reverse the fertility to a much higher rate?

Many factors have shaped women's contradictory status in present Iran, including the patriarchal and patrimonial patterns in Iranian history and culture, be it secular or religious (Islamic), the state policy and state ideology, the influential ideological or intellectual trends such as nationalism, anti-imperialism, socialism, Islamism, and more recently liberalism and a human rights framework. External and international factors, especially Western imperial meddling too have influenced state policies and intellectual discourses pertaining to women's rights and gender issues. Another set of factors, of increased influence in more recent years, has to do with increased processes of globalisation and the international currency of the discourses of human/women's rights spreading through the United Nations (U.N.) and transnational feminist activism and new communication technology such as the satellite television, the Internet and social media. Increased globalisation has intensified a "glocal" dialectic, meaning the interplay of the local-national factors with the global-international factors. The glocal and transnational dynamism in Iranian society have become particularly intensified in the past four decades due to the impact of millions of forced or voluntary exiles and emigration, mostly settled in Western Europe and North America. This massive exodus of Iranians, mostly due to political reasons, has entailed a drastic brain drain for the country. Yet, it has also resulted in the formation of many diasporic communities of Iranians that include thousands of highly educated and accomplished professionals, many of them still devoted to the cause of human rights and democracy for Iran. This has offered Iran's civil rights and women's rights movements with a resourceful and

well-connected new potential. More specifically, the Iranian diasporic feminist activism has made up one of the significant components of transnational connections, cross pollination, and glocal process of socio-cultural changes in Iran of today.

## 1 • Historical, Socioeconomic, and Political Contexts

The history of Iranian women's quest for equal rights and their collective actions for sociopolitical empowerment dates back to the formation of the modern social movements for constitutionalism and democratic nation-state building in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Iran, as in other parts of the world, the women's movement and feminist discourse are by-products of modernity and industrial capitalism. At the same time the women's movement, especially feminism, has presented a challenge to and a critique of the androcentric and unjust aspects of modernity. Moreover, since modernity in Iran and in many other Middle Eastern countries has been associated with Western intrusion, colonialism or imperialism, it has resulted in mixed feelings among many women and men. That is, a fascination with progressive aspects of modernity and strong desire to become modern, yet at the same time, a resentment and resistance against Western domination.

Taking advantage of such anti-imperialistic resentments, the ruling patriarchal and despotic authorities in Iran have usually accused and blamed Iranian feminists and any quest for women's emancipation as an exogenous idea. This supposedly Western exported phenomenon is accused of promoting sexual license to penetrate the *dar ol-Islam* and the traditional family and thereby destroying the internal moral fabric of the entire society. Therefore, women activists aspiring for equal rights (who may or may not identify as feminist) have often found themselves in a defensive position. They have usually tried to assure their community of their moral virtue, loyalty, and patriotism. They have also tried to convince the ruling elites that not only egalitarian and powerful female images have authentic and indigenous roots in Iranian ancient pre-Islamic history, but also the quest for equal rights is not incompatible with progressive understandings of Islamic tradition.<sup>4</sup>

The women's movement in Iran, as in most other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has been intertwined with nationalism and also anti-colonial or anti-imperialistic sentiments. Although Iran was never colonised, the strong influence of Russian and British Empires in Iran of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had given an anti-imperialistic orientation to many of the Iranian pro-modernity and pro-democracy groups. The constitutional movement (1905-1911) that was building a modern nation-state in Iran had to fight despotism of the old monarchy and its imperial supporters at the same time. Anti-American sentiments were added to this after the CIA and British Intelligence Service supported the *coup* in 1953 against the secular and democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh because of his agenda to nationalise the oil industry.

Within this context, women's rights advocates and feminists in Iran (as in Egypt and many other MENA countries), have often felt compelled to show their distance from the imperialist "outsiders," prove their loyalty and devotion to their nations, and then dare to fight the patriarchal "insiders" and demand women's rights. They have been carefully navigating between identity politics, a cultural pressure for "authenticity," and the quest for national independence on the one hand, and the aspiration for individual rights and universal values such as equality, human rights, freedom of choice, and democracy, on the other.

