

Women's Human Rights: From Global Declarations to Local Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the effect of international conferences, laws, resolutions, and consequent documents on rights on the struggle for women's human rights at regional, national, and local levels has been a matter of debate and controversy. In my view, they have been and continue to be indispensable to promoting women's human rights, but to be made practicable they must have popular support; that is, the ways and means of using them must be based on the exigencies of the social and cultural contexts in which they are to be applied.

In this article, I recount the story of our work for women's rights in Iran in the 1970s, partly as an historical reflection—because I believe we cannot go forward without understanding the past—but also as a case study of the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) and its role before, during, and after the First UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975. I describe how the WOI developed and mobilized itself to dialogue with national policy makers in Iran and with the international community, how this grassroots to national to international-level decision-making effort had a major impact on the 1975 World Conference on Women, and, in turn, how that impact filtered back to the national and grassroots levels in Iran.

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The history of the Iranian women's movement has been distorted by post-1979 revolutionary propaganda and sometimes left invisible because of the proximity between the major events in which the WOI played a decisive role and the upheaval that resulted in the Iranian Revolution. However, it is important to recall that history, because, despite the political upheaval that followed, the WOI's struggle for women's rights in Iran remains a powerful and potentially replicable example of how local concepts and norms move up, and how international agreements based on local ideas can move back down to act as a powerful tool to help raise community ownership and become more easily implemented at the local levels.

THE WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION OF IRAN

In 1967, after living and studying in the United States for twelve years, I returned to Iran to teach English literature at the National University of Iran. There I found that my female students were energized by stories describing the liberties and rights that Western women enjoyed. However, I also found that my students didn't want to *replicate* those rights exactly. They wanted to find a way to define and position these rights within their own culture. Our discussions and the challenge of negotiating our demands for independence, autonomy, and agency within a male-dominated structure, culture, and religion led to the founding of the Association of University Women, which focused on probing the contradictions, and finding solutions to, the discrepancies between the impulse toward modernity and freedom and the exigencies of culture, religion, and tradition.

The Association's success and growth led to my being drafted as Secretary General of

the WOI in 1971.² As Secretary General, I traveled throughout Iran to hear what women from all types of backgrounds wanted and worked with them to help them discover and articulate their needs and priorities, to arrive with them at a shared vision of rights, and to map out an efficient strategy to gain these rights.

The WOI had been founded in 1966 by a 5,000-member assembly of Iranian women from diverse backgrounds and regions, gathered through consultation, brainstorming, and negotiation, and was initiated by a fifty-member advisory group tasked by the High Council of Iranian Women's Associations and its president, Princess Ashraf Pahlavi. Its mission was "to raise the cultural, social and economic knowledge of the women of Iran and to make them aware of their family, social and economic rights, duties, and responsibilities." Initially, much of the WOI's rhetoric stressed women's responsibilities as good mothers, good wives, and pleasant companions for their mates. However, rapid changes in the circumstances of women, especially the increasing number of trained and educated professional women entering into the work force, made it apparent that carrying the double burden of home and profession without changes in men's behavior or in society's structures and attitudes would be almost impossible for most women. The ideological turning point came at the WOI's 1973 General Assembly, which led to amending the WOI Constitution.

At the General Assembly's opening session, some activists spoke about the beneficial effects of women's education and employment for the family and women's proven ability to perform simultaneously as traditional wives and mothers and as modern professionals. One

² Much of the information presented here about the WOI comes from my article, "An Introduction to the Women's Organization of Iran," Foundation for Iranian Studies, <http://www.fis-iran.org/en/women/organization/introduction>, and from my article, "The Women's Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (eds.), University of Illinois Press, 2002.

WOI Central Council member argued that the role of woman is complementary to that of man, using the image of an apple—the woman being the half that completes the whole. I walked to the podium after my colleague, looked at the gathering, wondered whether I had sensed their feelings correctly from conversations in preparation for the Assembly, and said, “Sisters, it is time to name our problem and its solution. We know that we are not all superwomen. It is unfair to expect us to be superwomen. No one can function in so many different and demanding roles. We ought not to be asked to accept total responsibility for the home while holding a full-time job outside the home. Women should not be asked either to do both jobs or to give up life outside the home. We are each a whole human being, complete in ourselves. We are half of nothing and no one.”

