

Women, Islam & Equality

The National Council of Resistance of Iran
Foreign Affairs Committee

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*As the Fourth World Conference on
Women convenes in Beijing, China,*

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

millions of oppressed women around
the world, particularly those in Islamic
countries.

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Introduction

Much has been written about Iran's contemporary history and the Iranian people's struggle for freedom and social justice over the last 100 years. Historians, Iranian and non-Iranian alike, have addressed this period in great detail, from the reign of the first Qajar king to the Constitutional Movement in 1906, to the rise to power of the Pahlavi monarchs (1920-1952, 1953 to 1979) and finally, the Iranian Revolution that ended the monarchy in Iran.

In these portrayals of Iran's history, however, the role of Iranian women in the century-long struggle for freedom and democracy has been virtually ignored. While the active and conspicuous participation of women in the anti-shah movement is still fresh in the minds of Iranians and students of Iranian affairs, what women did before the revolution and what they are doing now are stories left untold. Regrettably, there has been little, if any, attempt to systematically examine the role and situation of women during the Pahlavi regime and the theocracy that followed, or within the resistance movement that has now entered its 14th year.

Historians have also failed to address in a meaningful way another issue of paramount significance: The role and rights which Islam, as the religion of the overwhelming majority of Iranians, ascribes to women. It was widely accepted in the nineteenth century that Islam viewed women as subordinate to men. The 50-year Pahlavi dictatorship of Reza Khan and his son, the last shah of Iran, offered no genuine progress in Iranian women's rights, despite advances elsewhere in the world on women's issues and recognition by the international community of many aspects of their equality. The Pahlavi tyrants simply imposed certain aspects of western culture on Iran's women which served the interests of their despotic reign. Compulsory unveiling and hollow reforms are examples. In their confrontation with the genuine cultures of Iran and

Islam, specifically their approach to women, the shahs' primary objective was to keep women and men away from social and political struggle against their regime.

The successors to the monarchy, Khomeini and his retinue, came to power with the promise of restoring Islam and the *shari'a*. Their actions since the 1979 revolution, however, have been more harmful to Islam than their predecessors, as they perpetrated and tried to justify their flagrant crimes under the cloak of religion. It is not without reason that the Resistance movement that defied Khomeini and is striving for a secular form of government has, at its core, a Muslim, Shiite movement which in theory and practice has achieved unparalleled success in realizing women's equality with men.

This book addresses some of these issues. It must, however, be said at the outset that it was impossible to deal, in so few pages, with a profound topic of such importance in a manner that would have done the subject justice. Nevertheless, the pages that follow reflect an attempt to at least raise an issue that affects not only the lives of 30 million Iranian women, but perhaps the lives as well of hundreds of millions of Muslim women worldwide.

The first chapter offers a brief recounting of the history of the Iranian women's movement from 1895, with the beginning of the Tobacco Movement. It then charts the course of women's activities during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, when the first women's associations and societies took shape. A brief account of the role of women during the 20-year reign of Reza Khan, beginning in 1920, is followed by a summary of women's situation after the rise to power of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who ruled Iran from 1941 until 1952 and then again from 1953 to 1979.

The second chapter covers post-monarchic Iran. It deals with the reign of Khomeini and his heirs, highlighting their treatment of Iranian women, the darkest aspect of their rule. Contrasts are drawn between internationally recognized norms and standards on women's rights, and the laws of the clerical state.

Chapter three offers perhaps one of the few readings of Islam's approach to women and their individual and social rights. Relying on the holy book, the Quran, and the actual practices of the Prophet of Islam with respect to women, this chapter tries to demonstrate that pristine Islam, contrary to what the Iranian mullahs propound, or conventional wisdom might have us believe, views women as equal with men in every respect, in their private, social, political and economic lives. For reasons of space and time, this chapter is naturally not as

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complete as its subject matter deserves. Nevertheless, it is a beginning, addressing both the liberating message of Islam and the codes of conduct contained in the Quran vis-à-vis the issue of women's rights at the time of the Prophet, some 1,400 years ago.

Chapter four deals with the history of women's role in the Resistance movement against the current regime. Going back to the first days of the Revolution, when the new order had assumed power, it tries to inform the reader of the difficulties of the struggle for women's rights by a Muslim organization faced with a regime that considered itself the "guardian of Islam" and whose leader claimed to be the vice-regent of God on earth.

Chapter five introduces the architect of the Iranian women's remarkable advancement within the ranks of the Resistance. Maryam Rajavi, with 25 years of struggle against two dictatorships, provides a vivid example of belief in freedom and equality. Her emergence as the focal point of hope for all Iranians, especially women, offers an antithesis to the fundamentalist, misogynious mullahs of Iran.

— August 1995

I

A Century-long Quest for Equality

The Persian women since 1907 had become almost at a bound the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world. That this statement upsets the ideas of centuries makes no difference... Having themselves suffered from a double form of oppression, political and social... they broke through some of the most sacred customs which for centuries past have bound their sex in the land of Iran.

—W. Morgan Shuster, April 30, 1912¹

The tragic plight of women in Iran today reflects not their acquiescence to the misogynist mullahs, but the degree to which the clerics find the oppression of women vital to their survival. This vengeance, equivalent by modern-day standards to gender-based apartheid, in turn demonstrates the need to keep, at all costs, an ever tighter lid on a potentially explosive social force that has frequently and profoundly affected various popular movements against the status quo in the past century.

Iranian women have always played an important part in their society, and their resistance is very much synonymous with their nation's struggle for democracy and human rights, dating back to the dawn of the 20th century. They were the first women in the Islamic world to struggle to attain an equal say and standing in society. As William Morgan Shuster, an American who lived in Iran in the early 20th century, wrote in 1912 in his book, *The Strangling of Persia*: "The Persian women since 1907 had become almost at a bound the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world. That this statement upsets the ideas of centuries makes no difference. It is the fact. It is not too much to say that without the powerful moral force of those women... the ill-starred and short-

lived revolutionary movement,... would have early paled into a more disorganized protest. The women did much to keep the spirit of liberty alive. Having themselves suffered from a double form of oppression, political and social, they were the more eager to foment the great Nationalist movement...in their struggle for liberty and its modern expressions, they broke through some of the most sacred customs which for centuries past have bound their sex in the land of Iran.”²

Women’s prominent role in social movements in Iran began long before the 19th century. With the spread of Islam to Persia, the interaction between Persian nationalism and Shiite Islam’s defiant outlook gave impetus to many movements which rebelled against the oppressive status-quo. Women actively took part in many of these movements, which surfaced from 11th to 15th centuries, including the *Sanbad* movement in Neyshabur, *Moqane’* and *Sarbedaran*, in Khorassan province (northeast), *Ostadsis* in Sistan (southeast), and Babak in Azerbaijan, (northwest).³

The rise to power of the Safavid Dynasty (1502-1736), which espoused a backward, rigid interpretation of Islam, particularly toward women, brought with it the demise of progressive movements, and for that matter women’s participation in the social setting.

The emergence of women’s movements in Europe and America⁴ in the latter years of the nineteenth and beginning of the 20th century, revived the spirit of social activism in Iranian women, whose potential for defiance was far greater than that of their male counterparts. The first rebellion occurred exactly one hundred years ago, and is known as the “Tobacco Movement.” When in 1895, the Qajar monarch, Nasser od-Din shah, gave the exclusive rights for tobacco production and sale to the British firm, Rejie, the populace vehemently objected and boycotted the use of tobacco, forcing the king to annul the agreement. Iranian women were at the forefront of this resistance. At the peak of the protests, Amin ol-Soltan, the Court-appointed chancellor, tried to convince and coerce the citizenry to end their rebellion. Hundreds of women charged forward, calling on their husbands to reject his pleas. Even within the royal court, the women rose up against the agreement, broke the hookah and joined the boycott.

In his book, *The Tobacco Boycott*, Ibrahim Taymouri writes: “Women’s perseverance in this movement was such that when the ban on tobacco was announced, women led the protesters who marched toward Nasser od-Din shah’s palace. As they passed through the bazaar, these women closed down the shops, igniting a city-wide strike.”⁵

Historians write that when the throng of people reached the palace,

the Qajar monarch sent one of his confidants to calm the women. His attempts at talking to the protesters failed, because the women continued shouting slogans against Nasser od-Din shah. When, in a nearby mosque, the Friday prayer leader called on the marchers to disperse, angry women charged in and forced him to flee.

One woman, the tales of whose audacity have been passed down through generations of Iranians, is Zeinab Pasha. Also known as Bibi shah Zeinab, she led the popular opposition to the Rejie agreement in Tabriz, capital of East Azerbaijan Province. Zeinab Pasha organized seven groups of armed women to parry government efforts to put down the rebellion. The seven groups under her command themselves led other groups of women. When government forces intimidated the bazaar merchants into opening their shops, Zeinab Pasha and a group of armed women, wearing the *chador*, re-closed the shops.⁶ Eventually, bowing to pressures from across the country, Nasser od-Din shah canceled the Rejie agreement.

The beginning of the Constitutional Movement marked the unprecedented participation of women as a major social force. As the movement grew, women's democratic institutions grew with it. Although the Movement did not achieve its goals, it was nevertheless very important in propelling the women's movement in Iran forward. Many pro-Constitutionalist intellectuals addressed the situation of women and their historical oppression. Simultaneous with attacks on the reactionary, feudalistic culture and social relationships, recognition of women's rights became a subject of hot debate in the progressive media.

In its August 1890 issue, *Qanoon (The Law)*, a monthly published in London, wrote: "Women make up half of any nation. No plan of national significance will move forward unless women are consulted. The potential of a woman aware of her human essence, to serve in the progress of her country is equivalent to that of 100 men."⁷ Elsewhere, it wrote: "There are many cases of distinguished women surpassing men solely because of their abilities to reason and their wisdom. Their understanding of society's meaning and privileges is far greater than men's."⁸ Such commentaries at a time when women were generally considered as the property of men sparked many egalitarian ideas.

The expansion of the press, itself an indicator of the growth of democracy and a new era in Iran, was accompanied by greater participation of women in social affairs. From 1905 to 1915, some 30 women journalists joined the media. Gradually, independent women's newspapers were also published and played a significant role in diversifying public opinion, spreading the revolution and opening doors

for women.

The role of women in the Constitutional Revolution began with their offers of logistical and financial support for the movement, their success at inspiring patriotism and pride at gatherings, and their participation in marches and demonstrations. Secret or semi-secret women's councils and associations took shape in large cities and launched a series of organized activities to advance the cause. Activities pioneered by the more educated and enlightened women, gained momentum and women from all walks of life entered the social arena.