In their over a hundred-year history of collective activism, Iranian women have made remarkable achievements in the realms of education; scientific, literary, and artistic creativity; and to some extent in economic productivity and sociopolitical participation. However, they have not succeeded in gaining equal rights in many areas, particularly in the family (inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody). During the process of rapid modernisation under the Pahlavi dynasty (from the 1930s through the 1970s), many institutions in Iran, including the public education and judiciary systems, were modernised and went through secularisation. But the personal status and family law remained strictly on the basis of the old *sharia* (Islamic law).

Except for Tunisia, Turkey, and to some extent Morocco, and the Muslim-majority republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia of the Soviet and post-Soviet times (such as Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan), in most other Muslim-majority countries, egalitarian reforms in family law, whether by revising and reinterpreting *sharia* or by replacing it with secular law, have been painfully slow. This has been due to several complex reasons, the most important one being a patriarchal consensus (based on a tacit distribution of power) among the secular nationalist (usually military) elite and the religious Islamic elites, that is, the clerics (*ulema*). Laws governing women's roles in the public domain increasingly fall under the control of the secular modernising state elites, whereas laws governing women and children in the family (and domestic gender relationships and personal status areas) remain under the control of the clergy and religious authorities.

But with the rise of Islamism and after the establishment of the theocratic state of the Islamic Republic in Iran since 1979, many of the laws and policies in both the public and domestic domains have come under the direct control of the clerics, who have furthered the extent of gender discrimination in favor of men. A few significant progressive reforms made in family law in 1960s and 70s under the rubric of the Family Protection Law (during the second Pahlavi) were repealed in 1980s, and family law and the penal code regressed to the way they were in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>5</sup> Due to women's objections, however, and also because no replacement legislation was passed, in practice the Family Protection Law remained the guide for answering questions not explicitly dealt within *sharia*, hence a later reversal of some of the initial regressions.<sup>6</sup>

In short, after the establishment of *sharia*-based rule of the Islamic Republic in Iran, women lost many rights in almost all spheres of life. According to the Islamic Republic's laws of

*Hudud* (punishments, such as stoning) and *Qisas* (retaliation, eye for an eye), which belong to pre-modern tribal societies, a woman is practically considered as subhuman. For instance, in case of murder, a woman's *Diyeh* (blood money or compensation rate) is worth half that of a man's. In cases of bodily harm, certain body organs of a male person (for example, his testicles) are worth more than the whole body of a female person.<sup>7</sup> The women's movement in Iran, therefore, has remained predominantly rights oriented — making its main target the legal system that is full of discriminatory laws against any gender, ethnic, and religious groups other than the Shi'i male.<sup>8</sup> The demand for changes in the law and the role of lawyers in almost all women's organisations have become more prominent than ever.

One of the main mottos of the women's movement has been “change for equality,” with an emphasis on legal reforms, civil and political rights, hence several campaigns against discriminatory laws, policies, and violent or oppressive traditional customs. Many feminists have argued that discriminatory laws and practices — such as child marriage, unequal inheritance, laws of retribution, stoning, a husband's right to prevent his wife from working outside the home, male-biased rights to divorce, child custody, polygamy, and *sighe* (temporary marriages, legally allowed for even long-term married men), and forced hijab — reinforce violence, insecurity, and humiliation against women of all walks of life, and therefore should constitute the movement's priorities.<sup>9</sup> Some also reason that other social movements may and do address economic and working-class issues of women as well as men, but it is only the women's movement and feminists that focus on issues directly related to gender and sexuality.