There were a few seconds of silence, then applause and shouts and loud ululation³ from our colleagues from the southern part of the country. We had reached a point where we were able and willing to express our thoughts freely and to insist that our condition, roles, and needs had changed. We no longer begged for a chance to do everything, under rules that were not of our making. We demanded that the structure of society as well as the relations among members of the family change, so that an equitable distribution of rights and responsibilities would occur. We were challenging the political structure of the family unit, as well as the social hierarchy of which it was the nucleus.⁴ The WOI’s Constitution was then amended to include the goal of “defending the individual, family and social rights of women to ensure their complete equality in society and before the law.”

³ Ululation is a long, wavering, high-pitched trilling of the tongue, used by Middle East women to express approval or celebration.

⁴ “An Introduction to the Women’s Organization of Iran,” Mahnaz Afkhami, Foundation for Iranian Studies, <http://www.fis-iran.org/en/women/organization/introduction>.

The WOI grew in size, membership, and function during a period of rapid economic and social development in Iran and, during its twelve-year existence, became one of the most vibrant and effective agents of change in the status of women in the Global South.⁵

In our approach to the unequal status of women in Iran and the ways we developed our strategies, we went from evidential experience to theory—we did not start with a theoretical assumption and try to fit reality to it. Our only presupposition was that the status of women in our country was unequal and that the condition of women, especially poor women, was brutal. We sat with groups of women around Iran, listened to their stories, and asked them about their hopes for their daughters, about what frustrated and saddened them, and what would change their lives for the better. Overwhelmingly, women told us that economic self-sufficiency was their highest priority. For example, one woman said, “What good is equal right to divorce to me, if all it means is that I go from my husband’s house back to my father’s house?” Local women helped decide what services would be offered at WOI centers,⁶ which typically focused on education, whether literacy skills or vocational training. Trial and error showed that the most effective centers were those that were small, centrally-located, unassuming, and an integral part of the community. Our programs grew from the ground up and were adapted and altered depending on the neighborhood, the city, and the focus of the particular activists in a given locality. Our programs all had one thing in common—encouraging and enabling women to develop their capabilities and their self-reliance.

My work at the WOI had convinced me that it would be helpful to become familiar with

⁵ See Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*. New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁶ We created these centers to increase grassroots women’s ability to achieve financial independence, without which all rights and legal protections were irrelevant. The centers grew to include other crucial services, such as childcare, job counseling, family planning, and consciousness-raising gatherings.

other ways of seeing the world and the place of women in it, so in the early 1970s my colleagues at the WOI and I planned a series of travels and dialogues to learn about women in other parts of the world and about their challenges and strategies. Each of these trips brought us lessons of what would or would not work for us. We developed a reading list for our WOI board and other colleagues and discussed the contents in diverse settings. In the process we learned that the language and concepts that some Western feminists such as Kate Millet used in books such as *Sexual Politics* were less appealing to women in our region—perhaps even counterproductive. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, on the other hand, seemed more familiar, not so much in its particulars, but in the way she looked at a situation, saw it within its own context, and tried to understand the problem. Betty had an important message based on the reality of middle-class women in suburban America that reflected the problems of patriarchy. She did not focus on the individual as the center of the family, community, nation, or universe, or on sexuality as the focal point in studying the challenges women face. In this sense she was closer to feminists from the rest of the world than feminists from the West.

I thought it would be good for Iranian women to hear these Western feminists’ experiences and opinions first-hand, just as we had already heard from women elsewhere on our travels. Although none of these experiences presented models that would work for us, talking to women in these countries—textile workers, teachers, political leaders—had taught us that the underlying structures that affected the status of women were essentially the same across the world. The universality of women’s condition around the world suggested that we need to look at the roots of the problem of inequality across diverse circumstances, build solidarity around that understanding, nurture the capability to understand and respect the

other, and base our solidarity on our shared experience and respect for the ability of each of us to find our own solutions. It also taught us that although women's aspirations were very similar, the priorities and the strategies to reach these aspirations had to fit the specific circumstances on the ground. We had to find our own way in the world, based on our own cultural roots and our own way of life.

