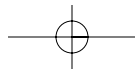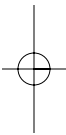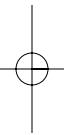Women's Rights and Democracy:
Peaceful Transformation in Iran

The Initiative for Inclusive Security Policy Commission

May 2006

THE INITIATIVE FOR INCLUSIVE SECURITY (including The Women Waging Peace Network), a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund, advocates for the full participation of all stakeholders, especially women, in peace processes.   Creating sustainable peace is achieved best by a diverse, citizen-driven approach.   Of the many sectors of society currently excluded from peace processes, none is larger—or more critical to success—than women. Since 1999, The Women Waging Peace Network has connected more than 400 experts with over 3,000 policy shapers to collaborate on fresh, workable solutions to long-standing conflicts across the globe.

THE POLICY COMMISSION is conducting a series of case studies to document women's contributions to peace processes across conflict areas worldwide.

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Wars and internal conflicts do not end simply with the signing of peace agreements. To avoid a resurgence of violence, it is necessary to develop and support measures for strengthening the governance, security, justice, and socioeconomic capacities of a state. This is a complex task in any society, but daunting in post-conflict situations. While the international community can provide assistance and valuable resources, the local population, which has no "exit strategy," has the greatest commitment to building a sustainable peace. It is therefore essential to draw on the assets, experiences, and dedication at the local level and among all sectors of society. One sector often over-looked and underestimated is women. In most post-conflict societies, women are more than 50 percent of the population and are actively engaged in peace building while addressing the basic survival needs of their families and communities. Yet they are often portrayed as passive victims, and little regard is given to their actual and potential roles in fostering security.

In October 2000, for the first time in its history, the United Nations Security Council acknowledged that women have a key role in promoting international stability by passing Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. It called on all parties to ensure women's participation in peace processes, from the prevention of conflict to negotiations and postwar reconstruction. The Initiative for Inclusive Security Policy Commission was established to examine peace processes, with a particular focus on the contributions of women. This report, "Women's Rights and Democracy: Peaceful Transformation in Iran," documents the role of women in the gradual, nonviolent societal transformation in Iran.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings

1. The struggle for women's rights is fully intertwined with the larger struggle for democracy. Women's identity has been used as a symbol by the regime since the revolution, and the expansion of women's rights in itself represents a political transformation.

2. Women are highly educated in Iran and represent over 60 percent of university entrants. This educated, female demographic is poised to influence the future political direction of the country.

3. Women are a key voter constituency, and politicians have recognized the importance of gaining their political support. In the 1997 presidential elections, President Mohammad Khatami's victory was widely attributed to support among women and youth. During the 2005 presidential campaign, the platforms of most of the candidates, regardless of political orientation, included women's issues.

4. Within Iranian society, there is a strong desire for gradual and peaceful change rather than radical and violent upheaval. Many Iranians recognize that women are a pivotal group influencing deep-rooted social change.

5. Iranian women are participating in all sectors of society and are using a variety of approaches to challenge state ideology, press for equal rights, and push the boundaries of acceptable discourse, from individual acts of resistance in their attire and makeup, to public protests and entry into journalism and scientific professions.

6. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide women with an entry point for involvement in social and political life. Demand for equal rights is on the agenda for many women's NGOs.

7. Civil society, and women's organizations and networks in particular, have used technology and the Internet as effective tools to expand freedom of expression, organize activism, and advocate for civil and political rights.

8. Women have been targets of the conservatives' backlash, but this has not stopped their efforts. Women in civil society have responded to repressive tactics by devising alternate methods to continue their activities (e.g., holding NGO meetings in their own homes after municipal support was discontinued).

Recommendations

The political situation in Iran is in flux. Since the Khatami era, much has changed in Iran. In the current environment, political activists face the risk of persecution. As a result, focusing attention on a particular social group, especially women, may jeopardize their activities.

Under these circumstances, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Recognize that women have been playing a vital role in the gradual social and political transformation of Iran.

2. Emphasize civil society/human rights issues as a priority in discussions and negotiations with the Iranian government.

3. Expand scholarships and exchange programs with Iranians in all fields, particularly for women.

4. Increase opportunities for the participation of Iranian NGO representatives in regional and international workshops and conferences.

5. Invest in more research and advocacy on the correlation between gender equality and political and economic development in Iran and neighboring countries.

6. Support more research and awareness-raising activities about moderate interpretations of Islamic laws regarding women.

7. Support the documentation and dissemination of Iranian women's achievements and challenges to other Muslim countries.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper provides a brief analysis of Iran's ongoing strug-gle for nonviolent societal transformation, with particular emphasis on the relevance of women's rights to Iran's polit-ical landscape, the role and impact of women as agents of change and nonviolent reform, and the obstacles and opportunities they continue to face.

Introduction

Women constitute the driving force behind the Iranian democratic movement. Their support for reformist candidates at every level has been a decisive factor in elections. In the presidential election of 1997, the support of women and youth ensured the victory of Mohammad Khatami. During the presidential cam-paign in 2005, women's issues were on the platforms of most candidates, regardless of political orientation.

During the Khatami presidency, Iranians who voted for the reformists, as well as some political analysts, expected the executive and legislative branches to wield enough power to implement democratic reforms. However, the appointed conservative Guardian Council and Expediency Council continued to domi-nate the parliament and executive branch. As a result, proposed bills and policies that were incompatible with conservative doctrine were overruled. After several years of political tension, especially in the wake of the February 2005 massive disqualification of the reformist parliamentary candidates, the reform movement was forced to re-examine expectations and accept that it had failed to fulfill its promises. Nonetheless, the reform movement increased the space for public dis-course and raised awareness about democracy, freedom, and civil society in Iranian society. As the Khatami era comes to an end, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promises conservative leadership, Iran's cautious path to political change remains uncertain.

Women and women's rights play a central role in the movement for change in Iran. In spite of repression and discrimination, women are laying the foundation for social transformation. Demographic changes have led to a new generation of young women with greater access to education, low fertility levels, and improved access to the job market. Women in Iran are highly educated—comprising 63 percent of university entrants—and are poised to participate extensively in the economic and political sectors. They are at the forefront of the call for democracy and human rights, and they are using nonviolent strategies to raise aware-ness and build support for equality and liberty.

At the same time, women activists are increasingly becoming targets of the conservatives' crackdown. Women journalists and activists, along with their male counterparts, run the risk of persecution for their activ-ities. Even Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has been subjected to political harassment. The regime's tactics constitute a major challenge to women's continuing efforts to promote equal rights and social transformation.

Background

The struggle for women's rights in Iran is closely interconnected with the political, religious, and social struggle to reconcile Islam, westernization, and mod-ernization in the country. In 1925, Reza Shah took control of Iran following a *coup d'etat*. Women be-came a central symbol of his efforts to modernize Iran, which included the introduction of formal edu-cation for girls and the forced abolition of the *hejab* (Islamic covering). Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah (the Shah), who ascended to the throne in 1941, continued the modernization policies of his father. In the early 1960s, a number of legislative changes were introduced, including full citizenship rights for women, women's rights to vote and run for office, and improved rights for women under family law. The religious clergy were among the strongest opponents of these policies, arguing that they were against Islamic values and a threat to the family structure.