This emphasis on legal reform, however, does not make Iranian feminist orientation limited to liberal feminism only. Although at this stage of economic and political development in Iran, liberalism can be very relevant, what may seem liberal in the western democratic context can be perceived as quite radical in a repressive and retrogressive religious state. As well-contextualised by one of the leading feminist activists in Iran, the classical western categorisation of Iranian feminists into liberal versus radical is false and misleading since it fails to account for the historical and specific situational conditions on the ground.<sup>10</sup>

The very notion of a “women's movement” in Iran is still a contested subject. The ruling conservative Islamists deny the existence of such a movement. They portray women's activism for equal rights as a “harmful feminist deviation instigated under the Western influence,”<sup>11</sup> or as a disguise for the Zionist and American agenda toward “regime change” through a “velvet revolution.” Thus, they react to it by smear campaigns, negative propaganda, arrest, and imprisonment.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the moderate Islamic reformers and secular progressive Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals, however, express support for the demands of women and condemn the government's arrest and repression of women activists. A few of them, however, insist that in Iran there is no “women's movement” yet, rather, there are feminist activists.<sup>13</sup> Basing their arguments on some classic definitions and old theories of social movements, they

point out that the current women activists lack a strong organisational structure capable of mobilising a vast number of the populace, generating serious conflicts with the state, and bringing about political changes. But, their arguments seem unrealistic in light of the more recent public protests, networks of campaigns, and many arrests and conflicts between the women activists and the state organs. An increasing number of sociologists (men and women), however, have begun writing about the recent rise in feminism and the women's movement in Iran with enthusiasm, characterising it as an "inspiring model" for other civil society movements<sup>14</sup> or as a "definer of a true social movement".<sup>15</sup>

Another approach, an interesting conceptual alternative to classical theorisation of social movements, has been presented by sociologist Asef Bayat, who defines the current women's activism in Iran as "a women's non-movement." He argues that in an authoritarian and repressive context such as that of Iran, "collective activities of a large number of women organised under strong leadership, with effective networks of solidarity, procedures of membership, mechanisms of framing, and communication and publicity – the types of movements that are associated with images of marches, banners, organisations, lobbying, and the like," are not feasible. Instead, as Bayat cogently stresses, women's activism through their presence in the public domains and their daily resistance to the state's ideology of seclusion and policies of sex segregation and forced veiling remains significant. To be a woman activist in the Iran of today means to be able to defy, resist, negotiate, or even circumvent gender discrimination – not necessarily by resorting to extraordinary and overarching "movements" identified by deliberate collective protest and informed by mobilisation theory and strategy, but by being involved in daily practices of life, by working, engaging in sports, jogging, singing, or running for public offices. This involves deploying the power of *presence*, the assertion of collective will in spite of all odds, by refusing to exit, circumventing the constraints, and discovering new spaces of freedom to make oneself heard, seen, and felt. The effective power of these practices lies precisely in their ordinariness.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the "*power of presence*" and the "*ordinariness*" of women's resistance constitute important aspects of women's agency in Iran, probably more so than in democratic countries.<sup>17</sup> However, Iranian women's activism in more recent years has actually evolved beyond "ordinariness". Some of the features of social movements mentioned by Bayat, especially those of the "new social movements" do exist in the recent trajectory of the collective women's activism in Iran such as framing, networking, campaigning, generating discourse or symbols (hence collective identity), lobbying, mobilising, and collective protests (though all in small scales). New social movements that emerged since the 1970s and 1980s in Europe, America, and other parts of the world around women's issues, feminism and sexuality, the environment, civil rights, and antiwar sentiment are categorically different from the movements in the past. Instead of having a formal organisational structure, new social movements, as the case of Iranian women's movement represents, are "segmentary" (have several, sometimes competing, organisations and groupings), "polycentric" (have multiple and sometimes competing leaders), and "reticulate" (are linked to each other through loose networks).<sup>18</sup>

## 2 • Stages of Feminist Formations and Women's Movements in Iran

The characteristics of feminist formation and the women's movement in modern Iran – its demands, strategies, tactics, effectiveness and achievements – have varied in accordance with differing socioeconomic developments, state policies, political trends, and cultural contexts at national and international levels. This history can be roughly divided into eight periods.<sup>19</sup>

**First** was the era of Constitutional Revolution and constitutionalism (1905–1925), during which the first generation of women activists emerged mostly through their involvement in the pro-constitutional and anti-imperialist activities. The first associations of women, usually semisecret, helped with women's literacy; demanded women's access to public education, hygiene, and vocational training; and criticised women's seclusion, polygamy, and domestic violence.