On December 16, 1906, *Edalat (Justice)* newspaper wrote the following on the role of women in the Constitutional Movement: "The Honorable Seyyed Jamal ad-din Va'ez, addressing an enthusiastic crowd, said: 'Constitutionalism will not take shape without financial support. Everyone must contribute what he can.' Suddenly, loud voices were heard among the women present. The impoverished women took off their earrings and offered them to advance this sacred movement. One of them told His Honor, 'I have two sons who earn two qarans (pennies) a day. From now on, I will give half of what they earn to any locality that you designate.'"⁹

The renowned Iranian historian, Ahmad Kasravi, referred to an incident on January 10, 1906, in Tehran: The shah's carriage was on its way to the home of a wealthy aristocrat, when it was attacked by a multitude of women marching in the streets, forcing it to stop. One of the women read a statement addressed to the king, saying: "Beware of the day when the people take away your crown and your mantle to govern."¹⁰

Women supported the newly established parliament and actively challenged the conservative factions and the clerics who had been elected as deputies. When the parliament decided to establish Iran's national bank without seeking financial help from foreign countries, women enthusiastically raised money and donated their jewelry. In Azerbaijan, they took up arms and took part in the 1908 and 1909 movements.

Women were also very active in the movement to boycott foreign imports. In Tehran, Tabriz and other cities, they held gatherings to make people aware of the issues and urged families to use their old clothing in the hope that in the future, the country could develop its own textile industry.

On December 30, 1906, when Mozzafar od-Din shah signed the new constitution, women had a statement published in the parliament's newspaper, calling on the government to initiate the education of women

and set up girls schools. When the parliament did not go along with the suggestion, instead declaring that women had a right only to the kind of education that would prepare them for “child rearing and house work” and urging them not to engage in political and governmental affairs, women took the initiative, creating a network of different associations and setting up girls schools and women’s hospitals. By 1910, some 50 girls schools had been established in Tehran. That same year, women organized a conference on cultural affairs. The weeklies *Danesh (Knowledge)* in 1910 and *Shokoufeh (Blossoming)* in 1913 were the first publications by women. *Women’s Letters, Daughters of Iran magazine, Women’s World,* and *The World of Women* soon followed.

The first secret society of women was founded in 1907. In the same year, the first organized meeting of women adopted 10 resolutions against discrimination and called for state education for girls. The Association of Women of the Homeland and the Association of Patriotic Women were among the more influential women’s associations of the time. Shuster writes: “In Tehran alone, 12 women’s associations were involved in different social and political activities.”¹¹ Through their members and activities, which included gatherings, these associations acted as a pressure group against the despotic regime and closely monitored political developments. Other active associations included the Association of Women’s Freedom, the Secret League of Women, the Women’s Committee, the Isfahan’s Women’s Organization, and the Assembly of Women’s Revolution.

Women’s role in the uprising in Tabriz was particularly noteworthy. When the Qajar king, Mohammad-Ali shah, shelled the parliament and constitutionalists were being gunned down, women in Azerbaijan province, wrote Kasravi, “upheld the nation’s honor more than anyone else.”¹² They were active on several fronts. They sent telegrams to other countries to raise international awareness and seek help. During the 11-month siege of Tabriz, women handled logistics, raising money, getting food from one bunker to the next, getting medicine to the wounded, preparing ammunition, etc.

One group of women also fought in the front lines, and other girls and women wore men’s clothing and fought alongside the men. “In one of the battles between Sattar Khan (the leader of the uprising) and the shah’s forces, the bodies of 20 women in men’s clothing were found.”¹³ A historian, living in Tabriz at the time, wrote that one of the bunkers was run by women wearing the *chador*¹⁴ and that he had seen a photograph of 60 Mojahedin women.

On November 29, 1911, Czarist Russia, with the approval of the

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British government, sent an ultimatum to the Iranian parliament: Shuster, the financial advisor to the government, must be expelled within 48 hours, or the capital would be occupied. A wave of protests erupted throughout the country. In Tehran, 50,000 marched and declared a general strike. Large groups of women, declaring their readiness to sacrifice their lives for the cause, were among them. On December 1, 1911, the Association of Women of the Homeland staged a demonstration by thousands of women in front of the *Majlis* (parliament). Shuster wrote that a group of some 300 women entered the parliament “clad in their plain black robes with the white nets of their veil dropped over their faces. Many held pistol under their skirts or in the folds of their sleeves. Straight to the Medjlis they went, and, gathered there, demanded of the President that he admit them all.... The President consented to receive a delegation of them. In his reception-hall they confronted him, and lest he and his colleagues should doubt their meaning, these cloistered Persian mothers, wives and daughters exhibited threateningly their revolvers, tore aside their veils, and confessed their decision to kill their own husbands and sons, and leave them behind their own dead bodies, if the deputies wavered in their duty to uphold the liberty and dignity of the Persian people and nation.”¹⁵

In mid-December, when Russian forces reached Qazvin (140 km west of Tehran), the city's League of Women called for help. Isfahan's League of Women called on the provincial associations to arm their members and declared its readiness to resist against the Russian forces. It can be said with certainty that it was largely due to the activities of these brave women that the Constitutional Parliament resisted the ultimatum for more than a year.

Although the Constitutional Revolution brought real progress in Iran and the constitution subsequently drafted guaranteed certain rights of the Iranian people, it continued to deny women their rights. The wording of the electoral law adopted in 1906 unequivocally denies women the right to vote.

In 1905, when the first phase of the Constitutional Movement succeeded, the media remained silent about the denial of women's rights. After Mohammad-Ali shah shelled the parliament during the second phase, however, women's rights became a major issue of debate. With the victory of the Socialist Revolution in 1917, which ended the domination of Czarist Russia over Iran, a new wave of activism for women's rights began. Many women and intellectuals, influenced by socialist thinking, joined the movement.

The advances brought about by the Constitutional Revolution were short-lived, however. The British conspired to foil the movement. Eventually, a coup by Reza Khan reestablished despotism, which plagued Iran for the next two decades. Many democratic associations and institutions withered away.

Women Under the Pahlavi Dictatorships

Reza Khan assumed power through a *coup d'état* supported by the British in 1920. He declared himself shah of Iran in 1925. Reza Khan's goal of ending the tribal system and establishing a strong central government was backed by the colonialist governments. The gradual transformation of Iran's economic structure into a capitalist system, required the growth of an urban consumer population and supply of cheap labor.

To achieve these goals, Reza Khan embarked upon "compulsory unveiling" of women. He disbanded all women's associations and assemblies, and in 1935 created a Women's Council, headed by his daughter, Shams. There was a tremendous backlash among the public to the measures. Many Women, who had actively participated in the social and political arena during the Constitutional Revolution, defied the "compulsory unveiling" and were thus forced back into their homes and out of the social sphere.

There were 3,467 female students in Iran when Reza Khan took over in 1925. That number dropped to 1,710 in 1930. It stood at 2,599 in 1935, the year "compulsory unveiling" was put into effect. During the Second World War and the occupation of Iran by the Allies in 1941, Reza Khan was removed from power. The shackles of his 20-year dictatorship were temporarily loosened, and the "compulsory unveiling" was done away with. Immediately, in the same year, the number of women students doubled to 5,816, reflecting the extent to which Reza Khan's rule had retarded the activities of women in society.

Between 1942 and 1953, the circumstances both of the Second World War and Iran's domestic situation created a relatively open environment, offering Iranian women a golden opportunity to initiate activities within the Iranian political landscape. Although the administration of the late Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, the only democratic government in contemporary Iran, was cut short, women made major gains during his rule. In 1952, women finally won the right to vote in the Municipal Councils. A new Social Insurance Code was ratified in 1953, which gave women equal rights with men and introduced maternity benefits and leave, and disability allowances for women, even though married.

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In striving to consolidate his rule after the coup that overthrew the popular government of Dr. Mossadeq in 1953, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi dissolved the various women's organizations and established the Organization of Iranian Women, appointing his sister, Ashraf, a notoriously corrupt woman, as its head.

In the 1960s, the shah intensified the political repression throughout the society, particularly targeting women. SAVAK, the notorious secret police, was given a free rein. Through a number of superficial and purely formalistic reforms, including the land reform and voting rights for women, the shah tried to champion the women's cause. In truth, however, all the elections during his reign were sham. In 1963, the shah allowed a few women loyal to the court to enter the parliament.

Simultaneously, women entered the work force as cheap laborers, to better serve the interests of the ruling elite. To expedite their entry, the first Family Protection Law modified the absolute right of men to divorce in 1967. In 1975, the second Family Protection Law gave women equal rights in divorce, custody of children and marriage settlements, and granted limited rights of guardianship; it raised the age of marriage for girls to eighteen, recognized women's equal rights with men to hinder their partners from undesirable occupations, and subjected polygamy to certain restrictions.

Taken as a whole, however, these reforms did little to make women equal partners in society. Actually, they were inevitable, given the general level of awareness in Iranian society, which had been opened to western influences both by the presence of thousands of foreign, especially American, civil and military personnel and the extensive travel abroad among the well-to-do and the Iranian intelligentsia. For the vast majority of Iranians, however, particularly the deprived strata of society and women in the rural areas, little had changed. While the shah claimed that Iran was at the gateway to the "great civilization," the following figures depict the real plight of women under his regime. In 1976, only 26% of women living in urban areas and 3.4% of women in rural areas were literate, as opposed to 49.1% and 13.7% for men. In the same year, 23% of men were unemployed. This compared to 87.5% of women. In the cities, where there was one doctor for every 2,000 men, there was one doctor for every 8,000 women. In rural areas, this became one doctor for every 20,000 men and every 55,000 women.

Despite the appearance of calm on the surface, dramatic developments began in the mid-1960s that ultimately culminated in the overthrow of the shah's regime in February 1979. On the political front, most genuine opposition parties were eliminated, and the

traditionally reformist parties, which worked exclusively within the system, were by and large forced into acquiescence. Others became discredited by their collusion with the royal court. Consequently, aside from government-controlled outlets, women had no forum in which to address their concerns or engage in any kind of political activity. This situation led Iranian intellectuals to break from the traditionally reformist parties and espouse a more militant approach to political struggle. Two major opposition currents emerged, which set the tone in the subsequent decade for political activity by the Iranian intelligentsia and youth.

The first, the Marxists, included a spectrum of widely divergent and sometimes contradictory political viewpoints, from the pro-Moscow Tudeh Party to the Organization of the Iranian People's Fedayeen Guerrillas (OPIFG),¹⁶ an independent Iranian group which took up armed struggle against the shah in 1970.

The second was the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, (PMOI) formed by three Tehran University graduates. Shiite Muslims, the Mojahedin founders and other senior members began their campaign in 1965 with six years of research into various aspects of Islamic teaching.¹⁷ They produced a treatise on the nature of existence, history, man and economics, and presented their own interpretation of Islam's holy book, the Quran, of *Nahj ol-Balagha*,¹⁸ and of prevailing political issues.

The Mojahedin were distinguished from all other religiously-oriented groups and circles of the time, among other things, by their dramatically different approach to the question of women's rights. Citing the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet and the Shiite Imams, the Mojahedin underscored Islam's egalitarian treatment of women and rejected gender-based discrimination. This was very appealing to intellectuals and the youth, but more importantly to women brought up in Muslim families. Despite the difficulties of life underground, many women joined the Mojahedin. Within two years after the release from jail of its leaders and most members in 1979, the Mojahedin emerged as a vast organization with tremendous resources.