WESTERN FEMINISTS VISIT IRAN

In 1973 I talked with my WOI colleagues about inviting a few Western feminists to Iran to give lectures, visit our centers, and give us feedback on our work. Some of my colleagues loved the idea and thought it would be useful to have this dialogue. Some were worried that the publicity around the visit might further typecast us as "Westoxicated," a nebulous concept in vogue among Iranian intellectuals at the time. Others were concerned about what the speakers would say and the ramifications of their opinions for us. In the end, we decided to move ahead. I suggested we invite Betty Friedan as the founder of the National Organization for Women, Kate Millet as one of the main theoreticians of radical feminism, and Helvi Sipilä as the UN's first female Assistant Secretary General, the highest ranking woman at the UN. Kate could not come,⁷ so I invited Germaine Greer as a representative of the more radical wing of the feminist movement.

Our visitors demonstrated varying levels of understanding of the complexities of our situation, the cultural context, and the limitations it placed on our work. For example, on a visit

⁷ In 1979, soon after the Shah's departure, Kate did travel to Iran under the auspices of the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom to participate in demonstrations for Iranian women's rights, a trip that ended disastrously (as she describes in her book *Going to Iran*).

to a WOI center in south Tehran's slum area, Betty Friedan asked one woman, "Why are you studying hairdressing? That's such a traditionally female skill." We couldn't expect her to understand the immense effort it took for a semi-literate, poor woman from the slums to gain the self-awareness just to want to leave her house and come to a class, nor could she realize what such a woman must do to gain agreement from the menfolk in her household to do so.

Germaine was brilliant but emotionally volatile. She was younger, with much less exposure to any but the Western liberal-left academic milieu. When we were in Shiraz, we organized a meeting at her request with women students at Pahlavi University. She began in a relaxed tone, talking about women's problems and needs, as though these young women were very much like those in her own classrooms. But what had worked at home did not work here. The young women began whispering to each other. It was unusual for the students to challenge a speaker, especially a guest from far away, but one said, "How can you presuppose what we want or need? Why are you preaching to us about our life choices?" Germaine was taken aback. It wasn't that she was saying something terribly radical. It was the impression she gave that they were somehow in need of Western direction and guidance. To her credit, Germaine explained that she had no such intention, and the young women relaxed and the conversation resumed.

Helvi, on the other hand, was an experienced diplomat and had been a leader in several women's organizations in Finland. Her work at the UN had brought her into contact with a wide variety of cultures and life experiences. She had been exposed to many approaches to women's issues across the globe and had a good experiential basis for comparison.

At this time (1974), we had eighty women's centers around the country. We secured a

grant from the Iranian government to build new centers, provided that the local community paid half of the cost. Our provincial activists were able to raise the matching funds from individuals, but more often from the local governments. In those years there was no tradition of grants from international organizations, as there is today. Local philanthropy in Iran, then as in most cases even today, was limited to religious endowments or charities catering to the needs of the poor. It was through the UN conferences of the 1970s and 1980s that NGOs began to flourish in the developing as well as the developed worlds and women from across the globe came into contact with and began to learn from one another. Thus at that time, other than Helvi Sipilä, our foreign visitors, coming from elite backgrounds in highly advanced countries, had little contact or information available to them about our world, just as most of our population knew little about theirs. Nonetheless, their response to the centers was very positive.

Helvi, especially, was impressed with the potential of the work and the possibility of using it as a model elsewhere. During the visit she and I discussed possibilities for the upcoming UN World Conference on Women scheduled for June 1975 in Mexico City, for which Helvi had been appointed Secretary General. I inquired about the possibility of a regional research and training center on women in Tehran for the ESCAP⁸ region, similar to those already launched in Latin America and Africa. We also discussed the outlines of a proposal to create a UN institute located in Tehran that could serve as a clearinghouse and research and documentation center

⁸ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

for the global women's movements (this later became INSTRAW).⁹ I thought I might be able to find ways to interest the Iranian government in supporting these initiatives. We realized that the Iranian government, sensitive as it was to international public opinion, would be responsive to UN resolutions, declarations, and documents and that we could use international pressure to support our national goals and plans. At the same time, Iran's position as a nation rich in human and natural resources, with a government committed to modernization, and with ties to East and West as well as to the developing world, might help us push some of our ideas and projects through the UN General Assembly.