The revolution of 1979 brought the clergy to power and established a state based on Islamic ideology. The new state promised women respect and pro-tection against Western imperialism. But women were stripped of many rights they had gained during the Shah's regime. Sharia, the body of Islamic law based on the Koran, became the basis for women's inferior legal standing in the home and in society. The regime also restricted women's employment, resulting in a dramatic decline in women in the workforce. Ironically, at the same time, the regime manipulated women's political participation in order to build legiti-macy and prove that it had widespread public support.

For example, the government encouraged women's participation in state-sponsored rallies and within the state-controlled political process.

During the Iran-Iraq war and in its aftermath, women began to speak out against legal discrimination and the lack of state support for family needs. By 1997, women clearly had become a potent political force for reform, and they played a key role in the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the presidential elections. Today, women are active in all spheres of Iranian society, expressing their views and raising their voices for democracy.

Women and Channels of Dissent

Culturally, young people in Iran are increasingly challenging the regime through their clothes, music, the arts, sports, and social interactions. Women in film are addressing once taboo topics such as adultery, domestic violence, prostitution, and oppression. Women are also rejecting discrimination in recreational activities, such as sports events. In June 2005, 26 young women defied the government's ban on women attending soccer matches by pushing past the barricades of a stadium in Tehran to enter the stands.[1] President Khatami, who was attending the game, ordered that the women be given seats.[2]

In the political arena, women inside the government are promoting women's rights. Women who occupy deputy positions in government ministries have allocated funds for women's empowerment and have expanded cooperation with civil society groups working for women's advancement. Women in the various ministries have organized workshops and educational programs to raise awareness about women's rights. In 2005, 89 women registered to run in the presidential elections out of a record number of 1,010 registrants.[3] However, the Guardian Council subsequently barred the women candidates (as it had in the past), along with the majority of other candidates.[4] The Guardian Council applies a strict interpretation to the constitution to bar women from becoming presidential candidates.[5] Women activists are pressing for a constitutional amendment to allow them to run for office in future presidential elections.

Frustrated with the lack of political space available to them, many women have shifted their focus to civil society as a mechanism to promote women's equality. Through their involvement in NGOs, women have initiated educational programs and promoted women's

rights, for example, by supporting female defendants on trial in criminal cases. Women's NGOs have organized diverse groups of women to plan public demonstrations and protests, and have responded to government restrictions on NGO activities with creative solutions. When conservatives prevented NGOs from using public facilities, women began holding meetings in their homes.

The media has also become a vehicle for women to highlight women's rights issues. Various newspapers and magazines have been established by and for women. These media resources have addressed such issues as human trafficking and legal discrimination against women.[6] Beginning in 2000, conservatives forced many of the reformist newspapers and magazines, including women's publications, to shut down. The Internet has become an alternative means of communication for the opposition movement. The government has responded by blocking Web sites and targeting those who log onto opposition Web sites. Despite government attempts to curb the activities, Web sites and bloggers continue to express dissent, and many of the most vocal are women.

Conclusion

Women in Iran are at the forefront of social currents that are moving the country in the direction of reform. Women personify social transformation in Iran. As wives, daughters, and sisters, women are bringing the issues of equality and freedom into the private sphere. Women of all economic classes, including the lower middle-class, where support for conservative and traditional values has been strongest, are among university students and workers in the formal sector. Women have the capacity to play a key role in building a broad, nonviolent social movement to change the political system.

Although the struggle for women's rights in Iran has been framed narrowly as a human rights issue, it has broader implications for the future of freedom and democracy in the country. The advancement of women's rights in Iran is closely intertwined with the larger struggle for democratic reform. Moving the country from theocracy to democracy will not be possible without women's full participation. As the international community struggles to devise strategies to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, win the war against global terrorism, and build democracy throughout the Middle East region, it will be vital for policymakers to

offer continuing encouragement, support, and protec-
tion to women who are working inside Iran to press for
lasting change.

Endnotes

[1]In April 2006, President Ahmadinejad decreed that women would
be permitted regularly to attend soccer matches for the first time
since 1979. "Iran to let women go to soccer games."
USAToday.com. 24 April 2006. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/
world/2006-04-24-iran-soccer_x.htm>

[2]Karl Vick, "At a Soccer Match, Women Kick Iran's Ban to the
Curb." *The Washington Post*, 9 June 2005, A12.

[3]Modher Amin, "Analysis: Presidential Candidacy in Iran," *United
Press International*, 17 May 2005.

[4]*Associated Press*, "Iranian Women Demand Right to Run," 13 June
2005.

[5]"Iranian Women Demand Right to Run," supra.

[6]Nazila Fathi, "Iranian Women Defy Authority to Protest Sex
Discrimination," *The New York Times*, 13 June 2005.

INTRODUCTION

Recent events have placed Iran in the international spotlight. International attention has focused on Iran's sponsorship of terrorism and the security risks it poses with its nuclear ambitions. In June 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president, prompting fears of increasing tensions with the West and rising repression by conservatives inside the country. Ahmadinejad's conservative and anti-Western position has radicalized domestic and foreign policy. In the wake of the government's increasing use of violence and repression, Iran's future of reform and the country's regional and international standing are uncertain.

The 2005 presidential elections signaled the end of the Khatami era and highlighted the weaknesses of the reform movement in Iran. When Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997, reformists hoped that it would lead to democratic change. But the efforts of the reformists were repeatedly obstructed in the years that followed. The Guardian Council, composed of Islamic clerics and lawyers, interprets the constitution and vetoes laws passed by the parliament that it deems unconstitutional. The Guardian Council and the higher Expediency Council continued to dominate the government and ensured that policies viewed as incompatible with conservative doctrine were blocked. The conservatives demonstrated their power in February 2005 and disqualified hundreds of reformist parliamentary candidates, shut down newspapers, and arrested journalists. In May 2005, the Guardian Council disqualified more than 1,000 presidential candidates, allowing only 6 candidates to run in the election.[1]

In recent years, the state has used more repressive tactics against dissidents, systematically threatening and detaining journalists, non-governmental activists, and politicians. Issues such as women's rights are a source of immense sensitivity, and the conservatives have increasingly targeted women. Those voicing any opposition to hardliners have been accused of blasphemy, threatening national security, and inciting public unrest. The clampdown on independent media that began in 2000 with the closure of newspapers reached the Internet and NGOs in 2004. The regime has targeted Web sites and arrested, charged, kept in solitary confinement, and in some cases, tortured and forced to "confess" individual Web bloggers and civil society activists.[2] Women are as vulnerable as men to

the regime's repression. Even Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has experienced government harassment.[3]

At the social and cultural levels, the rumblings of dissent have increased. Young people in Iran are increasingly intolerant and unafraid of the repressive state policies that limit their ability to express themselves through clothing, music, the arts, sports, and social interactions. They are questioning the role of Islam in Iranian society.[4] In major urban centers, particularly Tehran, there is growing skepticism and even rejection of religion as espoused by the state. Women are playing a central role in challenging state ideology and policies. This was demonstrated visibly in June 2005, when 26 young women defied the government ban on women attending soccer matches, pushing past the barricades of a stadium in Tehran to enter the stands. The women were successful; President Khatami, who was attending the game, ordered that they be given seats.[5] In April 2006, President Ahmadinejad decreed that women could regularly attend soccer matches.[6]

The country is facing significant economic and social challenges. Despite the rise in oil revenue, inflation is rampant, unemployment is high (particularly among the majority youth population), poverty is increasing rapidly, and crime rates have soared in major cities. There is a growing gap between the rich and poor due to economic corruption. The wealth of a small, elite segment of the population is growing, while the middle class is disappearing and public services are declining.[7] Prostitution, trafficking of Iranian girls and women, and drug abuse have increased exponentially in recent years. Although there is little understanding of the potential consequences of these trends, there is concern among some civil society activists and even government officials that social and economic pressures, coupled with increased political oppression, could lead to unrest. Finally, instability in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the presence of American forces in both countries, has led to growing concern among many Iranians of the impact regional instability could have on Iran domestically.