In the late 1960s, increases in the price of oil had brought an infusion of billions of petro-dollars into the Iranian economy. The shah began preparations for opulent celebrations marking the 2,500-year anniversary of monarchic rule in Iran. These coincided with the start of armed resistance by the Mojahedin and other secular underground opposition groups. This movement was especially difficult for women to join, particularly those sympathetic to the Mojahedin. On the one

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hand, women had to overcome prevailing taboos, such as leaving politics and revolution to men. On the other, in many families, the only acceptable realm of activity for young women was school. Anything beyond this limited realm- let alone joining a clandestine movement and beginning a life underground - brought shame for the family.

At the time, the sprawling SAVAK network made it impossible for clandestine groups to recruit in large numbers. Moreover, the movement was in its infancy, which, added to the complexities of underground struggle, meant that in the early years, only veteran men with long experience underground could stand in the front-line of struggle. At this stage, women played more of a support role for the professional activists. They provided logistical support and through contacts with other families, collected financial assistance for the clandestine cells. In fact, women could do these jobs more efficiently than men, because the SAVAK was less sensitive to them.

In 1971 and 1972, following the arrest of the leaders and most members of the Mojahedin, the mothers, sisters and women sympathizers of the organization staged demonstrations in Tehran, Mashad, Qom and other cities to protest the prevailing repression. These activities were unprecedented at the height of the shah's dictatorial rule. The Iranian people learned of a leading movement espousing a modern Islam, and seeking the overthrow of the shah and establishment of democracy in Iran. The legacy and ideals of the Mojahedin spread through a vast sector of Iranian society, attracting many new members among the younger generation. Despite the extensive executions from 1971 to 1977, support for the Mojahedin continued to grow.

In those days, women carried on their activities away from the public eye. They demonstrated their commitment to their own rights and to those of their nation through their defiance behind the tall walls of Evin and other prisons, where they were tortured alongside their male colleagues. At the time, the prospects for victory seemed distant, and the shah looked invincible.

One of the most active women in the Mojahedin in the early years was Fatemeh Amini. She was a 31-year-old teacher and a graduate of the University of Mashad. Fatemeh had begun her political activities in 1963 and became a member of the Mojahedin in 1970. She married one of her colleagues in the Resistance, who was arrested a year later and imprisoned. Before going underground, Fatemeh was active publicly. She had extensive contacts with the network of Mojahedin families and knew many of the sympathizers. She was also the contact

for the movement with Mojahedin members who were in prison.

She was eventually arrested at a meeting point and tortured by SAVAK to force her confession. She endured the tortures for five and a half months, but did not utter a word. As the result of repeated whippings with electrical cables and burning, she became paralyzed, eventually dying under torture.

Fatemeh Amini was not the only woman who overcame the many impediments in the path of women's activism. Mehrnoosh Ebrahimi, a member of the Fedayeen guerrillas, was the first woman killed in an armed confrontation with the shah's SAVAK, in September 1971. Marzieh Ahmadi Oskou'i was another prominent female Fedayeen member. Behjat Tiftakchi and Zahra Goudarzi, two women members of the Mojahedin, were executed by the SAVAK.

The most prominent woman member of the Resistance at the time was Ashraf Rabi'i (Rajavi).¹⁹ A physics major at Sharif University of Technology, Ashraf began her activities in 1970. She escaped SAVAK's surveillance many times. Her first husband, also a Mojahedin member, was executed by the shah's regime. On several occasions, when detained by the security forces, Ashraf was able to convince them of her innocence and escape. She traveled from city to city, setting up many clandestine cells. Finally, she was seriously wounded in an explosion in her hideout in Qazvin, enabling the SAVAK to arrest her. She was taken to Evin Prison and tortured. Her nose was broken and one of her eardrums permanently damaged from being slapped around. She remained in prison until the advent of the February 1979 revolution, when along with the last group of political prisoners, she was released 10 days before Khomeini entered Tehran.

In the last years of the shah's rule, when the people could no longer tolerate the court's corruption and pervasive repression, the armed resistance demonstrated the vulnerability of the ruling regime. The democratic movement exploded, and nothing could stand in its way. When the shah's regime began to unravel in 1978, the families of political prisoners, especially the Mojahedin and their supporters, were the first to stage street demonstrations whose main demand was the freedom of political prisoners. The international environment and election of a new administration in the United States contributed to this trend. All across the country, demonstrations and protests erupted, and millions poured into the streets. Not surprisingly, women led the way. The cries of the pioneering women of the early seventies echoed across the years, to be taken up by millions of Iranian women.

On September 8, 1978, the shah's army opened fire on a peaceful

march in Jaleh Square in Tehran, killing hundreds of innocent demonstrators, many of them women. The massacre only fueled their anger and strengthened their resolve. Women in massive numbers joined the men in the streets. The families of the Mojahedin prisoners and martyrs played an instrumental role in organizing the anti-shah protests, sit-ins and gatherings. In the months that followed, the shah and his “great civilization” were buried under the chants of “death to the shah.” The old order was rejected for all time, and a new era began. The anti-monarchic revolution of February 1979 tapped the tremendous potential and capabilities of Iran’s women, generating great expectations among them for the future.

Notes

1. William Morgan Shuster, *The Strangling of Persia*, (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1987), pp. 191-192.
2. Ibid.
3. Abdul-Hossein Nahid, *Zanan-e Iran dar Jonbesh-e Mashruteh (Iranian Women in the Constitutional Movement)*, (Germany: Navid Publications, 1989), pp. 8 -9.
4. Ibid, p. 7.
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6. Nahid, op. cit., p. 42.
7. *Qanoon (Law)*, London: August 1890.
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9. *Edalat (Justice)*, 16 December 1906, No. 27.
10. Ahmad Kasravi, *Tarikh-e Mashruteh Iran (History of Constitutionalism in Iran)*, (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications, 1984), 4th ed.
11. Shuster, op. cit., p. 193.
12. Kasravi, op. cit., p. 61.
13. M. Pavlovich, et al, *Seh Maqaleh dar Bareh Enqelab-e Mashruteh Iran, (Three Articles on Iran’s Constitutional Revolution)*, Houshiar Trans., p. 55.
14. Ibid.
15. Shuster, op. cit., p. 198.
16. Mohammad Mohaddessin, *Islamic Fundamentalism, The New Global Threat*, (Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press, 1993), pp. 195 -196.
17. Ibid.

A Century-long Quest for Equality

18. *Nahj ol-Balagha (The Road to Eloquence)* is a compilation of sermons, letters, and sayings of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shiite Imam.
19. After her release from prison, Ashraf Rabi'i (Rajavi) became one of the most senior women in the Mojahedin and was a parliamentary candidate in 1980. She married Massoud Rajavi in summer 1980, who was also released from prison with the last group of political prisoners. Ashraf Rajavi was slain on February 8, 1982, when members of the Guards Corps attacked her residence in northern Tehran, along with 18 other Mojahedin, including Moussa Khiabani, second in command of the Mojahein and Massoud Rajavi's deputy inside Iran. She left behind a son, Mostafa, who is now 14.

II

Prime Victims

Equality does not take precedence over justice... Justice does not mean that all laws must be the same for men and women. One of the mistakes that Westerners make is to forget this.... The difference in the stature, vitality, voice, development, muscular quality and physical strength of men and women shows that men are stronger and more capable in all fields... Men's brains are larger.... Men incline toward reasoning and rationalism while women basically tend to be emotional... These differences affect the delegation of responsibilities, duties and rights.

— Hashemi Rafsanjani, June 7, 1986¹

The revolution of 1979 marked the end of an era for Iran. After 2,500 years, the monarchy had been abolished. A new era of freedom, the people believed, had dawned, and they would at last live under a system which reflected both their aspirations for modern democracy and their national heritage. But all too soon, the dream became a nightmare, with the return of dictatorship, this time under the guise of religion. Within two years, the *Velayat-e Faqih* (absolute rule of the jurispudent) regime installed by Khomeini had monopolized all power, imposing its medieval world view on the society through a reign of terror. Political dissidents were arrested, tortured and executed. Non-conformists and minorities were persecuted. A devastating war took one million lives, and destroyed 3,000 villages. The feeble economic infrastructure created

under the shah collapsed, and living conditions went from bad, to worse, to intolerable.

This medieval theocracy's first and foremost victims have been women. Khomeini and his heirs view women as sub-human, and deny their fundamental rights. Indeed, misogyny is the underpinning of the velayat-e faqih mentality. Under the mullahs' rule, discrimination against women was institutionalized, and violence against them became the norm. In every aspect of life, women were doubly oppressed. The economy was no exception.

Prime Victims of Poverty

The economic crisis permeating Iranian society has persisted for several years. Of late, however, after 17 years of clerical rule, the catastrophe has reached explosive proportions. Inflation is running at 100%. The regime is faced with a 50 billion dollar foreign debt. Eighty percent of the Iranian population now lives below the poverty line. According to *The Times*, June 6, 1992, seventy percent of the population lives in absolute poverty, earning less than \$1 a day.

While poverty affects households as a whole, because of gender-based discrimination, Iranian women bear the brunt of the burden. Their plight is aggravated by an unjust legal system, which deprives women of their share of capital earned during marriage; the absence of a social welfare system geared to their needs; and a lack of economic opportunities. This situation has had grave consequences for the society. Infanticide and abandonment of children by mothers crushed under the weight of severe poverty have become common in today's Iran.

According to the state-controlled daily, *Abrar*, on September 8, 1987: "A woman entered Aburayhan clinic at Vali-Asr Avenue in Tehran at noon yesterday and asked the clinic clerks for powdered baby milk. She was given no milk because she had no coupons. Subsequently, she abandoned her baby son there and left the clinic." In December 1992, in Tehran, a mother abandoned her four-month-old infant in Shoosh Square. A note found on the child read: "I feel ashamed before God, but had no other choice." The head of a hospital ward said during an interview with the state television: "Most of the infants who are abandoned and brought to our ward have had significant portions of their bodies bit by insects and other animals. Some of them were found in trash cans; others were abandoned in cemeteries." *Jomhuri Islami* reported on August 20, 1993, that a mother killed her three sons, aged eight, six and four. *Ressalat* reported on November 18, 1992, that a mother stabbed her eight-year-old twins in Tehran.

Persistent and chronic poverty among women has forced multitudes into begging or pick-pocketing. According to *Kayhan* on September 30, 1989, the head of the Organization for Rehabilitation said: "Some of the women beggars whom we were about to arrest thanked us and insisted that we arrest them. One of them said, 'Our neighbor sent his wife to beg, so my husband has forced me to do the same.'" In September 1991, 70 women were arrested in Tehran for begging. One, age 43 and a mother of four, said that her husband was a laborer and that his salary was not sufficient to keep the family alive. The Iranian dailies abound in stories of women whose belongings have been thrown into streets, and who live on street corners due to extreme poverty. These women's plight is exacerbated by the lack of provisions or institutions to look after their welfare.

Brutalizing Dissident Women

As stated in the Draft Platform For Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, "Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms."