In the end, the Western feminists' visit was very helpful for us at the WOI. We translated their presentations into Persian and published a booklet that reached all our WOI members and many others across Iran. It also resulted in our becoming important players in the planning for the UN's Mexico City conference.

THE UN WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN 1975 IN MEXICO CITY

While the WOI created new local centers throughout Iran, the WOI Center for Research on Women conducted studies¹⁰ on women in various socio-economic and geographic sectors in Iran and sought to identify solutions to their problems. Throughout 1975, the International Women's Year, the WOI held a series of seminars around Iran on such key issues as the status of women in decision making, law, economic and political participation, education,

⁹ INSTRAW (International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women) is today the leading UN institute devoted to research, training, and knowledge management to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Cyrus Elahi, *A Comparative Study of the Socioeconomic Situation of Working Women in Tehran, Qazwin, and Kashan* (Tehran: WOI, 1977); Sekandar Amanalahi, *Status of Women in Tribal Society* (Tehran: WOI, 1977); and Nikchehreh Mohseni, *Images of Women in Elementary School Textbooks* (Tehran: WOI, 1976).

employment, and health, among others. We compiled statistics, commissioned research from various universities, and used it to prepare what we considered an accurate account of the situation of women in Iran.

In modernizing patriarchal societies, international connections and support are particularly important for promoting women's human rights, and in the WOI's case they proved critical. In March 1975 we presented a working paper¹¹ to the UN Consultative Committee in New York, which was the starting point for preparing the World Plan of Action (WPA) for the improvement of the status of women. The Consultative Committee, with representatives from twenty-three nations, was chaired by Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, a career diplomat and the head of Iran's delegation to the General Assembly for the past decade and of the delegation to Mexico City conference later that year. The Committee used our working paper in formulating the key concepts and policies and preparing the draft WPA for the Mexico City conference. The WPA final draft adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1975 reflected many of the ideas we had researched and tested in Iran and was based essentially on the following concepts:

- Regardless of the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic differences among nations, there are similarities in the situation of women throughout the world,
- Problems of development cannot be solved efficiently and in any real sense without a thorough change in the status of women in the developing world, and
- The involvement and total commitment of governments to initiate, implement, and monitor change are essential in bringing about women's full participation.

¹¹ "Draft International Plan of Action, working paper submitted by Iran with a view to facilitating discussion of the Draft Plan of Action," United Nations Economic and Social Council, E/CONF.66/CC/L.1/, 75-04559, 3 March 1975, Item 3 of the provisional agenda.

At the Conference, the Iranian delegation also initiated and lobbied for the resolutions calling for the creation of the two important UN research, training, and policy organizations for women that we had conceptualized earlier with Helvi Sipilä. The first, the ESCAP Center for Women and Development, was inaugurated in Tehran in February 1977 and was headed by Elizabeth Reid.¹² Iran supported the ESCAP Center with substantial financial contribution and in-kind support for facilities, support services, and some personnel. The second, INSTRAW, could not be established in Iran because of the revolution, but it is still a vital part of the network of gender initiatives at the UN.

Subsequently, several governments used the WPA to develop their own plans of action. The WOI used the WPA to formulate and implement a National Plan of Action for Iran that called for the full interaction of women in the process of development and that allowed women to become an integral part of the political decision-making process, not only in matters traditionally considered women's issues but in all governmental decisions impacting women's lives. This was a feat that was at that time, perhaps even today, quite unmatched anywhere else in the world.

In December 1975 I was appointed as Iran's first Minister for Women's Affairs,¹³ and I presented our findings to the Iranian cabinet.¹⁴ The picture I presented to the ministers was rather dismal: "The stated position of the government of Iran is to reach equality between men and women in all areas of endeavor. The real situation of women in the country is, as you have

¹² In 1973 she had been appointed the world's first advisor on women's affairs to a head of government (Australia); after heading the ESCAP Center (1977-1979), she was later Director of the UN Development Programme Division for Women in Development (1989-1991).

¹³ After France, this office was only the second of its kind in the world.