In spite of these challenges, positive developments in the social and cultural spheres are fundamentally changing the face of Iranian society. Women are at the forefront of much of this change. Fertility rates in the

country have continued to decline.[8] Illiteracy rates have also dropped steadily for men and women.[9] Education levels are at an all-time high. An estimated 65–70 percent of university students in Iran are female.[10] In contrast to the early years after the revolution, when women were barred from the sciences and many other fields, today they have access to all subject areas. The cultural life of the country has been invigorated. Iranian cinema is world famous, as are its many directors, male and female. Public opportunities for individual expression have grown in the film and publishing industries, the Internet, sports, and on the streets of Iranian cities. Young men and women have greater freedom for social interaction and to dress as they wish without constant fear of reprisal. Civil society has also expanded and grown stronger. The number of NGOs, community centers, and other public forums for expression and participation have increased dramatically. There has been a significant drive toward popular participation in politics as well; the local council elections of 2000 involved 100,000 candidates, including women, from across the country.[11] Political figures have recognized the widespread desire for change. In the 2005 presidential elections, most of the candidates recognized the need for reform.

Although the Khatami presidency failed to achieve its promise of reform, it did expand the space for public discourse and raise awareness of democracy, freedom, and civil society. According to a June 2005 survey, the majority of Iranians (65 percent) continue to believe that fundamental change in the government is needed to bring increased freedom and opportunity.[12] There is support for political change, but no clear strategy for achieving it.

The 2005 election results reflected Iranians' widespread frustration with the mismanagement and corruption of the regime and their sense of disengagement and alienation. There is a strong desire for social and economic justice in reaction to the widespread corruption among the ruling and religious elite. During the 2005 presidential elections, there was general dissatisfaction with all of the candidates. Ahmadinejad clearly indicated during his candidacy that he would not tolerate corruption. He had demonstrated an unwillingness to accept the trappings of wealth and power during his tenure as mayor, and reflected this in his simple lifestyle. The image resonated with the average Iranian voter. It was clear that even though the

Guardian Council controlled the selection of candidates, the voters expressed their desire for a change in the political leadership by electing Ahmadinejad.[13]

Women activists and professionals in Iran have expressed concern that Ahmadinejad's policies will negatively affect women's empowerment and participation in the country, and that he is attempting to curb the progress made under the previous administration. As an example, they point to a directive issued by the Ministry of Culture in October 2005 that bans female civil servants in the Ministry and journalists working for the state media from staying in the office after 6:00 PM. The directive cites women's role in the family and in raising children as justification for the restriction.[14] More recently, in March 2006, police attacked and beat hundreds of women, and reportedly arrested dozens more, for holding a peaceful assembly in honor of International Women's Day. An increase in incidents of violence against women throughout Iran, and stronger gender apartheid policies by the new government, confirm fears that Ahmadinejad's policies signal a serious set back for the women's rights movement and civil liberties in general.[15]

Although the return of the conservatives to power is a clear threat, and the oppressive and violent tactics already in use are ominous, few observers inside Iran believe that the state can reverse all of the societal changes already in motion. In effect, the initiatives for change that women continue to spearhead are indicative of a slow but deep transformation of Iranian society in an explicitly nonviolent manner.

Rationale: Why Focus on Women?

Women are playing an important catalytic role in this transformation process. Since the 1979 revolution, women in Iran have been bulwarks against extremist forces. In Iran, as in many other countries struggling for change, the fight for women's rights is fully intertwined with the struggle for democracy. However, unlike other places, it is also a highly sensitive political issue, as existing gender policies are a defining feature of the Islamic republic. Any challenge or shift away from the repressive measures imposed on women by the regime is also seen as a threat to the very nature of the republic. In other words, if women were to gain equal rights under the law, it would symbolize significant political transformation and loss of power by conservative forces in the country.

As one NGO activist stated in 2004:

> . . . owing to the intermingling of the politiciza-
> tion of Islam with women's issues . . . women's
> issues have become one of the major indicators of
> evaluating modern and fundamentalist Islamic
> functions.[16]

Research Methodology

This study is the result of an extensive literature survey on issues of conflict prevention and nonviolent transformation in Iranian contemporary history, and more particularly the role of women and gender issues in Iran. It includes an analysis of relevant academic literature, reports, press, and government publications. Primary research was conducted during a field trip to the country in 2004. Twenty-five in-depth interviews were also conducted with international scholars, national-level government officials, representatives of Iranian civil society, academia, and local women leaders. The interviewees were among the reformists who support the democratic movement. The conservatives were not included among the interviewees. This report is a preliminary exploration of the nexus between gender, the role of women, and the political conflict in Iran. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the discussions, interviewees are not identified by name in this study.

Definitions

Hejab: an Arabic word used in the Islamic context. It is based on an Islamic instruction for Muslim women to dress modestly. Today, the word "*hejab*" is frequently used to mean a headscarf worn by Muslim women upon reaching the early teenage years.

Sharia: the body of Islamic law based on the Koran.

Figh: Islamic jurisprudence. Literally, it means the understanding and acquisition of knowledge.

Velayat Faghih: Shiites are a minority among Muslims who believe the leadership (Velayat) of a Muslim society (Ummah) was left to Ali, a relative of Mohammad, the prophet of Islam, and his 11 descendents until the fourth century. After this time, the Shiites believe that the leadership of Muslim society passed to a pious chosen leader, approved by all pious Muslims, as an example for followers. Ayatollah Khomeini, an Iranian Shiite leader, used this belief as a basis for developing a theory of government. According to this theory, a government should be based on religious legislation under the leadership of Figh, the knowledgeable clergies. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, a religious regime was established in Iran that was based predominantly on this theory.

Vali-e-Faghih: the Supreme Leader in the political structure established by Khomeini in 1979.

WOMEN IN IRAN'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The 1979 revolution in Iran, and the subsequent formation of the Islamic Republic, catalyzed the spread of politicized Islam across the Middle East and the world. The shift away from Western images of women—unveiled, educated, and emancipated—toward veiled women was sudden and symbolic of the new movement. But in the Iranian political arena, discussions about gender and the rights of women did not begin with the revolution. In fact, the republic's compulsory veiling and legislation that limited women's rights in every sphere, were rooted in a direct backlash against the policies of the Pahlavi era, which began in 1925 following a *coup d'etat* that placed Reza Khan Pahlavi (who became known as Reza Shah)[17] on the throne.

Reza Shah was determined to mold Iranians in the image of the West. New laws were issued imposing European dress on Iranians. Women, in particular, were used as the centerpiece and symbol of this stride toward modern society. Two important policies with direct and long-lasting effects on women were introduced: education for girls and the forced removal of the *hejab* (Islamic covering).