In discussing the rights and freedoms of women, it is often correctly observed that the emancipation of women is one of the most obvious indicators of the development of a country. Of course, the reverse also holds true: widespread discrimination and prejudice against women indicate how backward the ruling system is.

On February 3, 1984, Khomeini said: "Killing is a form of mercy because it rectifies the person. Sometimes a person cannot be reformed unless he is cut up and burnt....You must kill, burn and lock up those in opposition." To survive, the clerical rulers must kill the thirst for freedom in all human beings, or they will reject its monopoly on power. With its cruel massacres, stoning and hangings in public, the regime wants to instill despair in the lives of all Iranians. For this reason, 100,000 Iranians, among them tens of thousands of women, have been executed and another 150,000 have been incarcerated, and subjected to 74 forms of physical and psychological tortures.

While no sector of Iranian society is immune to the mullahs' oppression, the sharpest edge of this misogynous rule's savagery is directed at Iranian women.

The clerics have systematically launched one crackdown after another on women, arresting, beating, flogging and torturing tens of

thousands on the pretext of combating mal-veiling, enjoining good and prohibiting vice. This terror is extended into every household through severe restrictions on women, and vicious punishments for infractions. Regardless of economic or educational level, ethnic or religious background, political or personal outlook, no Iranian family can escape the pervasive threat of violence to its female members.

As the U.N. Special Rapporteur on violence against women reported on November 22, 1994, certain practices and sanctions “which are violent towards women are justified by special legislation. The public stoning and lashing of women serve to institutionalize violence against women.”

Violence against women is the only sphere where there is no discrimination between men and women. If anything, there is a policy of reverse discrimination, and women are treated more viciously. The mullahs show a particular vengeance towards women who become politically active and join the resistance. Tens of thousands have been arrested on political charges and severely tortured and executed. Many have died under torture. One method is particularly revealing: the Pasdaran (Guards Corps) fire a single bullet into the womb of the condemned women political prisoners, leaving them to bleed to death in a slow process of excruciating pain. Even pregnant women have not been spared. Hundreds, including Massoumeh Qajar-Azdanloo, Azar Reza'i, Zahra Nozari, Nayyereh Khosravi and Parvin Mostofi, have been executed with their unborn children.

The Iranian regime is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. According to article 6 of the Covenant, the execution of individuals under the age of 18 as well as pregnant women is prohibited.

Disregarding their international commitments, the mullahs have shown no qualms about executing women of all ages; from 13-year-old adolescents like Fatemeh Mesbah, Maryam Ghodsi-Maab, 16; Ezzat Mesbah, 15; Mojgan Jamshidi, 14; and Nooshin Emami, 16; to 70-year-old grandmothers like Ettesamossadat Karbasi; Arasteh Qolivand, 56; Soqra Davari, 54; and Massoumeh Shadmani, 50.

Maryam Ghodsi-Mo'ab, a 16-year-old high school student activist, was arrested and went through extreme torture in the southern city of Ahwaz. She was executed on October 1981. Her burial permit read:

Islamic Republic of Iran
Coroner's Office
“Burial Permit”

This document, authorizes the burial of Maryam, daughter of

Mohammad Kazem Ghodsi-Mo'ab, aged 16, whose death on 7th October 1981 resulted from eight bullets entering her chest, eight her back and one her head. (Executed by the Revolutionary Court.)

Coroner- Dr. Pazhuheshi

Sediqeh Sadeqpour, a political activist, was arrested and severely tortured. She was released from jail when her legs became paralyzed, but later rearrested and again savagely tortured. Her eyes were gouged out and she was killed in Shiraz on November 4, 1985, when her throat was cut. She was 20 years old.

Mina Mohammadian was executed on February 29, 1987, on political charges. She was held in solitary confinement for eleven months prior to her execution. During that period, she went through forty interrogation sessions, during which she was subjected to the most horrendous tortures. She was repeatedly raped by the regime's Guards. She was 22 at the time of her execution.

Women political prisoners are kept in so-called "residential units" (cement cages, 50 cm square), with their heads cramped down onto their knees, for months at a time. They are beaten regularly, up to 50 times a day. Another common torture of women political prisoners, besides systematic flogging, is suspension for hours from the ceiling by the hands, or upside down, by the feet. In some cases, the torture leads first to paralysis, then to the woman's death. Nahid Shahrokhi-Mahalati, a 22-year-old teacher, was suspended from the ceiling for a prolonged period. She died under torture.

Exceptions are not made for foreign nationals. Annie Ezbar, a French nurse who had come to the assistance of the Iranian Resistance's National Liberation Army, was captured in an ambulance with her medical equipment. Hashemi Rafsanjani, then the regime's parliament speaker, acknowledged her arrest. After going through extensive torture, Mrs. Ezbar was executed.

According to a "religious" decree, virgin women prisoners must as a rule be raped before their execution, "lest they go to Paradise." Therefore, the night before execution, a Guard rapes the condemned woman. After her execution, the religious judge at the prison writes out a marriage certificate and sends it to the victim's family, along with a box of sweets. In a written confession in January 1990, Sarmast Akhlaq Tabandeh, a senior Guards Corps interrogator, recounted one such case in Shiraz prison: "Flora Owrangi, an acquaintance of one of my friends was one such victim. The night before her execution, the resident mullah in the prison conducted a lottery among the members of the firing squads and prison officials to determine who would rape her. She was

then forcibly injected with anesthesia ampoules, after which she was raped. The next day, after she was executed, the mullah in charge wrote a marriage certificate and the Guard who raped her took that along with a box of sweets to her parents.”

Violence against women

The penal code subjects women to extreme penalties if they do not comply with dress codes laid down by the clerical establishment. In his final report on January 2, 1992, to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, the Special Representative on the situation of human rights in Iran wrote: “... the Prosecutor General, Abolfazl Musavi Tabrizi, said that ‘anyone who rejects the principle of the *Hijab*’ (dress code) is an apostate and the punishment for an apostate under Islamic law is death.” According to *Ressalat* on January 6, 1987, Khomeini declared, “Hijab is a requirement, and those who reject it must be condemned to *Takfir* (excommunication).” It goes without saying that under the mullahs’ rule, *Takfir* translates into execution.

The dress code, which also applies to women of the Christian and other minority faiths, violates the right of all Iranian women to freedom of conscience and belief.

Note (1) of Article 102 of the penal code on *Ta’azirat* (penitences) states: “Women who appear on streets and in public without the (prescribed) ‘Islamic hijab’ will be condemned to penitences of 74 strikes of the lash.” As reported by the state-controlled newspaper *Kayhan* on March 30, 1983, the regime’s Prosecutor General announced that if an improperly veiled woman is arrested, there is no need for a court, since the crime is established. Public floggings of women in the streets are common.

Vice squads regularly mount crackdowns against women; some include roadblocks to enforce the dress codes. On May 9, 1995, Agence France Presse reported that the regime’s security forces had arrested 100 female foreign nationals visiting Iran from the Central Asian Republics for ignoring strict dress regulations. According to *The New York Times*, on June 23, 1993, “More than 800 women were arrested for dress code violations, with many being detained for wearing sunglasses, witnesses said.... A Western European diplomat was said to have been beaten on Sunday for refusing to allow the authorities to search his car.” The U.N. Special Representative on the human rights situation in Iran reported in 1992 that “165 improperly veiled women were arrested on June 7, 1992, in Tehran by security agents implementing a new plan to combat social corruption.” Reuters quoted

the Islamic Republic's news agency, IRNA, on April 23, 1991, as reporting that Tehran police had detained 800 women in two days for flouting the dress codes.

In some occasions, the punitive action leads to the death of the woman. On September 2, 1993, in Tehran, Bahareh Vojdani, a 20-year-old girl, was stopped by the vice squads for mal-veiling. She resisted the Guards' condescending behavior and the public reprimand. The Guards shot and killed her on the spot in broad daylight, as onlookers watched.

According to the regime's figures, in 1992, "113,000 persons were arrested and referred to the judicial authorities on charges of dissemination of moral corruption and mal-veiling." The harassment is not limited to arrests. The regime's officials also send motorcycle gangs of club-wielders into the streets to attack women, sometimes slashing their faces with razor blades or throwing acid into their faces. On June 11, 1994, Agence France Presse quoted the Iranian press in a report on security officials' warning to women to avoid "improper smiles" in the streets. They were also instructed to fully observe the dress code before "looking out the windows" of their homes. In some cases, the fine for murdering a tribal woman in southern Iran for crimes of honor is as low as \$6.20.

Besides the "normal" penalty of 74 lashes, female government employees who violate the dress code are liable to temporary suspension from work for up to two years; expulsion and suspension from the public service, and indefinite deprivation of any employment in the public service. According to the state-controlled daily, *Ressalat*, on May 23, 1991, the head of the Security Forces' Politico-Ideological Bureau announced: "Employees whose wives appear in public improperly veiled are considered to have violated the administrative law." This means that the woman's husband is also summoned at his workplace for administrative violation. In this way, the husband, too, becomes part of the "vice patrol," controlling the behavior of his wife for fear of losing his job.

Stoning to death

The stoning of women is one of the more savage, and revealing aspects of the mullahs' rule in Iran. This vicious punishment of women is without precedent in Iran's recent history, and is not to be found anywhere else in the world. Since the inception of the mullahs' rule, hundreds of women of various ages have been and continue to be stoned to death throughout Iran.

What makes this hideous crime more abhorrent is that these crimes are carried out under the name of Islam. The Quran and the Prophet of Islam deeply despised such behavior and denounced such barbarism. The Prophet did his utmost to eradicate backward traditions, including stoning which victimized women.

The penalty for adultery under Article 83 of the penal code, called the Law of *Hodoud* is flogging (100 strikes of the lash) for unmarried male and female offenders. Married offenders are liable to stoning regardless of their gender, but the method laid down for a man involves his burial up to his waist, and for a woman up to her neck (article 102). The law provides that if a person who is to be stoned manages to escape, he or she will be allowed to go free. Since it is easier for a man to escape, this discrimination literally becomes a matter of life and death.

Interestingly, Article 6 (2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran has ratified, states: "Sentence of death may be imposed only for the most serious crimes in accordance with the law in force at the time of the commission of the crime." Offenses for which the Law of *Hodoud* provides the death penalty do not involve murder or serious bodily harm, constituting the "most serious crimes".

Article 104 of the Law of *Hodoud* provides that the stones should not be so large that a person dies after being hit with two of them, nor so small as to be defined as pebbles, but must cause severe injury. This makes it clear that the purpose of stoning is to inflict grievous pain on the victim, in a process leading to his or her slow death.

Anecdotes of this brutal process reveal ever more dimensions of cruelty. Most of the time, the regime's authorities force the victim's family members, including children, to watch the stoning to death of their loved one, and in some instances, even when the woman miraculously managed to escape, contrary to the regime's own law, she was recaptured and either stoned again or killed on the spot.

On August 10, 1994, in the city of Arak, a woman was sentenced to death by stoning. According to the ruling of the religious judge, her husband and two children were forced to attend the execution. The woman urged her husband to take the children away, but to no avail. A truck full of stones was brought in to be used during the stoning. In the middle of the stoning, although her eyes had been gouged out, the victim was able to escape from the ditch and started running away, but the regime's guards recaptured her and shot her to death.