¹⁴ As Iran's first Minister of Women's Affairs and the only woman in a cabinet of twenty men I had yet to build meaningful alliances.

seen, quite far from that goal. For centuries women have been relegated to the private sphere in this country, as in almost all others. Their subservient position has been reinforced by societal arrangements across all fields of endeavor and has been strengthened by the subtle support of literature, myth, and the arts. To change this, there needs to be a commitment to change that covers the entire range of human relationships. We need to examine all aspects of our development planning, from skills building, job distribution, family support systems, and school curricula to city planning and legislative reform. Achievement of the goal of equality takes a revolutionary stance on the part of the government.”

Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda dismissed my comments and the report, indicating that Iranian women had made significant progress and that the report gave an unrealistic picture of the status of women in the country. He was acutely aware of the influence of the traditional groups in society, and especially mindful of the power of the clergy. The clergy had fought women at every step for every reform, especially after we passed the expanded Family Protection Law in 1975, which granted women more rights in the family¹⁵ and gave Iranian women the most far-reaching rights in the MENA region, with the exception of Tunisia. The changes angered and threatened the clerics, because they lost not only on a most important ideological front but also in the area of their own power and financial gain, since matters related to family affairs, such as marriage, divorce, the custody of children, etc., were moved from the religious to the civic courts.

¹⁵ For example, prior to the law’s passage, the right of divorce had belonged solely to the husband, after passage, both men and women could ask the courts for divorce under specific circumstances; while earlier, a man could marry four wives and have many temporary marriages, after the law’s passage, a man could marry a second wife only after obtaining the express consent of his first wife and the first wife was given the right to obtain a divorce from her husband in case he took a second wife. Although the Family Protection Law was annulled in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution, it still stands out today for having been ahead of its time, particularly in a Muslim-majority country.

Hoveyda had been Prime Minister for ten years and was a knowledgeable, deeply connected, highly skilled politician. He was well aware of the backlash building against the radical changes we had initiated. He was afraid of the consequences of too much visibility and too strong a movement toward rapid change in the contested terrain where the private and public intersect and relations between family, community, and society are negotiated. This is the area where the deep-rooted beliefs of the population were skillfully manipulated by the conservative clergy.

We decided that we needed strong support from women—at the top as well as at the grassroots. The simpler task was to seek support from the Queen, who was sympathetic to our cause and had regularly supported our efforts and had often lobbied for us with the Shah and the Prime Minister. I called her office, which immediately responded with an appointment for a few days later. In the meanwhile, I called a meeting with my colleagues to discuss an action plan. We had a built-in constituency in our membership and the hundreds of thousands of women who regularly attended the WOI centers. We had focused on building the foundations and venues for advocacy, but we had not developed a clear-cut national action plan. We realized that if we found a way of involving the grassroots as well as other stakeholders in formulating a shared vision, we would have a road map that would guide us toward the future.

Our final document — the “National Plan of Action for the Improvement of Women’s Status in Iran” — included the goals of improving the status of women and involving them fully in the process of development, and also specific mechanisms for implementing and monitoring this agenda. The draft plan was discussed and debated in seven hundred gatherings of activists and policy makers throughout Iran during 1976-1977. It covered all relevant areas of

development and rights from education to employment, from culture and the media to agriculture and rural cooperatives, from health and reproductive rights to legislative reform. The implementation mechanism was a high council of twelve cabinet ministers tasked by the Prime Minister to meet annually to plan the ways and means of integrating women in all fields of development and periodically to review the progress made. In the interim, senior deputy ministers met monthly in a meeting I chaired, as Minister of Women's Affairs, to monitor and evaluate the challenges met and progress made in each ministry's domain. This structural built-in monitoring system to align the expressed goals of the women's movement and national development policy became the greatest accomplishment of the women's movement in Iran.

The Iranian cabinet approved the National Plan of Action in May 1978. The momentum we had achieved through widespread consultation and interaction among the women and between various NGO and governmental participants transformed what would have otherwise amounted to no more than a plea from a pressure group into an essential part of Iran's national agenda. As such, it became the most important accomplishment of the women's movement in Iran. If the subsequent failure of the political system in Iran had not made it irrelevant, Iran's experiment in the interaction of the women's movement and the national decision-making apparatus could well have provided a model for many developing (and perhaps other) countries.¹⁶

As the WOI became more influential and more successful in helping secure increased legal rights for women, so the opposition became stronger and more overt. Religious fundamentalists opposed the WOI because our activities conflicted with their version of Islam