Considerable emphasis was placed on the education of girls and the introduction of women in the workforce. As a result, formal and informal educational opportunities began to flourish. A national education system for boys and girls was developed, resulting in a sharp rise in the number of girls' schools in the country.

The forced abolition of the *hejab* in 1936 also had a deep impact on the lives of women, and as a result, Iranian society. Reza Shah and his modernist contemporaries believed that the *hejab* hampered women's participation in social life.[18] But the new legislation overlooked the traditional Islamic tenets dominating the views and attitudes of ordinary people, including many in the privileged classes. Religious groups, in particular, viewed the modernization process as a means of undermining Islamic ethical values. As they lashed out at the anti-*hejab* law, they encountered a severe crackdown from the state. Despite the mass suppression of dissent, the religious establishment remained an insistent critic of the modernization process.[19] In order to protect their honor within the community and among relatives, many families decided to oppose the new law by preventing female family members from appearing in public. As a result, the anti-*hejab* legislation forced many women from the lower and middle classes back into the domestic sphere, taking away their chances to engage in public activities.

The demise of Reza Shah and the ascendance of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (the Shah), to the throne in 1941 resulted in a continuation of the modernization effort. During the Shah's reign, a number of significant legislative changes were introduced in support of "women's emancipation." In 1962, women were granted full citizenship rights, including the right to vote and to run for election. In 1967, the Family Protection Law was passed, banning polygamy and giving women equal rights in the areas of divorce and child custody, in effect flouting traditional Sharia law.

The politically oriented clergy argued that conformation with Western social codes of behavior was tantamount to a rejection of Islamic ethical values. Women's enfranchisement and public activities were condemned as the evil instrument of "imperialist stooges" to deprave the young and debase the sacred foundation of the family.[20] They called on the Iranian people in the name of religion to resist the plans of "the despotic puppet of western imperialism."

The 1979 Revolution

The 1979 revolution, characterized by massive anti-Shah demonstrations, was a turning point in Iran's history. Politically, anti-Shah activists fell under two broad categories: the intellectuals (leftists or nationalists) opposing autocracy, and the religious, fighting against Western values. Despite conflicting goals, they united against the Shah, seeking independence, democracy, and social justice.[21] Although many middle class women did not believe in the Islamic dress code, they observed the *hejab* in political rallies as a token of solidarity against the Shah.[22]

Ironically, the same conservative religious forces that had sought to curb women's participation in public affairs actively mobilized women for anti-Shah demonstrations, promising an idealized Islamic state in which women would be respected and would no longer be threatened with Western "anti-family" values. The role of women in society was integral to this emerging religious ideology.[23] Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized this when he said, "Women can cause either advancement or degradation of the ethical values in society."[24] Thus, having been recognized as symbols of secular

modernization by the Pahlavis in the early part of the twentieth century, women at the end of the century were acknowledged as the standard-bearers of the sacred values of the Islamic state. The conspicuous presence of women in the pro-theocracy, anti-Shah rallies marked the beginning of their political visibility in Iran.

By the late 1970s, public demonstrations against the Shah were escalating, often resulting in violent confrontations between security forces and protestors. The turning point occurred on September 8, 1978, which became known as "Black Friday," when hundreds of opposition were killed after the army was sent in to disperse demonstrators and soldiers began shooting. Ayatollah Khomeini, from his exile in France, called for the Shah to leave Iran. In the face of rising instability and growing opposition to the regime, in January 1979 the Shah was forced to flee Iran. In February 1979, Khomeini returned to the country.[25]

The Islamic State: The Power Structure as a Basis for Political Conflict

The clergy, under the leadership of Khomeini, and with significant popular support, established a new state based on Islamic ideology in 1979.[26] The state was defined by a political structure deriving its legitimacy from two sources that purported to balance power: democratic institutions based on elections, and non-democratic institutions accountable to the Supreme leader (*Vali-e-Faghih*). Non-democratic institutions were intended to have a supervisory role in ensuring the implementation of Islamic law.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic recognizes the *Vali-e-Faghih* as the head of state and the commander-in-chief of armed forces, including the police. He appoints the individuals in the major oversight bodies, including the head of the judiciary, the Islamic scholars of the Council of Guardians, and all members of the Expediency Council. The Council of Guardians has two primary responsibilities: endorsing legislation and vetting candidates for elected office. In effect, the Guardian Council must approve all bills passed by the parliament to ensure that they do not contradict Sharia or the constitution. All candidates who run for office must have the written approval of the Council. The Expediency Council was originally designed to arbitrate between the government and Guardians on rejected bills. Over time, it became a policymaking body with control over government policies. There are some organizations and foundations reporting only to

the Supreme Leader, such as the Iranian Broadcasting Agency and the Mostazafan Foundation, the second largest asset holder in Iran besides the government. As a result of the imbalance in power, even those who assume elected office remain largely marginalized.

Although the structure of the political system is based on the assumption that divine and popular sources of power are balanced, veto power lies with the so-called "divine legitimacy." According to Ayatollah Khomeini:

> The monarchy government is not legitimate. A legitimate government is the one that is approved by people. A legitimate government is the one that is approved by God.

This continues to be a thorny issue, as the members of the clergy claim their legitimacy is divine, and therefore does not depend on the people's approval. They argue that popular votes count only if they are consistent with divine rule. In effect, this argument has been used as justification for consolidating the theocracy.

Due to the charismatic nature of Ayatollah Khomeini, in the first decade of the revolution, contradictions and imbalances in the structure of the system and the sources of legitimacy were not immediately apparent. Because Khomeini was the supreme religious authority, his followers in the government dismissed as heresy any notions that contradicted his policies; hence, there were no internal disagreements regarding balance of power among the branches of the government. But the politician-clergymen were well aware of the consequences of the Constitution's dualistic feature of the power structure. After Khomeini's death in 1989, amendments to the Constitution were passed that further expanded the sphere of influence of the non-electoral offices, and boosted the clergy's political power.

The Islamic Regime and Women

The revolutionaries tried to redefine women's identity using their own standards. The family as an institution was highly exalted, and women were identified as integral. In the eyes of the new regime, women were considered only mothers and wives. This attitude was reflected in the Constitution, civil law, and government policies, both implicitly and explicitly. The Constitution, drafted in 1979, states: "Since the family is the fundamental unit of Islamic society, all laws, regulations, and pertinent programs must tend to facilitate the formation of a family, and to safeguard its sanctity and the stability of family relations on the

basis of the law and the ethics of Islam."[27] New legislation and policies deprived women of many rights granted to them during the Pahlavi era. The "Family Protection Law" was overturned and Sharia reinstated as the basis of civil law. Consequently, polygamy and the marriage of adolescents, defined as age nine, became legal. With the new Islamic law in effect, in the private sphere women were once again legally under the dominance of men.

The system failed to anticipate that issues such as polygamy would not only be detrimental to women, but would also jeopardize the very family institution that ideologues sought to protect. In essence, the state viewed women as the feeble sex, physiologically and intellectually. It sought to limit women to reproductive, sexual, and domestic functions. Family planning was publicly denounced, resulting in rapid population growth.