**Second**, the era of modern nation-state-building (1920s–1940s) associated with increasing literacy and women's entrance in universities, gradual expansion in women's associations and women's press, the controversial state-dictated compulsory unveiling of women (1935), and forced adoption of the Western dress code for men and women.<sup>20</sup>

**Third**, the era of nationalisation (of the oil industry) (1940s–1950s) brought more women into the public and political activism within both nationalist and socialist ideological and organisational frameworks. Many reform projects and egalitarian ideas concerning women's roles and status were brought into the public discourse, yet neither the nationalist nor the socialist and Communist parties could succeed in bringing about legislative reforms concerning women's suffrage or changes in family law.

**Fourth**, the era of modernisation (1960s–1970s) saw a growth in the social visibility of modern working and professional women in the rapid process of urbanisation, and some positive and significant legal reforms concerning women's suffrage and family law. But, increased centralisation and the dictatorship of the Shah led to the erosion of women's autonomous associations resulting in state control and a top-down process of autocratic modernisation without democratisation, thus creation of a dual and polarised society.

**Fifth**, the era of Islamist Revolution and Islamisation (1979–1997) associated with massive socio-political mobilisation of men and women, but soon followed with many retrogressive and discriminatory laws and policies against women and religious and ethnic minorities, forced hijab, sex segregation, war and violence, political repression, massive emigration and exile of intellectuals and ordinary people, and overall socio-economic decline.

**Sixth**, the era of post-Islamist reform and pragmatism under President Khatami (1997–2005) associated with a relative socio-political openness, civil society discourse, and neo-liberalism (that had actually begun under presidency of Hashemi Rafsajani's "construction era," 1989–1997). But the growth of civil society organisations, the vibrant and relatively free press, including feminist press, and relative economic improvement did not last long.

**Seventh**, the neo-conservative and populist backlash under President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013); associated with resurgence of Islamist fanatic groups, over-emphasis on nuclear ambitions, belligerent and provocative foreign policy, intensified hostility between the IRI, Israel and the Western powers, thus an increased danger of military attacks and war, increasing international sanctions and isolation of Iran, increased repression of the media and civil society organisations, including women's groups, introduction of anti-women bills, increased corruption, economic mismanagement, inflation, and rising unemployment.

**Eighth**, the era of "moderation" under President Rouhani (2013+) has been associated with remarkable shift in foreign policy, success in resolution of the nuclear crisis thanks to diplomatic approach and negotiation with the world powers. But so far attempts toward some openness and improvement in human rights and women's status have been blocked by the ruling hard-liners who still have the upper hand over the moderate president.

### 3 • What Next: the "Era of Moderation"?

Under the second term of Ahmadinejad's growingly unpopular government led by a military-clerical alliance, people experienced increasing violation of human rights, especially of women's rights, more restriction on the media and civil society organisations, a brutal crackdown on the pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009-2011, and new waves of exodus of activists from Iran and further brain drains. Moreover, the rising inflation (41 per cent in 2012), budget deficit, unemployment, and overall economic hardship caused by the government's mismanagement and reckless spending on the one hand, and the expanding international sanctions, political isolation, and even a threat of military attack on the other, brought many in Iran to the verge of despair.

During this period, the main subjects of discussion among the Iranian women activists inside and outside Iran included the need for a critical assessment of the role of the women's movement within the Green Movement; the need for adjustment of tactics and framing of feminist activism under the rising repression, the declining economic conditions and increasing political crisis, militarisation and inter-national tension; and the need to redefine and re-adjust the women's movement's transnational relationships, especially between the activists inside and the diaspora feminists outside Iran as the composition of them had changed after the latest wave of exodus.<sup>21</sup>

Another subject of discussion and debate among the feminist activists was related to the 2013 presidential elections. Similar to the strategy pursued by many feminist activists in the past two decades, during the 11<sup>th</sup> presidential elections in summer of 2013 they formed a coalition of diverse groups and individual women to do "Brain-Storming about Women's Demands".<sup>22</sup> This coalition represented three "forces for change" among women: Certain members within the ruling factions connected to the state who advocate women's rights; women activists within the civil society who work collectively within organised NGOs or



semi organised networks; and individual women who defy sexism and resist in daily life in support of change for equality.<sup>23</sup> They tried to highlight commonalities among the concerns of these three spectrums of forces and use the election time as an opportunity to publicise and press on women's demands without endorsing any particular candidate.<sup>24</sup> Among the presidential candidates, the only one that had sent some representatives to sit in the first seminar of this coalition and listen to their demands was Hassan Rouhani.