¹⁶ Mahnaz Afkhami, *Iran's National Plan of Action: Ideology, Structure, Implementation*, Tehran: Manuscript prepared for publication for the Center for Research, WOI, 1978.

and because, largely due to WOI efforts, the Family Protection Law was passed and much of their power and authority was lost when a whole set of issues in family affairs was removed from clerical jurisdiction and became a matter for the civil courts to decide. To appease the fundamentalists, in August 1978 my position as Minister for Women's Affairs was eliminated. However, even though the revolution prevented implementation of the National Plan of Action, we considered our successes to that point, especially the integration of elements of women's participation into the work plan of twelve ministries of government under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister, to be a major victory.¹⁷

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

The WOI was one of the first organizations to feel the brunt of the early revolutionary rage in late 1970s Iran, becoming a focal point not only for the revolutionaries, but also for those who feared and hated the accelerating change we were helping to bring about in the status of women and their role in the family.

I had left Iran for New York in late 1978, to negotiate the final contract to establish INSTRAW. The negotiations with the UN took a few weeks longer than anticipated. By the time they concluded I was warned by my colleagues in Iran that the Islamic revolutionary movement

¹⁷ For additional reading on this, see Mahnaz Afkhami, "Introduction," in *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World (Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East)*, ed. by Mahnaz Afkhami, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995; my oral history interview at <http://fis-iran.org/en/oralhistory/Afkhami-Mahnaz>; Gholam Reza Afkhami, ed., *Women, State, and Society in Iran: 1941-1978*, Interview with Mehrangiz Dowlatshahi, the Oral History Archives of the Foundation for Iranian Studies, (Bethesda, Md., FIS, 2002), 82-88; and Mahnaz Afkhami, "Iran: A Future in the Past—The Prerevolutionary Women's Movement," in *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, Robin Morgan, ed., NY: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1984. See also Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, *Senator: Struggles of Mehrangiz Manouchehrian in the Context of Women's Activism in Iran*, Tehran: Towse'e Publications, 2003, which offers further information on the WOI and several of the topics discussed in this chapter.

was gaining momentum and as a gesture of appeasement the government was arresting some of those who were targeted by the revolutionaries—and thus it would be dangerous for me to return. My work for women had put me on the death list of the fundamentalist revolutionaries, who condemned me as “corrupt of the earth and warrior with God.” My mission took me out of the country during the worst of the revolution and thus saved my life, sparing me the fate of others. Several of those arrested, such as former Prime Minister Hoveyda, would be executed a few months later when the revolutionary government came to power. The first woman political prisoner the Iranian revolutionaries executed was Farrokhru Parsa, the first woman to hold a cabinet post in Iran.¹⁸ She was hanged in Tehran’s red-light district, alongside a woman accused of prostitution and a man accused of drug dealing. She was executed not for her political role, but because her political role, by being public and visible, was seen as the same as prostitution. To Khomeini, the very fact of a woman being in the public sphere, and unveiled, made her a criminal and a sinner.

I believe that the Iranian Revolution was a watershed moment in contemporary Middle East history in general, and for the status of women in the Middle East in particular. The Islamist movement conceptualized and organized by Khomeini and his followers had begun in 1963, when the franchise for women was announced as part of Iran’s White Revolution. This movement spread across the MENA region and changed the nature of politics, international relations, and the role of the citizen in society. The central tenet of Khomeini’s world view was his vision of human relationships rooted in the family as the foundational unit of society; at the

¹⁸ Mrs. Parsa had been a teacher and headmistress of one of the best girls’ high schools in the country. When women gained the right to vote in 1963, she was among the first group elected to serve in Iran’s parliament. Subsequently she was appointed as the first woman cabinet minister (Education) in Iran’s history.

center of this vision was the role of woman as wife, mother, and daughter—always dependent, always protected, always controlled. The status, place, and behavior of women in the “community of Muslims” were the focal point in his delineation of good and evil.