In March 1979, the Islamic *hejab* was made compulsory for all women—regardless of their religion. The *hejab* was both a distinct symbol of the new regime's ideology and a rejection of the worldly values of the "ancient regime."[28]

The state also introduced aggressive new policies regarding women's employment. Many women were dismissed from official positions. Government agencies stopped providing day-care services for working mothers to discourage them from working full-time. Women were persuaded and sometimes forced to quit their jobs. They were denied access to certain positions, including judgeships.[29] Promotions to managerial positions became a distant dream for many professional women. The state policy led to a decline in women's employment in the first decade following the revolution. Women comprised 13.77 percent of the work force two years before the revolution and accounted for only 8.85 percent of workers by 1986.[30]

Paradoxically, in the political sphere, the state promoted women's participation. The new leaders were aware that the presence of women at political rallies was a means of demonstrating popular support for the new political system. This would not only confer greater legitimacy to the regime, both internationally and domestically, but it would also be a convincing response to internal and foreign critics who condemned the leadership's violation of women's rights. Thus, promoting women's participation in political events became a notable feature of Iranian politics.

Although there was some discussion of disenfranchising women in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, it did not come to pass. As the first Islamic state based on a Shiite perspective, the new Iranian leaders claimed that the regime was a role model for the Islamic world. They understood that the outright absence of women—half of the population—from the political process would blemish the image the regime wished to cultivate. Instead, women were encouraged to cast their votes for state-approved candidates[31] and show that they enjoyed their civil rights. In sermons, they were told that it was their divine duty to vote, participate in political rallies, and help strengthen the state. Ayatollah Khomeini spoke of women's socio-political role in 255 out of 629 public speeches.[32]

Despite the public displays, there were very few women active in formal politics. The scarcity of women in the parliament, and their complete absence from decision-making positions in government, was evidence of the leadership's disparaging attitude towards women.

Women and the Iran-Iraq War

In 1980, concerned about the rise of a Sharia Islamic regime emerging on its borders that could threaten pan-Arabism and exploit Iraq's geopolitical vulnerabilities, and believing that Iran's military was too weak to defend the nation's borders or retaliate, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran. The Iran-Iraq war ignited a bloody eight-year battle that claimed the lives of approximately one million people.

Women were intensively involved in and affected by the war. With men and boys dying, women were increasingly left to shoulder the burdens of their families and to take responsibility for the care of the young, sick, injured, and elderly. Many were emotionally and economically devastated. However, the state was strategic in providing aid and shoring up support among war-affected populations. Like their male counterparts, many women supported the war and took on critical responsibilities in mobilizing support, preparing food, and providing medical care at the frontlines and in their communities. Similar to tactics used during the revolution, the regime's rhetoric highlighted women's central role.

The women who were staunch supporters of the regime and believed the earlier rhetoric of emancipation during the establishment of an Islamic state were willing to forgo their own demands for rights in the

interest of national security. Nevertheless, as the war continued and male casualties rose, women began to voice their concerns. For example, widows who faced the loss of custody of their children in favor of their in-laws under the Sharia legal framework, spoke out against the injustice of the law. Many also protested the lack of state support for the children of "martyrs," and pressed the government to compensate families and provide assistance. In addition, the political rhetoric gave women a sense of entitlement and empowerment. Many women believed that they had a right to make these demands because the state was indebted to them for the sacrifice of losing their sons, husbands, and brothers during the war.

WOMEN BEGIN TO CLAIM THEIR SPACE AND FIND A VOICE

The end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, followed by Khomeini's death in 1989, brought the contradictory strands of the political leadership into sharp focus. On the political right, the hardliners held sway, curbing individual liberties in favor of maintaining revolutionary and religious fervor. On the left, support for core democratic principles was emerging in such areas as:

• Respect for the individual rights of every citizen and recognition of the right to self-determination in private and public life;

• Distribution and diffusion of power and effective mechanisms to ensure equal access to power for all citizens, not just the clergy; and

• Respect for and equal application of the rule of law.

Women's voices and demands for change also became more evident in two ways. First, they were key supporters of democratic principles, believing that in a democracy they would be treated more fairly. Second, many women were demanding improvement in their legal rights. Many women believed that democracy would bring greater freedom and equal economic and social opportunities.[33] They had experienced firsthand the shortcomings in the legal code with regard to women's status in society and the family, and were beginning to voice their disagreement with discriminatory state policies.

In the aftermath of the revolution, the state had not only barred women from studying certain sciences, but had established gender-segregated medical schools to limit contact between men and women. On the one hand, the establishment of all-female medical schools led to an increase in the number of women in the medical field, but at the same time, it raised awareness among women students of the discrimination they faced. This encouraged activism by female students. In March 2000, hundreds of female medical students protested in front of the Ministry of Health, claiming that they were receiving inadequate medical training as a result of segregation.[34]

The number of women working in professions—including medical, legal, business, and government positions—has risen steadily in recent years. According to United Nations Population Fund statistics, in 1976 only 13 percent of females held professional occupations in Iran. By 1991, the percentage had increased to 39.7 percent.[35] In 2000, the percentage of women as part of the total labor force was 27 percent, up from 20 percent in 1980.[36] Despite these gains, women continue to occupy few management positions. For example, in 2000 only 0.5 percent of women in the private sector held executive positions.[37]

Women's civic and political involvement has also grown. The 1997 landslide presidential victory by Khatami, the perceived political outsider, was widely attributed to the turnout and support among young people and women. In turn, his support for women was notable. In 1998, for example, in a meeting with housewives, he said:

> Women are not [the] second sex; however, historically, they have been unfairly treated by men. We should give them their rights and compensate the past for them. That is why we should open up the space for them in education and social activities.[38]

To signal support for women while avoiding a backlash from hardliners, Khatami adopted a policy of fostering women's organizations that aimed for women's empowerment, rather than providing symbolic or direct support for the women's movement. He believed that in the long-term, women's empowerment programs were a more effective mechanism for improving women's rights. This approach was reflected in Paragraphs A–E (Article 158) of the third *Five-Year Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan*, which recognized women as key contributors to the nation's development.

During the 2005 presidential elections, it was clear that women were recognized as an important constituency. Gender issues were on the platforms of most presidential candidates, regardless of political orientation. Out of a record 1,010 registrants, 89 women registered to run in the elections.[39] Subsequently, the Guardian Council not only barred the women candidates, as it had in the past, but is also barred all but six of the male candidates who registered.[40]

Although leading reformists and intellectuals have argued that the struggle for democracy should be pursued before the struggle for gender equality, Iranian women activists and feminists have rejected this notion.[41] They have maintained that it is impossible to separate women's rights from democratic freedom, as the two are inextricably linked. Therefore, throughout

The Personal Level: The Hejab

Following the 1979 revolution, when the *hejab* became compulsory, disregard for it became a symbol of opposition. "The more the state pushed the implementation of the *hejab*, the more women resisted," says one woman NGO representative. "The *hejab* became a symbol of struggle against the state policies. Today . . . everybody knows that the compulsory *hejab* will not work in Iran. It backfired and it will rebound more."[42]