In October 1989 in the city of Qom, a woman who was being stoned managed to pull herself out of the hole, only to be forced back into it and stoned to death. In justifying the murder, Qom's Chief Religious

judge, Mullah Karimi, elaborated to *Ressalat* newspaper on October 30, 1989: "Generally speaking, legal and religious decrees on someone condemned to stoning call for her stoning if her guilt was proven on the basis of witnesses' testimonies. Even if she were to escape in the middle of the administration of the sentence, she must be returned and stoned to death."

On December 7, 1994, Reuters quoted a state controlled newspaper, *Hamsharhi*, on a married woman who was stoned to death in the city of Ramhormouz, southwestern Iran. *Ressalat*, March 1, 1994, read: "A woman was stoned to death in the city of Qom." *Kayhan* of February 1, 1994, reported that a woman named Mina Kolvat was stoned to death in Tehran for having immoral relations with her cousin.

The U.N. Special Representative on the human rights situation in Iran reported to the U.N. General Assembly in 1993: "On November 1, 1992, a woman named Fatima Bani was stoned to death in Isfahan."

Abrar reported on November 5, 1991, that a woman was stoned in the city of Qom charged with immoral relations. According to *Kayhan*, August 21, 1991, a woman charged with adultery by the name of Kobra was sentenced to 70 lashes and stoning. The verdict was carried out in the presence of local people and district officials.

Jomhourī Islami wrote on March 11, 1991, that in Rasht (northern Iran), "Bamani Fekri, child of Mohammad-Issa, ..., was sentenced to stoning, retribution, blinding of both eyes and payment of 100 gold dinars. After the announcement of the verdict, she committed suicide in prison."

Ressalat reported on January 16, 1990, that a woman was stoned to death in the city of Bandar Anzali (northern Iran). *Ettela'at* reported on January 5, 1990: "Two women were stoned publicly on Wednesday in the northern city of Lahijan (northern Iran)." *Jomhourī Islami*, January 2, 1990: "Two women were stoned in the city of Langrood (northern Iran)."

Kayhan wrote on July 31, 1989: "Six women were stoned to death publicly in Kermanshah on charges of adultery and moral corruption." *Kayhan*, April 17, 1989, quoted the Religious judge and head of the Fars and Bushehr Justice Department as sentencing 10 women to stoning to death on prostitution charges which were immediately carried out.

Tehran radio, reported on March 6, 1989, that a woman was stoned in Karaj for committing adultery." *Kayhan*, October 4, 1986, reported that a 25-year-old woman named Nosrat was stoned to death in the city of Qom. She died after an hour of continuous stoning.

On April 17, 1986, a woman was stoned to death in the city of Qom.

Prior to being stoned, she was whipped in public. In July 1980, four women were simultaneously stoned to death in the city of Kerman.

The brutality is not limited to stoning. For example, in late May 1990, in the city of Neyshabour (northeastern Iran), a woman charged with adultery was thrown off a 10-story building. The execution was carried out before the public, and the victim died on impact.

The regime's duplicity, when it comes to publicizing the news of such Byzantine atrocities, is very telling. Inside Iran, they are trumpeted with great fanfare, but when it comes to the international arena, officials brazenly deny their methods. In an interview with *Le Figaro* on September 10, 1994, Rafsanjani was asked, "Are women accused of adultery stoned in Iran?" He replied: "No, no such thing exists in Iran. This has been fabricated to damage us."

Inequalities in Health Care

"Women have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The enjoyment of this right is vital to their life and well being and their ability to participate in all areas of public and private life," states the Draft Platform For Action for the Fourth World Conference on Women.

Health and hygiene have reached crisis proportions in Iran, and women are particularly affected by the consequences. The mullahs have devoted fewer and fewer resources to women's health, regardless of their special needs, especially during the maternity period. Attempts to segregate what limited health facilities are available have aggravated this situation. Based on United Nations statistics, Iran is among only a few countries in the world where more young women die than young men. In the 15 to 22 age group, 25 girls and 20 boys die out of every 1,000 young Iranians.

According to *Abrar*, a state-controlled daily, of March 30, 1989, for every 1.5 million residents of the rural areas of Fars Province (southern Iran), there is only one gynecologist. Likewise, there is only one for every 600,000 residents in rural areas of Kermanshah Province (western Iran). Another daily, *Jomhuri Islami*, reported on October 16, 1988, that in the town of Faresan, (southern Iran), 25 percent of all deliveries end in the death of the mothers due to shortages of hospitals for women. A Majlis deputy from the northeastern city of Ahar, acknowledged in July 1988: "Despite its size, the city of Ahar does not have even one gynecologist. We have been witnessing the deaths of pregnant women and their babies becoming orphans."

According to *Abrar*, April 28, 1993, hospitals will gradually be

segregated. The Ministry of Health and Medical Education seeks to gradually separate women's wards and women's hospitals from those of men. This would make the scarce medical facilities for women even scarcer, compounding their problems.

Women & the Iran-Iraq War

The eight year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) had a devastating impact on Iranian society. After 1982, when Iraqi forces pulled back behind internationally recognized borders, a just and comprehensive peace was within reach, but the Khomeini regime protracted the war until 1988, as the main means of maintaining its grip on power. The tangible result on the Iranian side alone was two million dead or wounded, several million refugees, 1,000 billion dollars of economic damages, the destruction of 50 towns and cities, and the devastation of 3,000 villages.

During the war, women were urged to send their loved ones to the war front, sell all their belongings and donate them to the mullahs' war chest, and even participate in such gruesome tasks as searching through the corpses and blood-drenched clothes of victims, piecing them together, and washing and burying them.

As the state-controlled daily, *Jomhuri Islami*, reported on September 18, 1986, according to the regime's view, "A woman with character is a woman who sends her husband to the front, and then escorts her husband's corpse [in his funeral procession]. After she has escorted her husband's corpse, she helps behind the lines."

In an interview with Tehran radio on November 28, 1989, Khomeini's son, Ahmad, described the kind of woman officially promoted as ideal: "While little has been said about the *Bassiji* sisters, one cannot describe their sacrifices. They sent their sons, husbands and brothers to the fronts, then washed their blood-drenched clothes (after they were killed)."

Kayhan, September 24, 1987: "Mother Beygoum is designated to separate the pieces of flesh and bones from the clothes of a (dead soldier) and put them in a plastic bag. Another mother washes these pieces of flesh and bones and buries them."

But the misery did not end with the hostilities. This role, designated to women, has continued ever since. *Kayhan*, November 21, 1994: "The aging, frail woman was sitting outside the entrance of Alamal Hoda Base. With her tearful, poor-sighted and weak eyes, she was searching in the blood-stained military uniforms of the combatants of this land."

The social consequences of this war among its primary victims,

women and children, went unnoticed. Since it was very difficult for a widow to provide for herself and run a family in Iran's highly patriarchal society, multitudes turned to prostitution as the only means to survive. According to the Associated Press of July 21, 1989, the arrest of a war widow charged with prostitution (which could end in a death sentence) caused a national scandal, because the woman had prostituted herself as a last resort to support her family.

A confidential report to the mullahs' parliament in 1991 said the sudden surge in the rate of suicide among women throughout Iran was due in part to the pressures exerted on the wives of the Guards and soldiers who had served in the eight-year war with Iraq and who suffer from psychological disorders. The report pointed out that the most severely affected were men who spent time in the war as teenagers, when they had killed or captured scores of people or witnessed sexual intercourse with animals on the battlefield. The women suicides pointed to the psychological imbalance of their husbands as the sole reason for their decision to kill themselves.

Scores of war widows also turned to drug dealing as a means of survival, often becoming addicted to drugs as well. According to the regime's figures, 61% of women prisoners are jailed for drug-related offenses.

Girl Children Abused

Girl children suffer from the worst conditions in Iran today. According to the clerical regime's rules and regulations, a girl child can virtually be bought or sold with the consent of her male guardian. Article 1041 of the Civil Code provides that "Marriage before puberty is prohibited. Marriage contracted before reaching puberty with the permission of the guardian is valid provided that the interest of the ward are duly observed."

It has become common practice to sell or force very young girls to marry much older husbands, giving rise to all sorts of social ills. *Adineh* magazine, Summer 1991: "An eleven-year-old girl was married off to a 27-year-old man. The father, who had seven daughters, received \$300 for his consent. The morning after the marriage ceremonies, the girl was taken to hospital suffering from severe lacerations to her genitals."

The state-controlled daily, *Ressalat*, reported on December 15, 1991, that due to extreme poverty and the absence of the most basic facilities, the deprived people of northern Khorassan sell their young girls for up to 100,000 rials (\$33). The buyers, who are mostly from Gonabad, northeast Iran, take the girls away and put them to work on farms and in workshops. In the province of Sistan/Balouchestan, southeastern Iran,

girls eight to 10 years old are sold by their addicted parents for 12,000 rials (\$4).

The confidential report of the regime's parliament, September 2, 1992, on a sudden surge in suicide among women states that girl children as young as 10, instead of spending their days playing with other children, were being forced to marry men three to four times their age. Suddenly finding themselves faced with a mountain of problems beyond their capacity, they were led on numerous occasions to commit suicide.

Note (1) of article 1210 of the Civil Code states: "Age of puberty for a boy is at 15 full lunar years and for a girl is at nine full lunar years."

Article 48 of the Penal Code of 1991 provides that children are free from penal responsibility. Note (1) of the same article defines a child as a person who has not reached the age of legal puberty. This means that a nine-year-old girl can be punished as an adult by flogging, execution and even stoning. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Summary Executions indicated in his 1992 report that four minors, 16 and 17 years of age, who were accused of taking part in an anti-government demonstration, had been executed.

Girl children are abused in the labor force as well. Girls as young as four are used in the brick manufacturing, carpet weaving, textile and clothing industries. *Kayhan*, October 26, 1992: "Several 12 to 13-year-old children work in factories near Tehran." On November 22, 1994, Tehran radio quoted the Deputy for Health Affairs of the regime's Ministry of Health and Treatment as saying: "There are more than 5 million girls, 10 years old and older, who work at carpet workshops throughout Iran. Some of them have contracted various diseases like anthrax, deformed dorsal vertebrae, blindness, deformed knee joints, inflammation of finger joints, infection of gums and teeth and weakness of the legs."

Nor are the children immune to the despair which the regime propagates to society at large. *Salaam* newspaper reported on September 8, 1992: "Nine-year-old commits suicide because of poverty." *Ressalat* wrote on January 8, 1992: "In one high-school in Tehran, three girls committed suicide by throwing themselves off the top of a building in a matter of 10 days. Investigations revealed that two teachers from the Educational Affairs Bureau made lengthy speeches every morning on the futility of worldly life. They even took the students to Behesht-e-Zahra (Iran's largest cemetery in southern Tehran), and had the children lay down the graves."

In recent years, mal-nutrition has evolved as a major problem for

Iranian children, in particular girls. According to *Salaam* newspaper, by the year 1992, more than 40,000 students of Ilam province, i.e., one fourth of the total, had contracted serious diseases and their lives were endangered due to destitution and mal-nutrition.