Protection of women from state and domestic violence, respect for civil and human rights that can provide security for establishing women NGOs – in order to do educational, cultural and journalistic work toward promotion of egalitarian values and elimination of discriminatory laws and policies – were among the main demands. They also wanted the presidential candidates to promise appointment of qualified and egalitarian ministers, including women ministers in their cabinet. The last meeting and statements issued by this coalition, was about the “Required Criteria for the State Ministries” that was signed and supported by over 600 individuals.<sup>25</sup> This stress on setting clear criteria for appointment of ministers was in part a reaction to the tactical move Ahmadinejad had made in 2009 by unexpectedly appointing two women ministers to his cabinet in order to appease women since they had made up his primary opponents during the Green Movement. Many activists however had dismissed his gesture as opportunistic, disingenuous, and at most too little too late.

Rouhani won the election with a small margin. So far, there has been very little success in improvement of the status of women/human rights, and domestic political situation. While right after Rouhani's election, a number of political prisoners were released, among them prominent women's rights defense lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh; many others (including journalists, lawyers, writers and teachers) are still in jail. One of the leading and most courageous among human/women's rights activists who has been imprisoned again, this time under Rouhani, is Narges Mohammadi whose letters from prison have been a significant source of inspiration.<sup>26</sup> Iran still continues to have one of the highest execution rates in the world.<sup>27</sup> President Rouhani's new Iranian “Citizen Rights Charter” met with mixed reviews and ended in nothing real so far. We have seen reactivation of some NGOs and women's press, such as Zanan Emrooz, but they have remained under constant threats and in a precarious situation. Rouhani's appointment of four women to the cabinet as deputies or spokesperson, and a few women mayors in underdeveloped provinces such as Baluchistan have been welcomed by women activists.

The most encouraging appointment has been that of Shahindokht Mowlaverdi, as woman vice president in “women and family affairs”. Her background as an active member of women's rights coalitions at civil society level, her courageous resistance against attacks and harsh critiques by the hardliners have made her a rather popular ally of Iran's feminist groups. However, it remains to be seen how much Mowlaverdi can really achieve in the face of the relentless attacks on every progressive and egalitarian project she has tried to pursue so far. In one of her statements, she pointed to the reality that women's status cannot change simply by a woman minister who is being blocked from doing anything effective and is actually “being crucified”.<sup>28</sup>

## 4 • Conclusion

Going through a tumultuous trajectory, the women's movement in Iran is gradually growing into a seasoned and inspiring feminist model for those aspiring for equal rights and gender justice under repressive and authoritarian Islamist regimes. Iranian women's experiences; their resilience and courage; and their creative, flexible, and pragmatic strategies have significant practical and theoretical implications for local and global feminisms. Despite intense repression at the state and societal levels, personality frictions, ideological divergence, and differences in strategy and tactics, Iranian gender activists have often converged in practice to collaborate over their common goals. While the patriarchal system has tried to keep Iran internationally insulated, women are becoming increasingly more informed of the current trends within global feminisms and more transnationally engaged, especially with regard to the mechanisms, tools, and machineries created through the U.N. gender projects and conventions such as CEDAW.<sup>29</sup> Although due to the vetting power of the conservative Guardian Council, the attempts made by the reformist deputies in the sixth Majlis to ratify CEDAW did not succeed, most women activists, including some Islamic as well as secular ones, have been framing their demands within the CEDAW framework.