Twenty-five years after the revolution, the *hejab* remains a contentious issue. On one hand, it is a symbol of the revolution, and for many women from more traditional homes, a route to wider public participation and access to the world. On the other hand, it is clearly a symbol of state oppression and a barometer of women's status. The violations are evident in city streets. Compared to the first decade of the revolution, the number of people who do not adhere to the law concerning appearance has increased markedly. Between the late 1990s and 2004, women, especially young urban women, could be seen wearing sandals without socks, revealing manicured nails and makeup, and wearing increasingly shorter and tighter trousers and *manteaus* (long coats) in a variety of colors. In a few public places in Tehran, women have been granted permission to remove their headscarves and *manteaus*.[43] Many women use their style of dress to show their opposition to the Islamic state's attitudes and policies concerning women. But since their victory in the 2004 seventh parliamentary elections, conservative forces have been reasserting strict *hejab* regulations. Women who violate the rules or wear "loose" *hejab* have once again been confronted and at times, arrested, by security forces.[44]

The campaign to enforce the *hejab* has strengthened under the presidency of Ahmadinejad. As of April 20, 2006, police in Tehran were being ordered to arrest women wearing loose-fitting headscarves, tight jackets, or trousers exposing skin.[45] In a more extreme example, in January of 2006, two female university students suffered "acid attacks" for not adhering to strict Islamic dress code. The incident was not investigated by police and perpetrators were not charged. [46] Ahmadinejad has urged Islamic vigilantes to take action to "purify the Islamic Republic from the vestiges of corrupt western culture," including actions to stop the "mal-veiling" of women and girls. The new government has also initiated a plan to "increase the *hejab* culture and female chastity," which not only enforces strict use of the *hejab*, but orders the construction of separate sidewalks for men and women in an effort to further gender-apartheid policies.[47]

the 1990s, and particularly during the Khatami years, women sought, found, and created niches and entry points in every sphere—including politics, the mass media, and civil society—through which to fight for greater freedom and equality in society.

In every sphere, women continue to express their objections to the dominant ideology, not in a violent, aggressive, or confrontational manner, but through civil disobedience and non-compliance. Most significantly, their actions highlight the stark realities of oppression in the country and have generated awareness, empathy, and support within Iranian society for significant social and political change.

The Formal Political Sphere

Like earlier generations, many post-revolution women activists have found that working with the state—directly or indirectly—is inevitable. With Khatami's rise to power, activists were hopeful that more women would be appointed to managerial positions. Although this did not happen (in 2000, only five percent of women in government occupied executive positions), women were appointed to deputy posts in key ministries.[48] In 2000, there were 105 women occupying positions as directors general or deputy directors in two thirds of the ministries in Iran.[49] Through these positions, they were able to instigate some changes in

terms of budget allocations to favor women's empow-
erment. The Khatami administration also paved the
way for greater cooperation between women working
within the state apparatus and those outside. As one
noted activist observed:

> Under Khatami, women in the state bureaucracy
> and parliament had a very friendly relationship
> with the women NGOs. They offered NGOs
> many public facilities for their meetings or pro-
> grams. NGOs were invited for advisory meet-
> ings. These relations were very positive for the
> women's cause, both for the women inside the
> state and in the civil society.[50]

In addition to addressing budgetary issues, women
inside the system at the national and municipal levels
promoted women's issues through the programs of
various line ministries. For example, the ministries of
Education, Interior, Islamic Guidance and Culture,
and Agriculture ran staff workshops that discussed
women's rights. They drew on the expertise of women's
NGOs to run their educational programs. Through
these vectors, issues of women's rights reached a
broader population, particularly in provincial and rural
areas, and among women from traditional families.
The workshops provided a venue that had never existed
before, in which ordinary women had the space and
confidence to speak about their experiences and aspira-
tions as they related to the debate on women's rights
within the framework of Islam and the state. The
outreach was beyond anything that feminists from
urban areas had ever attained before.

The Print Media

From the early 1900s, women-centered magazines and
newspapers existed in Iran.

These publications were typically non-political, fo-
cusing on culture and art. After the 1979 revolution,
however, with the absence of political organizations
or space for participation in politics, women's maga-
zines took on a political function.[51] At first, there
were a few independent women publications with
limited circulation, all approaching women's rights
through an Islamic framework, thus justifying the
values espoused by the state.[52] By the early 1990s,
journals that offered alternative perspectives were
emerging. In particular, the magazine *Zanan* (*Women*),
became a forum for women's rights and a key vehicle
for secular and religious feminists. It remains a pio-
neering venture, tackling a broad range of issues,

some of which are still taboo from the standpoint of
the state. For example, *Zanan* was the first publica-
tion to highlight the growth in human trafficking and
the plight of Iranian women trafficked to states in the
Persian Gulf region. Throughout the years, it was
also the prime reporter on the progress and challenges
facing women parliamentarians in their struggle to
gain equality.

In 1997–1998, there was a remarkable press boom in
Iran. The boom gave women the opportunity to extend
their participation in political debate. In July 1998,
Faezeh Rafsanjani, daughter of the former president
and a member of the fifth Parliament (1995–1999),
launched *Zan* (*Woman*), the first Iranian daily paper
wholly dedicated to women. Subsequently, two other
newspapers and 37 magazines that focused on women
and family issues were started. In response to the
unprecedented popularity of women's magazines,
reformist publications, such *Yas-e-No*, that had not
covered these issues before, began to allocate space to
women's issues.

In the magazines, journalists—often women—focused
on stories and issues that depicted the challenges facing
women under the existing laws of the state. They
addressed human rights and highlighted the state's
failure to implement women's rights as an integral part
of Islamic justice. One female journalist observed:

> Women's magazines illustrate the universal
> problems that might be found in each and
> every household. They draw on the common
> sense of ordinary people to communicate
> women's problems to them. So even a conser-
> vative father whose daughter cannot file for a
> divorce, or have the custody of their children
> after an unsuccessful marriage, can see the
> injustices and have sympathy with us—and
> support our efforts to advocate for change in
> women's legal codes in Iran.[53]

In addition, the magazines were effective in linking
daily challenges facing women to broader political
obstacles, and the need for a democratic system
in which the prospects for women's rights would
be improved.

The readers of these magazines generally are young,
urban, educated women. The journals have raised
consciousness about women's issues and catalyzed
discussion and debate in the public and private spheres.
One commentator noted that even the wives, daugh-
ters, and daughters-in-law of the clergy read these

magazines. As a result, these women are now challenging their male relatives on issues of women's status and rights. The struggle for women's rights is now being fought in homes and families across the country, including those of the religious leadership.[54]

The influence and potential threat presented by the print media became evident in the spring of 2000, when conservative forces, led by the judiciary and the armed forces, set in motion a series of trials that led to the closing down of over 30 newspapers and magazines; three women's periodicals, including the daily paper, *Zan*, were among them.[55] *Yas-e-No* was shut down in early 2004. Also in 2004, female journalists Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, editor of the women's rights journal, *Farzaneh*, and Fereshteh Ghazi of the daily newspaper, *Etemad*, were arrested and charged with "moral crimes." Many journalists shifted to the Internet as their medium of communication, and in late 2004, authorities targeted numerous Web sites and detained and tortured individual bloggers, accusing them of threatening national security, inciting public protest, blasphemy, and immorality.