According to *Kayhan* on January 22, 1992, out of 1.1 million elementary students who were medically examined, more than 610,000 of them, i.e. 60 percent, had some sort of disease. Of these, 190,000 students had contagious diseases and more than 12,000 had psychological ailments.

Despite such figures, on April 26, 1995, the regime's parliament passed a bill banning imports of powdered milk and baby food. These items can only be purchased by prescription from pharmacies. The mullahs have cited austerity measures to save foreign currency as the reason for this callous decision, which only aggravates the mal-nutrition of Iranian children, in particular infants.

Educational Opportunities

It has been said, "If you educate a man, you educate one person; if you educate a woman, you educate an entire family." Women's education is the key not only to their own welfare, but to that of the whole society. A sound, comprehensive educational system is a prerequisite to a society's progress. By the same token, a poor, inadequate and unequal educational system culminates in a society's destitution, stagnation and poverty.

The Iranian educational system has been in constant decline ever since the mullahs took over. Sixteen years later, it is on the verge of complete collapse. In the academic year 1994-1995, there were 17.8 million students in Iran. The budget allocated for each student in 1979 was equivalent to \$260; by 1991, this figure had plummeted to \$6 per year, i.e. 1/43 of what it was 12 years ago.

In 1992-1993, more than four million students were unable to attend schools and continue their education due to lack of facilities. According to the daily, *Ressalat*, September 24, 1994, there is a shortage of 314,000 classrooms in Iran. As a result, in some areas of the country, schools operate in three to six shifts a day. For example, according to the regime's officials, in Isfahan children can attend school only three half-days per week, and spend the rest of their time at home.

Two million of northeastern Khorassan Province's six million inhabitants (i.e. 33%) are illiterate. In Sistan/Balouchestan Province 50% of eligible students cannot attend schools. According to the daily, *Salaam*, in 1992 more than 40,000 students, over 25% of this state's

students, contracted serious diseases and were at critical risk due to destitution and poverty.

This precarious situation is exacerbated for Iranian women. The Platform of Action for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women stipulates that “education is a basic human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys, and thus ultimately leads to more equal relationships between women and men.”

According to the Compendium of Statistics on Illiteracy (1990) by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, for the years 1970-1990, the illiteracy rate is decreasing for young women worldwide. Illiteracy among Iranian women is increasing at an alarming rate. According to a report on Tehran radio in November 1989, an official of the Bureau of Statistics said the illiteracy rate among adolescent women, formerly 51%, had reached 70%.

Some 57.7% of women aged 15 to 24 are illiterate; the figure for men in the same age group is 29 percent. The figures get worse on technical training and higher education. There exists only one technical training center for women in Tehran, with a population of more than 13 million, in effect making it impossible for them to pursue technical training for a vocation. As for higher education, Iranian women are banned from such fields as law, accounting, commerce, engineering and agriculture. According to the report to the United Nations in 1992 by Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, women are excluded from 91 specific fields of study at the university level. These include 55 fields of technology and seven of natural sciences. In the arts, women have access to only 10 out of 35 fields of study.

According to *Hamshahri*, on July 5, 1993, women “are barred” from pursuing an education in 55% of math, engineering, technical and hard sciences fields; 28% of social sciences fields; and 23% of natural sciences and medical fields. The list entailed most of the important and productive fields, with professional prospects and opportunities.

On November 28, 1993, the regime’s Ministry of Higher Education announced that restrictions on technical fields and engineering, basic arts and sciences, medicine and social studies had been lifted, but an official immediately announced that there might still exist some restrictions for women in some of these fields (Tehran radio, November 29, 1993). In practice, nothing changed.

The scope is limited for Iranian women to pursue higher education. Even in fields that women are allowed to enter, a very small portion of the quotas are allotted to them, regardless of their educational

qualifications. Men get most of the opportunities. According to published statistics of the United Nations in 1986, throughout Iran there were only 49,000 female university students, a meager two percent of the total. In 1993, the “Islamic legislative assembly” rejected a move to allow unmarried female students to go abroad for further studies. Married women had to get permission from their husbands.

Participation in the Economy

Economic growth in many of the developing regions has provided new opportunities for women in economic participation, production and income. In contrast, once in power in 1979, the mullahs’ brought about an assortment of social and legal restrictions for women. Women faced various impediments to their social and political activities, at work and school, in the arts and sports. They were variously eliminated from the society at great speed, and were even stripped of their most fundamental marital rights.

In March 1979, only one month after the inception of his rule, Khomeini dismissed all women judges, investigating judges and prosecutors and first ordered the wearing of the veil. In May, he banned co-education. In June, married women were prohibited from attending high school, and the government started to shut down existing nurseries at the work place. With the passage of time, the measures to strip women off all of their social rights became law and were systematically enforced.

Article 1117 of the Civil Code states, “The husband can prohibit his wife from occupations or technical jobs which are incompatible with the family interests or the dignity of himself or his wife.” Accordingly, many Iranian women wishing to lead a socially or politically active life or even to pursue a career of interest to them are banned from doing so.

Women cannot sit on the bench and are absolutely excluded from judicial appointments. Further, they are deprived of jobs in such fields as the power, gas, oil, petrochemical, electrical and communications industries.

According to the Platform of Action for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, “women’s participation in economic life significantly increased during the past decade as women became the workers of choice in many industries and became predominant in small and medium-scale enterprises.” In Iran, the trend was completely the reverse. *Ettela’at*, reported on May 26, 1993, “While the number of women in highly technical professions has increased 40%, overall the Iranian women’s labor force shrinks by two percent every year. This

trend will completely put women out of the social arena in the future.”

According to a report by B.B.C. radio on April 6, 1993: “A decade after the revolution, the population of females had risen by 10 million, but the number of jobs for women decreased from 1.2 million in 1977 to 975,000 in 1987. “In the past, 11% of women were employed; by 1987, this figure had fallen to six percent...” The compulsory dress code initially resulted in the firing of 100,000 women. In 1977, some 20% of industrial and mine workers were women. By 1985, this had slipped to seven percent.

In an interview with *Kayhan* on March 18, 1987, the Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Hiring revealed that seven months after the enactment of article 74 of the Employment Law, more than 11,000 government employees had been purged; the overwhelming majority were women.

In comparison, according to statistics prepared by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat from the International Labor Office, the rates of women’s economic activity rose overall from 1970 to 1990. The figure for the geographical region where Iran is located was more than 20% for the year 1990. The decrease in Iranian women’s participation in the labor force also reflects a qualitative change, meaning that a large number of those women were expelled from higher positions. In 1990, the level of Iranian women’s participation in the labor market ranked 108th in the International Labor Organization’s study of 110 countries.

Unequal Before the Law

Universal respect of the indivisible and unalienable human rights of women of all ages is the basis on which all efforts for the advancement of women are built. A comparison of the Khomeini regime’s laws on women with internationally accepted principles for equality of the sexes, vividly demonstrates the bitter reality that as long as the mullahs remain in power, discrimination against women in Iran will persist.

All existing laws in Iran which deal with the rights of women arise from the stereotyped presumption that men are endowed with a right to dominate women. “A man can divorce his wife whenever he so wishes,” states Article 1133 of the Civil Code. Based on this article, a husband is not required to present any reasons or grounds for divorce. On the other hand, mullah Morteza Moghtadai, the Prosecutor General, said, “Women were not given the right to instigate divorce because they are prone to emotional and irrational decision-making.”

Article 105 of the Civil Code stipulates: “In the relationship between

husband and wife, heading the family is characteristic of the husband.” The Islamic Council of Guardians decreed that “a woman does not have the right to leave her home without her husband’s permission, not even to attend her father’s funeral procession. A woman is completely at the service of her husband.”

There is even inequality in punishment for a similar crime. According to the law of *Qisas* or *Talion*, if a woman murders a man, his family has the right to demand half of his “blood money,” (a sum paid to the next of kin as compensation for the murder of a relative) even though the murderess is executed in “retribution.” By contrast, if a man murders a woman, her next of kin must, before retribution, pay one half the murderer’s blood-money to his next of kin before an execution can take place.

Inheritance laws are also unequal. According to article 913, a widower inherits one half of the estate of his wife as a widow inherits only one fourth of the estate of her husband provided that the deceased leaves no children or grand children as heirs, in which case the widow inherits one eighth while the widower inherits one fourth of the estate. This inequality is further extended in article 946 which provides: “The husband takes inheritance from the totality of the estate of the wife; but the wife only from the following effects: a) from the movable property, of whatever kind; b) from buildings and trees,” but never the land.

If the deceased leaves sons and daughters, each son inherits and “takes twice as much as each daughter (article 907 of the Civil Code).” In all cases, the mother of the deceased takes a lesser share of the estate than his or her father.

Unequal Opportunity to Advance

Judging by the continuing gap between women’s *de Jure* and *de facto* equality, as well as their absence from power and political decision-making as indicative of any society’s attitudinal and structural discrimination against women, one can easily ascertain the plight of Iranian women in society. Women literally play no role and have no say in policy and decision-making processes under the mullahs’ rule.

There have been no women in the cabinet since the 1979 revolution. No woman had been even a deputy minister in the Khomeini regime. In the regime’s Parliament, only nine of the 270 members are women, a mere 3.3 percent.

According to article 115 of the regime’s constitution, “The President must be elected from among male religious and political dignitaries.”

Ressalat, December 15, 1986, quoted Mullah Mohammad Yazdi, the head of the Judiciary as saying: "No matter at what stage of knowledge, virtue, perfection and prudence a woman is, she does not have the right to rule... Even if a righteous accredited woman posses all qualifications, she cannot assume leadership position nor can she judge, because she is a woman."

Even a call for a parliamentary women's committee in September 1993 was strongly rejected. During the debate, a male deputy said: "Women must accept that men rule over them and the world, too, should know that man is dominant... If a women's committee is to be set up, we should also form a men's committee. If this motion is carried, we will be hearing murmurs tomorrow about a minister for women's affairs."

Rising Suicide among Women

Overwhelmed by despair, caught in a vicious cycle of social humiliation and coercion, family insecurity, constant fear for their children's lives as well as their own, and no legal and social safeguards to preserve and defend their rights, many Iranian women have found death the only escape. This has given rise to an unprecedented trend of suicides, in particular self-immolation, in Iran.

Overall, for the years 1980 to 1990, suicide increased 17-fold in Iran. As reported by *Ettela'at* on December 20, 1989, in a symposium on psychological and psychiatric research in Tehran, a study on 100 cases of suicide revealed that 69% involved women. According to a January 1, 1994, report in *Jahan-e Islam*, during the pervious year, at least 3,600 people committed suicide in one year across Khorassan Province (northeastern Iran). 2,530 of them were women. Most had tragically burned themselves to death.

The head of the intoxication ward in Mashad's Imam Reza Hospital said: "49% of those committing suicide were 10 to 30 years old. Fifty-three percent of those surveyed were married, 45% single and two percent divorced." He believed that self-immolation, the most tragic type of suicide, is on the rise.