Nevertheless, due to increased repression and lack of access to the mainstream media in the country, the strong potential of the impact of the women's movement has not been actualised. Like most typical feminist women's movements, it is predominantly made up of the urban middle class in major cities. The movement has a long way to go to reach various classes and ethnic or religious minorities among the wider populace in small towns, provinces, and rural areas. Systemic political and structural barriers too, have blocked the effectiveness of the otherwise hard and courageous struggles of women for equality and gender justice.<sup>30</sup>

In today's increasingly globalised world system, feminists and women activists in many countries have been using at least three groups of strategies to empower women and bring about egalitarian changes: women's policy machinery within state institutions, building an issue advocacy network outside of formal institutions, and developing grassroots women's movement practices that are aimed at cultural production, consciousness raising, and knowledge creation.<sup>31</sup> The repressive, patriarchal, and authoritarian state in Iran has made it very difficult for Iranian feminists to utilise all these strategies effectively. Yet whenever such spaces become available due to changes and contradictions within the political system, women activists can and have utilised such small structural opportunities.

Islamism, as a totalitarian state ideology, has resulted in a prevalent aversion toward any ideological absolutism among intellectuals, feminists included. A pragmatic, social democratic or liberal democratic human rights framework has become the common denomination for collaboration and coalition building. Aside from some who still fight for an abstract utopian society based on certain ideologies, many tend to work for concrete changes toward improvement of the rights and living conditions of all citizens regardless of their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ideological stand.

Most women activists have adopted non-confrontational, non-ideological, non-sectarian, and reform-oriented strategies. Deploying the “power of presence”, they have entered into a strategic engagement not only with the civil society at large, but also with some members of the ruling elite. They engage the political reformers inside and outside the government, the intelligentsia, the media, the law and lawmakers in the parliament, the clerics, various social institutions, and ordinary people. This engagement takes various forms and tactics, constructive criticisms within as well as outside of the framework of the existing laws and Islamic sharia toward revision, reinterpretation, and reform as well as deconstruction and subversion. Their desire to stay away from both elitism and populism and also keep moving ahead pragmatically in the face of continuous repression by the hard-liners has proved a most challenging task. Nevertheless, the Iranian women’s rights movement has remained potentially vigorous and actually defiant. It has maintained its homegrown roots and independence both despite and because of all the national and international pulls and pushes.

Many have hoped that with the latest successful nuclear deal between Iran and five plus one world powers, Iran will enter into a new era of reconciliation with the West, the end of the cold war in U.S.-Iran relations, and will move toward a more rational and less repressive political system. But, it is hard to keep the hope alive given the extremist trends evident in the recent U.S. presidential election; the continuous power of hardliners in Iran; especially the rising power of religious extremists such as ISIL in the MENA region; the ongoing violent tragedy in Syria that has grown into a *loci* of a regional sectarian and hegemonic proxy wars, involving among others, Saudi Arabia, the most powerful bastion of patriarchy.

But we can be sure of one thing: without vibrant civil society organisations, especially effective grassroots women’s movements for equal rights and gender justice, Iran, or any other country in MENA, for that matter, cannot ever succeed in building a peaceful, secular and democratic political regime - a regime capable of pursuing democratic sustainable human development domestically while at the same time playing a constructive role in relation to the current sectarian proxy wars in the region.

## NOTES

1 • This article is an edited version of a chapter from the book *Women's Movements in the Global Era – The Power of Local Feminisms* (Westview Press, 2016).

2 • I am grateful to Amrita Basu and Nikki Keddie for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. Part of this work was supported by the Keddie-Balzan Fellowship at UCLA awarded to me during 2005–2006.

3 • See Farzaneh Rudy, "Youth, Women's Rights and Political Change in Iran." PRB, 2009, accessed November, 17, 2016, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2009/iranyouth.aspx>.

4 • See, for example, Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahidji, *Shenakht-e hovviyat-e zan-e irani dar gostareh-ye pish-tarikh va tarikh* (Tehran: Roshangaran, 1372/1993); Nahid Tavassoli, "Nov-garayi dini va zan" [Modernist Religiosity and Woman], in *Chera khawb-e zan chap ast?*, Nahid Tavassoli (Tehran: Nashr Qatreh, 1382/2003); and Sedigheh Vasmaghi, *Women, Jurisprudence, Islam* (Translators: Ashena and Philip G. Kreyenbroek) (Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 2014).