By 1975, the International Year of the Woman, the WOI had successfully established 349 branches and 120 centers, and had 55 affiliates among independent organizations. In 1977 alone, over one million women used WOI services. On the eve of the Iranian Revolution, nearly two million women in Iran were gainfully employed in public and private sectors; 187,928 women were studying in various branches of Iran’s universities; of the nearly 150,000 women government employees, 1,666 occupied managerial positions; and twenty-two Majlis deputies, two senators, one ambassador, three deputy ministers, one provincial governor, five mayors, and 333 municipal council members were women.¹⁹ Despite and because of our success, all of the WOI centers were dismantled or trashed after the revolution.

The laws we had been able to pass by 1978 had given women nearly equal rights to divorce, raised the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18, increased women’s rights in cases of child rearing and child custody, and supported women’s employment outside the home, including extended paid maternity leave, part-time work with full-time benefits for mothers, and childcare on work premises.

Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979. His first act, before there was a new constitution or government, was to annul the Family Protection Law we had worked so hard to achieve. His next command was to require the sexual apartheid in public places and veiling for women that remains the law in Iran even today. Women activists who had joined the

¹⁹ Reyhaneh Noshiravani, “Iranian Women in the Era of Modernization: A Chronology,” <http://www.fis-iran.org/en/women/milestones/pre-revolution>.

revolutionaries in the hope of expanding their rights were the first among the progressive groups to realize the anti-historical nature of the new regime, and on March 8, 1979, they were the first to demonstrate against these commands. They were met with brutal force, beaten, and imprisoned. The legal status of women regressed a century: polygamy was reinstated; the right to divorce and to custody of children became the sole prerogative of the husband; the minimum age of marriage for girls was set at nine years; gender apartheid became the rule at universities and all public spaces, and over one hundred majors were closed to women; family planning was banned and the population doubled in the following decade; female government workers were forced into early retirement; women were forbidden to serve as judges; adultery by women became punishable by stoning; and women's testimony was valued at half of a man's.

Women resisted the Islamic government at every step, and gradually their efforts met with some success. The need for their skills and talent forced the government to rehire women, and their numbers in the private sector inched back closer to what they were in pre-revolutionary times. The trend toward the increase in women at institutions of higher learning accelerated. As the government realized the negative economic impact of the population explosion, it resumed the family planning policies of the past, and population growth was reduced substantially. Unfortunately, that policy was recently reversed by the supreme leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei.

In the thirty-five years since the revolution, and despite the able and vociferous advocacy attempts of women activists, the repressive laws affecting women and the family have remained intact. Even President Mohammad Khatami, who enjoyed considerable public

support and made several attempts at introducing modest changes in the laws on the status of women, did not succeed. Increasing the minimum age of marriage from nine to thirteen was his most important achievement in this area.

Iranian women have excelled in creative endeavors where government involvement is less effective, such as in the arts and literature, and also in private business and fields where the edicts on segregation of services require women professionals to serve females. Women have been pushed back, but they have not been defeated.²⁰ They have found ways around the limitations on their rights and shown their creativity and resilience. However, the cost of the Iranian Revolution has set back their trajectory of change and growth, just as it has retarded the country's overall development considerably.²¹

What then can we take away from this case study?

First, Iranian women achieved the rights they possessed before the Iranian Revolution by their own hard work and persistent effort. It took them almost a century to move from total public invisibility to a position of visible political, social, and economic presence.

Second, once rights have been achieved, they settle in a society's collective psyche, creating a new set of historical conditions that thereafter cannot be easily dislodged. The obverse of this statement is that lasting social change involves hard infrastructural

²⁰ See, for example, Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, *Iranian Women's One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality: The Inside Story*, Women's Learning Partnership Translation Series, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010. Khorasani describes how the founders of the One Million Signatures Campaign were able to gain legions of supporters and form a nimble coalition of women's groups to successfully pursue and promote women's issues prior to Iran's disputed 2009 presidential election.

²¹ For more information about the post-revolutionary situation of women, see Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran's Islamic Revolution*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, and Haleh Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case-Study*, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

transformation resulting from persistent and diverse economic, social, and intellectual stimuli and support.

Third, securing rights depends on achieving and dispensing political power, and this requires widespread consciousness-raising based on dialogue that is focused on a variety of constituencies, from the grassroots to academia, from school curricula to the media, from community centers to governmental offices.

Fourth and finally, the will of the international community expressed in the United Nations documents that resulted from the interactions of local, national, and international private and public institutions is indispensable to improving the status of women and creating inclusive and just societies.