"An official in charge of an intensive care unit for burn cases at Mashad's Qa'em Hospital said, '59 persons who had set themselves ablaze in suicide attempts were transferred to this hospital. Ninety-eight percent of them were women, and 99% of whom died.'"

Kayhan reported on November 22, 1993: "In a matter of less than two years, 880 people have committed suicide in Khuzistan province (southwestern Iran)." *Ettela'at* reported on January 20, 1994, that

“According to the governor of Ilam Province (population 456,000), 137 people committed suicide in nine months; 101 (or 74%) were women.”

A confidential report to the regime’s parliament quotes the nurses’ supervisor in a northern Tehran hospital, the capital’s only burn unit, as saying: “In a 24-hour period we use 800 sheets for women who set themselves afire and we have to sterilize the same sheets again for the new cases.” More than 95% of the victims brought to this hospital are from the poor southern districts.

An expert on psychology and accidents in Mottahari hospital in Tehran on October 5, 1992, said: “Eight out of every 10 patients who are brought to the hospital are women who have set themselves on fire.”

This tragic phenomenon is not limited to any particular region of the country. According to *Salaam*, on January 30, 1993: “The problem of suicide, previously plaguing Ilam (western Iran) and its neighboring cities, has recently hit the nation’s northern region, in some cities of Mazandaran Province.... In the past months, especially in the past two months, the suicide rate has had an unprecedented rise in Ardabil (northwestern Iran).”

Salaam, April 25, 1992 : “An 85-year-old woman set herself on fire.” According to *Zan-e Rouz*, a women’s magazine, on February 26, 1994, “A 14-year-old high school girl set herself on fire and killed herself, to evade marrying a 42-year-old man.” In December 1992, a destitute woman who was unable to provide for her infant’s needs, burned herself to death in Tehran.

In February 1994, a prominent Iranian female academic, Dr. Homa Darabi, went to one of the busiest squares in Tehran, tore off the compulsory head scarf, poured kerosine over herself and set herself on fire shouting: “Down with tyranny, long live freedom, long live Iran.” In so doing, she protested against the persecution of her countrywomen. She died of severe burns in a Tehran hospital. She had been persistently harassed by the security forces for failing to follow the strict dress code, culminating in her dismissal from the university in December 1991.

Jahan-e Islam of January 1, 1994, reported that “according to the International Health Organization, for every 100,000 persons, 20 persons in Japan commit suicide; 5.9 persons in France; 27 persons in Berlin; 10.5 persons in the United States; and 17 persons in Sweden every year.” In Iran, in Khorassan Province alone, for every 100,000 persons, 60 persons commit suicide. In Ilam Province, 41 persons

commit suicide out of every 100,000 people.

But these are official government figures. In a country like Iran in whose remote towns and villages minimum medical facilities are lacking, the actual number of suicides cannot be registered like those in Japan or the United States. In reality, one has to consider the actual number of suicides in Iran to be much higher than those mentioned in this report.

Notes

1. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, interview in Ettela'at, 7 June 1986.

III

Islam: Beacon of Women's Emancipation

As a Muslim woman, let me proclaim that the peddlers of religion who rule Iran in the name of Islam, but shed blood, suppress the people and advocate export of fundamentalism and terrorism, are themselves the worst enemy of Islam and Muslims. The day will come when they will be forced to let go of the name of Islam.

— Maryam Rajavi, June 16, 1995¹

The theocracy of the mullahs of Iran, who for 16 years have ruled and issued decrees in the name of Islam and the Islamic Republic, is recognized throughout the world as history's most misogynist regime. For Khomeini and his retinue, gender is the primary distinction. The mullahs' God, like themselves, is a misogynist torturer, constantly calculating human beings' sexual offenses. They view woman as the embodiment of sexual desire, the source of sin, and the manifestation of Satan. She must be kept out of the public view at all times, reserving her for use, under the absolute domination of men, for sexual pleasure and reproduction. In this system of values, a woman is never considered a human being, although as a concession, she has been described on a par with children and the mentally imbalanced.² At other times, to discredit her views and testimony, she is classified among thieves and

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“those who wage war on God.”³

In his most famous book, *Tahrir-ol Vasileh (Instrument of Writing)*, a collection of his views and *fatwas*, Khomeini carefully degrades women to a level less than that of slaves, and bordering on that of animals. In the chapter on cleanliness, he declares women *najes* (filthy), meaning that if men need to wash only once to cleanse themselves, women must do so twice.⁴ In his view, the multitudes of women who gather for prayers cannot hold collective prayers unless a man leads them.⁵ Although Islam emphasizes praying collectively in the mosque, Khomeini recommends that women pray at home, and even there, it is better that they pray in the closet.⁶ Women do not have the right to leave home without the permission of their husbands. Men have to provide for their living expenses, but husbands are not required to pay for their wives' serious illnesses.⁷ Denied independent means, the wife must tolerate her condition, and await death.

From this perspective, everything finds meaning in the context of the wife's attractiveness. If a woman refrains from creating an environment which provides pleasure to her husband, he has the right to beat her, and to add to the beating every day to force the wife into submission.⁸ In such a situation, the husband need not even provide for his wife's expenses. All these affairs are unilateral, and are the husband's prerogative. The wife has but one responsibility: total submission. The husband can divorce his wife *in absentia*: “In divorce, it is not necessary for the wife to know, let alone agree.”⁹ Khomeini has also sanctioned “temporary marriage,” legitimizing prostitution, specifying that a sum be paid to the woman for use of her body.¹⁰

If we add to this collection Khomeini's *fatwa* sanctioning the rape of virgin girls before their execution, and the *fatwa* permitting executions of pregnant women, we arrive at a general understanding of the views of the mullahs' mentor.

His disciple, Rafsanjani also calls for gender apartheid: “Equality does not take precedence over justice... Justice does not mean that all laws must be the same for men and women. One of the mistakes that Westerners make is to forget this.... The difference in the stature, vitality, voice, development, muscular quality and physical strength of men and women shows that men are stronger and more capable in all fields... Men's brains are larger... These differences affect the delegation of responsibilities, duties and rights.”¹¹ Rafsanjani describes an equitable division of labor as follows: “Women are consumers, but men are to manage..” Even in the home, he does not accept women as managers: “Running the affairs of the household and financial matters are the

responsibility of the husband.”¹²

The *Majlis* deputies have similar views. They believe, for example: “Women must be kept unaware...”¹³ “Women must accept that men rule over them. The world must also realize that men are superior.”¹⁴ The head of the regime’s Judiciary says: “Your wife, who is your possession, is in fact your slave.”¹⁵

These are glimpses of the misogynist mullahs’ thinking, upon which their all-encompassing, appalling suppression of Iranian women is based. They have imparted a flavor of Islam to their views, and in the name of Islam they advocate despicable hostility, a ploy unambiguously condemned in the Quran: “And who does greater evil than he who forges against God falsehood, when he is being called unto surrender?”¹⁶

The extent of Khomeini and his regime’s distortion of Islam is unprecedented in the past 1,400 years. In justifying their views on the women’s issue, the mullahs have ironically inverted the teachings of the Prophet and Holy Quran on one of the most brilliant and appealing aspects of Islam. One of the most telling features of the Age of *Jaheliat* (ignorance)¹⁷ against which the Prophet of Islam arose was the practice of burying baby girls alive. In other parts of the world, women fared no better than in the Arabian Peninsula. The emergence of Muhammed is inseparable from the dawn of women’s liberties in this period.

Islam is a far cry from what Khomeini and the mullahs would have us believe. It is the religion of *Towhid*, or oneness, and worship of one God. From Abraham to Muhammed, the leading women of the religion of *Towhid* have shone forth, from Hajar (Abraham’s wife), Asieh (Pharaoh’s wife who raised Moses), and the Virgin Mary, to Khadijeh (Prophet Muhammad’s wife) and Fatima (his daughter). The ideology of *Towhid*, which is the basis of the Islamic worldview, opposes all discrimination. *Towhid* makes a passionate call for the equality and oneness of women and men. The Holy Quran says: “O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely, the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god fearing of you.”¹⁸

Islam is an invitation to all human beings to liberate themselves. Throughout the Quran, women and men have been addressed in equal terms. In not a single case is the criteria for women differentiated from that for men. To stress the issue of equality, verse two of the chapter *Nisaa* (Women) refers to the origins of women and men: “Mankind, hear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, whether male or female, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women; fear God by whom you demand one of another.”

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In verse 194 of *Al-i-Imran* (House of Imarn) it adds: "I waste not the labour of any that labours among you, be you male or female - the one of you is as the other."

These verses clearly reject any distinctions between men and women. Women and men play an equal role in society, and there are no differences in their spheres of responsibility. For the Quran, the yardstick is one's actions and sense of responsibility. "... no soul laden bears the load of another, and that a human being shall have to his account only as he has laboured."¹⁹

Verses 72 and 73 of *Ahzab* (The Confederates), "We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth; and the human being carried it", hold women and men equally responsible, and reiterate that the element of responsibility is the criteria for judging women's and men's actions "That God may chastise the hypocrites, men and women alike, and the idolaters, men and women alike; and that God may turn again unto the believers, men and women alike."

Verse 36 of the same chapter says women and men have equal opportunities to excel: "Men and women who have surrendered, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, enduring men and enduring women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give charity, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God often - for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward."

The next verse unequivocally warns: "It is not for any believer, man or woman, when God and his messenger have decreed a matter, to have choice in the affair. Whoever disobeys God and his Messenger has gone astray into manifest error." One must ask Khomeini and the mullahs where in the Quran and Islam is there talk of inequality between women and men, of discrimination? How dare they call for the confinement of women to their homes?

Pioneers in Conversion to Islam

It is not without reason that women flourished with the coming of the Prophet of Islam, in an era when slavery and patriarchal tribal societies were intertwined. Distinction, discrimination and inequality are alien to the spirit of the Quran and Towhid. The first believer in Islam was a woman, Khadijeh, the Prophet's wife, who devoted all her wealth and her entire life to Islam. Her effective support played a prominent role in the advancement of the religion. The second Muslim was the Prophet's cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, and the third a woman,

Fatima bent As'as, a renowned woman from the Quraish and the mother of Ali. Umar, the second Muslim ruler after the death of the Prophet, was converted to Islam by his two sisters. Tradition tells us that when Umar went to see his two sisters, he found them secretly reading the Quran. The shocking encounter humbled this famous combatant of Arabia, and within a few moments, he had converted to Islam.

The first martyr to the cause of Islam was also a woman, Somaya, wife of Yasser and the mother of Ammar, one of the Prophet's great disciples. Tortured along with her husband and son by Abu-Jahl, to the very end Somaya urged them to remain steadfast.

By the sixth year after the *Be'that*²⁰, at least 23 of the first 63 Muslims were women. Many were slaves, who endured much torment and hardship. Of the first ten Muslims, a group which includes Ali and Abu-Bakr, the first caliph, four were women: Khadijeh, Fatima, and two freed slaves, Lobaineh and Zonairah. Both women had been the slaves of Umar, the second caliph, but were recognized as equals when they converted to Islam. The fifth Muslim woman, Ghozaiyeh, was a nomad. Her purity and bravery was an inspiration to other women.