5 • Mehrangiz Kar, "Discrimination Against Women Under Iranian Law." Gozar (Freedom House), December 8, 2008.

6 • Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Negotiating the Politics of Gender in Iran: An Ethnography of a Documentary," in *The new Iranian cinema*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002): 167, 187.

7 • Women Living Under Muslim Laws: "IRAN: Gender Discrimination at Its Worst," 2014. For a shorter review of this blatantly sexist body of law, see Nayereh Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): Appendix 261-265; Shirin Ebadi, History

and Documentation of Human Rights in Iran, trans. Nazila Fathi (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000).

8 • Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, "Liberal Policies within Iranian Women's Movement." Feminist School, November 11, 2010/1389, accessed November 30, 2016, <https://goo.gl/QyuLPI>.

9 • Shirin Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child: A Study on Legal Aspects of Children's Rights in Iran* (Translated by M. Zaimaran) (Tehran: UNICEF, 1994); Mehrangiz Kar, *Mavane` Hoquqi Towse` siyasi dar Iran (Legal Obstacles against Political Development in Iran)* (Tehran: Qatreh Publications, 2002); Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, "Liberal Policies within Iranian Women's Movement." Feminist School, November 11, 2010/1389, accessed November 30, 2016, <https://goo.gl/AhCTGF>; Rezvan Moghadam, "An Interview with Radio Zamaneh." Radio Zamaneh, 2013, accessed November 24, 2016, <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/189490> (In Persian); Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iranian Woman Wins Rights Award for Hijab Campaign." The Guardian, February 24, 2015, accessed November 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/24/iranian-woman-wins-rights-award-hijab-campaign>; Jelveh Javaheri, "Ejازه hamsar, rouy-e digar-e sekkeh esteqlal zanan" [Husband's Permission, The Other Side of the Coin of Women's Independence]." Khoshounat Bas, Azar 1394, Tehran, Iran, 2015, accessed November 24, 2016, <https://goo.gl/yOXzvf>; and Lara Secor, "War of Words: A Woman's Battle to End Stoning and Juvenile Execution in Iran." New Yorker, January 4, 2016, accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/04/war-of-words-annals-of-activism-laura-secor>.

10 • See Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, "Liberal Policies within Iranian Women's Movement."

Feminist School, November 11, 2010, accessed November 17, 2016, <https://goo.gl/zV7Frc>.

11 • Even the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has on a few occasions warned “Muslim sisters” against the danger of feminism. See Nayereh Tohidi, “The International Connections of the Women’s Movement in Iran, 1979–2000,” in *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interaction in Culture and Cultural Politics*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Rudi Matthee (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002): 205–31.

12 • Nayereh Tohidi, “Iran’s Women’s Rights Activists are Being Smeared.” *Women’s News*, September 17, 2008, accessed November 24, 2016, <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3743>. Reprinted in <http://www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?article149>.

13 • A series of interviews with some prominent male and female scholars about the question of whether there is a women’s movement in Iran appeared in several issues of the magazine *Zanan*.

14 • See, for example, Kazem Alamdari, “Jonbesh yek-million emza, ulgouyi bara-ye jamèh madani dar Iran.” 10 Farvardin/March, 1387/2008, accessed November 24, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article210>.

15 • See Nahid Keshavarz, “Kampaign yek million emza be masabeh jonbesh-e ejte- mayi.” 15 Ordibehesht/April, 1387/2008, accessed November 24, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article550>; and Mehrdad Mashayekhi, “Iranian Women Placing the Social Movement in its Proper Place.” 17 Esfand/Feb. 1387/2009, accessed November 24, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article2235>.

16 • Asef Bayat, *February. Street Politics: Poor People’s Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 162.

17 • Such “dailyness” or “ordinariness” of women’s activism is not unique to Iran. A prominent American feminist has discussed the significance of the dailyness of women’s activism and feminist practice in the American context. See Bettina

Aptheker, *Tapestries of life: Women’s work, women’s consciousness, and the meaning of daily life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989).