The Film Industry

Following the revolution, the government made a concerted attempt to "Islamicize" cinema and bring it fully under state control. It placed heavy restrictions on the portrayal of women's roles and gender themes, thereby crippling the industry's ability to create storylines and produce films. This led to the almost total absence of women in the industry for a decade after the revolution. Nevertheless, Iranian films subsequently underwent a remarkable transformation in parallel with the wider changes in Iranian culture and society. In fact, film became an effective mechanism for expressing the underlying trends in the society, and implicitly challenging the state's ideology and policies.

During his tenure as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in the early 1990s, Khatami supported a more open policy on culture, sparking a growth in domestic cinema and independent press. Taboo topics relating to women, divorce, custody, polygamy, abortion, and love were again addressed. The movie *A Time to Love* (1991) marked the beginning of a new approach, as it dealt with the forbidden subject of a love triangle of one woman and two men. In a country where adultery is punishable by stoning, the idea of presenting the story of a woman's forbidden love for a man, out of wedlock, marked a turning point.[56]

Women film directors emerged as well, producing films that dealt with women's rights and problems under the theocratic state. Topics ranged from adultery to domestic violence, prostitution, and oppression in a patriarchal state. Lashing out against the state's policies, the films sparked public debate on women's issues. They not only increased public sympathy regarding women's issues, but they also began to foster a more progressive attitude toward women in society.[57] These films have challenged the legal limitations and sociopolitical attitudes about women, expressing support for personal freedom and equality. Released in major urban areas, they present the issues experientially to a wide public audience. Through them, gender stereotyping, a key pillar of the regime, is being critically addressed, and the radical Islamic discourse is being challenged.

Radio, Television, and Digital Media

Expanded access to satellite television, radio, and the Internet, amid the ongoing conflict between reformist and conservative factions, is of growing importance in Iran today. With the closure of newspapers, the Internet has become an increasingly important venue for political interaction.[58] Conservatives initiated a policy of bans and censorship to limit access and to assert control over Internet and satellite use. But contrary to their expectations, the ban has led to an increase in the number of people accessing these sources of information. "Since the banning of dishes eight years ago," said Ali Asghar Amir Sherdoust, a member of the cultural commission in 2004, "three million dishes and receivers have been sold, but police have seized only 70,000 of them."[59] In April 2006, the Iranian parliament was presented with a bill to raise fines for possession of a satellite dish from $110 to over $5000; it is unclear what effect passage of such a bill would have on usage.[60]

The Internet has provided an alternative platform for reformists to challenge the regime. While space for political discourse has become more limited within the theocratic-authoritarian state, the Internet has opened a new arena, accommodating numerous dissident groups online. One young female reformist commented,

> The Internet made our social work easier. Without any fear of the accusation by the state agent, we could talk over the Internet inside or outside of the country. It helps us to have more knowledge about the situation while it gives us privacy for self-expression and opposition.[61]

On November 7, 2001, the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, a conservative- dominated body, declared that Internet service providers (ISPs) must remove anti-government and "anti-Islamic" sites from their servers, and that all ISPs should be placed under state control. In the ensuing years, certain interests within the regime, including the powerful conservative judiciary, have attempted to block 100 Web sites and target bloggers. However, Internet usage continues to grow. "Coffee-nets" have become an inexpensive way for the young to converse online and to challenge the Islamic government and its oppressive imposition of moral guidelines for the separation of the sexes in everyday public places. Iran is home to the third-largest blogging community in the world.[62] In 2004, there were 200,000 registered Farsi language Web logs, of which 60,000 were active (primarily in Iran).[63] While there is no breakdown of statistics in terms of gender, many of the most vocal are women. The bloggers write about many issues, from their personal dreams and aspirations to their sense of desperation, anger, and questioning of the state and religion.[64] As one civil society activist noted:

> The state is not able to force women to do anything any more; they are well educated. The access to the Internet makes their struggle easier. They are connected through the Internet to get the news and raise awareness. You can see women everywhere using the Internet. You can find young women web logs on the Internet that reflect their ideas on the current situation in Iran. Women are willing to surpass the state, and they can.[65]

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in the form of charities that provide services such as food, medication, and education, became formally recognized entities in the aftermath of the 1906 constitutional revolution.[66] But they had a low profile in Iranian society. At the time of the 1979 revolution, there were 45 NGOs working on women's issues, predominantly on economic issues. They generally dealt with poor women and single-parent families,[67] offering grants or self-employment loans.[68] Most were linked to the state, and many were abolished after the revolution.

Following the 1979 revolution, a number of new NGOs emerged with the goal of furthering Islamic values. They were politically motivated organizations, committed to presenting an "authentic" image of the "Muslim Woman." They intentionally avoided identi-fying themselves with feminism, as they believed feminism had failed to provide women with what they were genuinely entitled to. In the years that followed, individual women gradually began to organize their efforts through NGOs that represented divergent views from the state ideology.

The Emergence and Support of Women's NGOs During the Khatami Era

With Khatami's election and the increased attention given to women and civil society during his administration, there was a sudden proliferation of women's NGOs. According to Khatami's advisor on women's affairs, Zahra Shojaie, the number of NGOs rose by 318 percent during his presidency.[69] Some of these organizations went beyond charity, education, and reproductive health and became engaged in political, cultural, and legal aspects of women's rights. But as Khatami's reform agenda faced resistance from conservative powers and failed to fulfill its promises, many social sectors, including women, moved away from the formal political arena and focused their efforts on promoting women's rights through civil society. According to one civil society activist:

> The reform movement has failed to accomplish its goals within the current discourse and structure. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the demand for democracy and reform has failed overall. Rather, it is alive and strong; however, it has changed its location to the civil society. The shift has happened because women believe that fundamental changes are possible within the society. Women NGOs had a very active role in changing the focus of attention from reform through the state toward reform through civil society.[70]

With the understanding that increased awareness among women was a vital factor in promoting democracy and women's rights, activists set out to launch campaigns focused on information and capacity building, education and communication, and domestic violence. Attention was also given to building the capacity of fledgling NGOs; however, most NGOs avoided taking on the issues in an overtly political manner, and opted instead to lay the groundwork and raise consciousness on a wider scale. For example, in southern Iran, an area renowned for its traditionalism and isolationist attitudes towards outsiders, including the government, one woman initiated a "Koran reading" program for adolescent girls. She drew on her own

personal contacts and relationships to build trust among parents, so that they would allow their daughters to attend. By offering instruction on the Koran, the classes were regarded as acceptable for girls. However, through the classes, the girls were also exposed to other issues, ranging from health and sanitation, to broader education and social consciousness. Many of the students eventually went on to further education and university study.[71]

The increased focus and attention on women's issues in society affected the way in which the state handled women's issues in many cases, and activists reacted to policies that were discriminatory toward women. For example, in 2004, during a campaign for women's rights, civil society activists influenced state policies in four criminal cases. They wrote petitions and articles, and lobbied the government on behalf of women who were victims of the discriminatory legal system. By gaining political attention and disseminating news of the victims publicly, women activists influenced the judicial process. One of the most prominent cases was that of Afsaneh Noroozi, a young woman who was jailed for more than six years after she was accused of killing a high-ranking police officer. Her lawyer claimed that she acted in self-defense, as the police officer had tried to rape her. The outcry of concerned journalists and activists highlighted the bias of the court system in cases against women. In November 2003, after lobbying by female parliamentarians and international attention, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi-Shahrudi, head of the judiciary, lifted Noroozi's death sentence and returned the case to the Supreme Court.[72] This was the first time since the revolution that female members of parliament opposed a court ruling.