18 • See Luther Gerlach, “The Structure of Social Movements: Environmental Activism and its Opponents,” in *Waves of Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*, ed. Jo Freeman and Victoria Johnson (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

19 • This chronological division is somewhat similar to the one presented by Parvin Paidar in her seminal book *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (1995).

20 • Since Reza Shah’s forced unveiling policy, the veil became a politicized issue. His son (Mohammad Reza Shah), stopped enforcing mandatory unveiling, but that did not prevent the backlash of forced veiling under Khomeini and the Islamist state since 1979. Had Reza Shah respected women’s freedom of choice and used authority and the police to protect both the unveiled and veiled women from harassment and attacks instead of ordering his police to take off women’s head-covers by force, the issue of veil would have probably taken a different trajectory in Iran.

21 • Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, “The Crisis of Agency in the Iranian Women’s Movement: A critique from inside.” 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Iranian Women’s Studies Foundation, Paris, July, 2010, accessed November 17, 2016, <http://shabakeh.de/opinion/347/>; Nayereh Tohidi, “A Critical Assessment of Iranian Women’s Movement in the Context of the Green Movement for Democracy.” 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Iranian Women’s Studies Foundation, Paris, July 2010, accessed November 17, 2016, [https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=10150315806087356](https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=10150315806087356).

22 • See a report, video, and pictures of the participants at: The Feminist School, accessed November 17, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article7316>.

23 • Ibid. Ahmadi Khorasani, Noushin. 2012/1391. *Bahar-e Jonbesh-e Zanan* [The Spring of Iranian Women's Movement]: [www.noushinahmadi.wordpress.com](http://www.noushinahmadi.wordpress.com).

24 • See: The Feminist School, November 17, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article7316>; Minoo Mortazi-Langaroudi, cited in a report by Feminist School, 22 Khordad 1392, 2013, accessed November 24, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article7316>.

25 • See: The Feminist School, November 17, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article7343>.

26 • See: "Narges Mohammadi Should Be Released Immediately and Given Medical Treatment," International Campaign for Human Rights, October 19, 2015, accessed November 17, 2016, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/10/narges-mohammadi-8/>.

27 • See: "UN Rapporteurs Urge Iran to Stop Executions," International Campaign for Human Rights, January 22, 2014, accessed November 17, 2016, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/01/un-executions/>.

28 • See: "Iran's Women's Affairs Chief Feels Powerless To Act," Women Living Under Muslim Laws, January 5, 2015, accessed November 17, 2016, <http://www.wluml.org/news/irans-womens-affairs-chief-feels-powerless-act>.

29 • Nayereh Tohidi, "Ta'amol mahali-jahani feminism dar jonbesh-e zanan-e Iran" [The Local-global Intersection of Feminism in the Women's Movement in Iran], The Feminist School, 2008, accessed November 24, 2016, <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article1660>.

30 • For a discussion on the debate over CEDAW in the sixth Majlis, see Nayereh Tohidi, "Islamic Feminism: Perils and Promises," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003): 134-146, accessed November 17, 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/359702/\\_ISLAMIC\\_FEMINISM\\_PERILS\\_AND\\_PROMISES](https://www.academia.edu/359702/_ISLAMIC_FEMINISM_PERILS_AND_PROMISES).

31 • See Myra Max Ferree, "Globalization and Feminism: Opportunities and Obstacles for Activism in the Global Arena," in *Global Feminism*, ed. Myra Max Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

**NAYEREH TOHIDI** - *Iran*

Nayereh Tohidi is professor and former chair of the Gender & Women Studies Department and currently, the founding director of the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at California State University, Northridge. A native of Iran, Tohidi earned her BSc from the University of Tehran in Psychology and Sociology and her MA and PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her teaching and research expertise include gender and development, women's movements, feminism and Islam, and gender and ethnic issues in the Middle East and North Africa, with a focus on Iran and the Azerbaijan Republic.

email: [nayereh.tohidi@csun.edu](mailto:nayereh.tohidi@csun.edu)

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