Women's Leadership in Civil Society: New Strategies of Activism

Frustrated with the lack of political space available to them, women have increasingly turned to civil society organizations to promote societal and political transformation. Women have attempted to protect NGOs from the conservatives' tactics of forced closure. Although municipalities had provided some support to women's NGOs under the Khatami administration, conservatives took control of the town halls after the second municipal election in 2002. Once in power, they blocked access to public facilities for NGOs. Women responded by holding meetings in their houses to avoid the reach of the conservatives.[73] According to one prominent activist:

We hold our meetings in our house, in the backyard. We have started to discuss our problems and the possible solutions. We talked about the effective strategy for our goals. We, women with different backgrounds and goals, came to compromise on our goals and strategies. The government cannot stop this huge wave of awareness and strong will.[74]

In Iran, the majority of non-charitable organizations receive direct or indirect grants from the government or state foundations. Few organizations have been able to survive after governmental support is discontinued. The conservatives assumed that by withdrawing logistical support, the NGOs would gradually wither and would eventually cease to exist. Ironically, the discontinuation of municipal support did not eliminate NGOs; on the contrary, it helped them improvise a means of independent survival. They cut down on their costs while continuing to expand their networks informally.

The following example is illustrative of women's leadership in organizing NGO activism against the regime's tactics. One of the most controversial issues regarding women's rights in Iran is polygamy. The conservatives have always tried to justify it as an appropriate practice based on interpretations of Sharia. To pass along their message, the state-run television, the stronghold of conservatives with a constitutionally approved monopoly, aired a soap opera portraying polygamy. In response, women NGOs organized a picket in front of the main entrance of the Iranian Broadcasting Agency. Women with different political affiliations and from various socioeconomic backgrounds organized and participated in the protest. The action demonstrated that women have the ability to organize effectively. One civil society activist stated:

Women's organizations have started to work collectively. Often they gather to adopt a united strategy to move forward. For example, national broadcasting, which is under control of the conservatives, launched a series of movies about polygamy, custody, and the selfishness of an educated woman. These movies were offensive to women from all walks of life. Women's NGOs organized a gathering against national broadcasting policies on women. The interesting point was that women from different backgrounds and different ages were actively involved in that meeting.[75]

13

The rising level of women's education and literacy rates, and their declining birth rates, are indicative of sweeping changes for women across the social spectrum, and are directly related to the growing capacity of women's NGOs to engage in a variety of issues, including politically sensitive ones.

For example, as a significant symbolic gesture and to counter the conservative forces, women's NGOs started to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8, 2000; such celebrations had been formally abolished after the revolution. In Tehran in 2004, an authorized demonstration that was planned on International Women's Day in one of the city's major parks was disbanded by the police.[76] But in other areas, such as Kurdistan, 3,000 women celebrated the day.[77] In meetings that were organized by women's NGOs, controversial topics were discussed, including: women's rights as human beings, their legal position, freedom, domestic violence, and self-determination.

In 2005, following the crackdown on civil society, women's groups emerged as a key voice of dissent, promoting the movement for a referendum and publicizing reform issues in conjunction with International Women's Day.[78] Similarly, after President Ahmadinejad came to power, and began implementing policies to further restrict the rights of women, hundreds of women united to voice their opposition on International Women's Day in 2006. Thus, the simple act of organizing around International Women's Day is being used to challenge the Iranian regime.

In the days before the June 2005 presidential election, women voiced their demands for equality and political participation. Women activists lobbied for a constitutional amendment to allow them to become candidates in presidential elections (the Guardian Council bars women from running for president). On June 12, 2005, 40 women's NGOs organized a public demonstration and circulated a petition signed by many male intellectuals and activists. Hundreds of women, despite political and ideological differences, marched outside Tehran University and on nearby streets to demand equal rights in the constitution and legal system.[79] The demonstration garnered extensive media coverage around the world, including in the *New York Times* and other newspapers and radio programs. Women's NGOs showed their ability to organize a large demonstration and to capture press attention that highlighted their message.

CONCLUSION

The structure of the Iranian government has caused controversies over the dividing line between the state sphere of influence and citizens' human and civil rights. This has led to an ever-growing political conflict between the state and society, a conflict that has formed the basis of the reformist movement. Although the Khatami era succeeded in opening the space for discourse on civil and human rights, it failed to usher in the transition to democracy that reformists had hoped for. In addition, it did not result in substantial changes in women's status. Despite an increased number of women in politics, women still do not wield enough power to influence the formal policymaking process. Women are turning to civil society organizations to promote awareness and mobilize support for civil and human rights. They play significant, leading roles in the emerging civil society sector.

With the election of President Ahmadinejad in June 2005, many activists now believe that political change in Iran is not possible from within the formal political structure. The current regime, dominated by conservatives, remains firmly in charge of the country. Within Iranian society, there is a strong desire for gradual and peaceful change rather than radical and violent upheaval against the regime. Yet, the election signaled the further weakening of the reform movement in the country, and with rising levels of unemployment and other societal problems, large segments of the population are politically disengaged. It will take a unified, broad-based civilian movement to bring democracy to Iran, a movement that does not yet exist in the country.

Despite these challenges, civil society groups, and women in particular, are at the forefront of demands for democratic reform. Women are regarded within Iranian society as a pivotal social group pressing for change. In fact, many inside the country believe that women have the capacity to influence the future political direction of the country. They are at the center of resistance efforts against theocratic rule. Rising levels of education, low fertility rates, and increased access to communication tools have enabled women to participate more actively in the job market and politics. This participation has helped women voice their grievances and, in the process, challenge the state's legitimacy. Women's active resistance is pushing the boundaries of private and public spheres, challenging the ideologies and perspectives of authorities, and prompting a gradual transformation that is beyond the control of the regime. Women are using education and their social networks to raise awareness, mobilize support, and to make legitimate demands for greater freedom and justice. This transformation of Iranian society from the ground up is perhaps the most positive indication of a persistent push for democracy, openness, and plurality.

Women's rights are inexorably linked with democracy. In Iran, expanded women's rights will have dramatic repercussions for the regime. Iranians are increasingly questioning the role of Islam in political and civic life, and civil society activists, including women, are using every opening to voice their perspectives. Women's struggle to attain equal rights has become a central feature of the expanding discourse regarding government, religion, and reform. Women's efforts are emblematic of the larger public's desire for increased democratic and human rights and economic justice. Women clearly have the potential to play a crucial role in fostering unity across demographic and social lines, and in galvanizing a pro-democratic movement in the country. The US and the international community should do everything possible to support and strengthen Iranian women's efforts.

ENDNOTES

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[51]Keddi, 2000.

[52]Magazines such as *Payam-e Hajar* (*The Message of Hajar*), under direct government order, and *Zan-e-Ruz* (*Today's Woman*).

[53]Interview with a woman journalist, Tehran, 16 June 2004.

[54]Many interviewees noted that female relatives of members of the leadership constitute the most vociferous voices for change.

[55]In the first year of the Khatami government, 281 periodicals obtained publication permits. Only 171 received permits the second year after the crackdown by the judiciary.

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APPENDIX 1: MAP OF IRAN

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