The *hijrat* (migration)²¹ by Muslim women marked a major step in the path towards the liberation of women, at a time when the tribal system dictated punishments of death or slavery for a wife who left her husband. The ratio of migrant women to men is also significant. The first group of *Mohajerin*, who left Mecca for the Red Sea and Ethiopia five years after the *Be'that* (two years after the call to convert became public), was comprised of 15 Muslims. The names of at least four women, Leili, Um-Salameh, Sahleh and Roghieh, the Prophet's daughter, have been recorded in the pages of history.

In a society where being female was itself a source of shame, and girl children were buried alive by the thousands; a society which considered woman as property which was inherited, and whose human dignity was not recognized, the Prophet of Islam performed *Bei'at* (the oath of allegiance) with each of his women converts, and insisted on their participation in the most important decisions that affected the Muslim society. Then he set about providing for women's civil rights and formulating a constitution of their human rights.

His teachings abound in expressions of admiration for women, and exultation of their status. Little girls found peace at his side. Many times he was criticized by other men for "hugging goats and seating them at your side," but he replied by referring to Fatima, his daughter, as a part of his own being, and called her his mother.²² Inspired by the Word of God, he described her as *Kowthar* (the fountainhead of

continuity).

Women converts to Islam left their husbands and families in Mecca and after much torment, migrated to Medina to join Muhammed. They were with him in all arenas, including on the field of battle, where they fought alongside the men. The young society of Medina founded by the Prophet suddenly came face to face with women whose rights were without precedent. On occasion, the men opposed and resisted these changes, which included the right to choose one's spouse; the ban on women's inclusion in a deceased man's inheritance; the ban on accusing women of improprieties without due process; the right to hold property, independent of men, and recognition of contracts and business deals entered into by women independent of their husbands or male family members; the right to seek recourse against their husbands and male relatives; the right to travel and migrate; the right to inheritance; the right to a share of war booty; the right to guardianship of children; the ban on isolating women and various other arbitrary forms of divorce; the right to teach, learn, and advocate their views; the right to vote; freedom of expression; the right to take part in all social decisions; and finally, and most importantly, the right to leadership and directorship of the society.

The Right to Leadership

The Iranian mullahs say: "Regardless of a woman's knowledge, know how and wisdom, she cannot lead."²³ The clerics start with denying women the right to be judges, and then deny them a leadership role. Mohammad Yazdi, the head of the Judiciary, states: "Women cannot be judges; that is, they cannot issue a verdict and cannot run the court in such a way as to make the final decisions themselves."²⁴ In Khomeini's view, mothers have no jurisdiction over their children. A woman cannot even open a bank account for her child, let alone interfere in his or her affairs. She has no rights concerning her daughter's marriage. All these rights belong to the father or the guardian whom he designates²⁵ "Woman's testimony in questions of defense, inheritance, divorce..., leadership, justice, punishment and the appearance of the new moon, have no credibility."²⁶

In a statement issued in 1963, Khomeini opposed giving women their rights and their election to public office. He described voting rights for women as blatant "aggression" against "the Quran's unequivocal decrees," and characterized advocacy of equality between women and men as formal opposition to Islam.²⁷ Contrary to Khomeini's false claims about Islam, the Quran urges society to "consult with them," and it was

the Prophet's tradition to do so.

Citing eyewitnesses in his book *Al-Maghazi*, Vaqedi notes that in the affair known as the Hodaybieh peace treaty (with the leaders of the Quraish), which the Quran describes as a great victory, when the Prophet finished the work on the treaty, he told his disciples: "Rise, sacrifice a lamb and shave your heads" (as Muslims did when going to Mecca for the Hajj). Not understanding the strategic importance of this brilliant political maneuver by the Prophet, they did not obey his order. This angered the Prophet, who returned to the quarters of Um-Salameh, his wife who was traveling with him. When Um-Salameh heard the story, she advised the Prophet to go ahead and perform the sacrifice, and said his disciples would follow suit. The Prophet took her advice, and when the Muslims saw him, they rushed to join him.

Islam does not stop short at merely consulting with women. Verse 73 of *Towbah* (Repentance), ignored by the mullahs, refers to the equal rights of men and women: "And believers, the men and women, are leaders one of the other, they bid to honour, and forbid dishonour; they perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and they obey God and his Messenger. Those - upon them God will have mercy; God is All-mighty, All wise."

Verses 98-102 of *Al-i-Imran* stress the need for vanguards and leadership (whether male or female) for the furtherance of the Islamic movement and the unity of the lay society: "And hold you fast to God's bond, together and do not scatter; remember God's blessing upon you when you were enemies, and He brought your hearts together, so that by His blessing you became brothers. You were upon the brink of a pit of Fire, and He delivered you from it; even so God makes clear to you his signs; so haply you will be guided. Let there be one nation of you, calling to good, and bidding to honour, and forbidding dishonour; those are the prosperers. Be not as those who scattered and fell into variance..."

Society of Equality & Fraternity (Qest)

The Quran describes the aim of social development as the establishment of *Qest*, justice. Within society, *Towhid*, or monotheism (oneness), means establishing social justice. In terms of human relationships, it means equality, including between women and men: "Indeed, We sent our Messengers with the clear signs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that human beings might uphold justice."²⁸

Thus, establishing social justice is the primary objective of Islam, and women and men are equally called upon to work towards its

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realization. This is a general law, that determines the relations between women and men and between social groupings. It is hence the responsibility of the leadership of any society in any given time, namely the enlightened women and men of that society, to strive for social justice and human equality, consistent with the social context and historic period in which they live.

It can be said with certainty that what was considered to be the most radical implementation of social justice and *Qest* during the Prophet's time - an era of tribal economic and social relations, and of a patriarchal slave society - cannot be considered sufficient in later stages of social and historical development. There must be change, in the same way that social justice took on new form and meaning in the decades after the Middle Ages, when capitalism surfaced, and especially after such great developments as the French Revolution, Industrial Revolution, and independence of the United States. On the threshold of the 21st century, when the world in many ways is taking on a totally different look, social justice must attain new heights, and the equality between women and men must enter the most progressive phase of its evolution. This is the meaning of the enduring *Qest*, called for in the Quran and true Islamic thinking.

It is, to put it mildly, naive to expect that the Prophet of Islam could have implemented all the social and humanistic ideals and objectives of Islam in the society which he ironically led.²⁹ The reality is that the society of his time consisted of a set of economic and social relationships based on slavery, the level of social consciousness was quite low, and his contemporaries could not tolerate more than what was accomplished. Even those values and rights which the Prophet introduced, reflecting the depth of his thinking and justice-oriented radicalism, were met with bewilderment, opposition and resistance by his disciples. The society was not ready for more, as best attested by the fact that after the Prophet's death, it regressed.

One can conclude from the absence of women in the *Saqifeh* Council³⁰, which decided on the issue of leadership after the death of the Prophet, from their non-existence in the social and political arenas after the Prophet's demise, and to history's silence on this matter, that the succeeding patriarchal system never followed the Prophet's example. After the Prophet, we have only glimpses of the activities of the leading women of their time: the profound protests of the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, to the politics of her contemporaries; and the rebellion of Zeinab, Fatima's daughter, after the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the Prophet's grandson. Subsequent women's movements, for several centuries, were

clandestine.

Muhammed's Revolution & Women

Although some believe that among some early Arab nomadic tribes, a matriarchal system was dominant, they nevertheless acknowledge that the ruling system was patriarchal. Human rights and an independent identity for women were not recognized. The most important short-term objective of the Prophet was to establish social institutions and a civil constitution giving women an independent human identity, so that they would be recognized in the same way that men were, and no longer defined as slaves, cattle or a man's property.

The Quran says: "... to men is allotted what they earn And to women what they earn..."³¹, that, "It is not lawful for you to take of what you have given them....,"³² and that, "O believers, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will; neither debar them, that you may go off with part of what you have given them..."³³ These are examples of the steps taken to create an independent identity for women. It is significant that the last verse was revealed in Medina, after the formation of a civil society. Previously, it had been impossible for the Prophet to actually implement such bans. What meager property a woman might have was considered fair game, and no safeguards protected even her own body. Taken as a whole, the historical evidence indicates that sexual exploitation dominated the culture of the day, and prostitution was well established in the economic and social system. A verse in the Quran delivered the first blow to this status quo: "But force not your young wives to prostitutions when they desire chastity."³⁴

In offering an interpretation of verses 151, 152 and 153 of *An'am* (Cattle), the book, *Ad Dar Al Manshur...*, quotes Ebadeh ibn As-Samet, the renowned disciple of the Prophet, as saying: "The Prophet of God addressed his selfless disciples who had helped him during the difficult years in Mecca and the Hijrat, asking them: 'Which one of you will swear allegiance (*Bei'at*) with me on these three verses.'" The first part of this passage, on which the Prophet asked for and received a solemn oath, says: "Come, I will recite you what your Lord has forbidden you: that you associate not anything with Him and to be good to your parents, and not to slay your children because of poverty; We will provide you and them; and that you not approach not any decency outward or inward, and that you slay not the soul God has made sacred..."

It is understood that when the Prophet requested a special oath from his disciples, it meant that the issue was difficult for even his closest followers to accept and uphold. The children murdered on the

pretext of poverty included daughters. The pretext was also applied to girls who were thought to bring shame upon the family, or daughters who might be coveted by someone incompatible with the family's stature. These were serious matters, and the victims were buried alive. Historians write that some men prepared a small ditch prior to the birth of their children, and in the event that the baby was a girl, they put her in the ditch and poured dirt on her until she died. "... and when any of them is given the good tidings of a girl, his face is darkened and he chokes inwardly, as he hides him from the people because of the evil of the good tidings that have been given unto him, whether he shall preserve it in humiliation, or trample it into the dust..."³⁵

Therefore, the first order of business for the Prophet was the fight to eradicate this inhuman tradition, ensuring women and girls' right to life. The issue had not been totally resolved even by the last days of the Prophet's life, when some Muslims were still complaining about his practice of putting his female grandchildren, (including Zeinab, born to Fatima five years before the Prophet's death) on his lap and kissing and caressing them. Clearly, the society in which he lived could only take so much, and the Prophet faced serious obstacles in changing the status quo of women.

A glimpse of the situation of a mature woman at the time is provided by Abol Fotouh Razi in his book interpreting the Quran. Discussing verse 23 of the chapter *Nisaa*, Razi writes: "During the Age of *Jaheliat* (ignorance) and early Islam, it was customary when a married man died, for one of his male heirs to place a piece of cloth on the widow or on her tent, thereby becoming her owner. The woman would be left on her own, without any rights or income, until such time as the man wished to sleep with her. If this was not the case, the man would seek compensation from the woman for letting her go, or would keep her as a slave until she died."

Under such circumstances, it is clear that the mere mention of independent legal rights for women would be met with resistance. The Prophet, however, realized the equivalent of a bill of women's rights. His male contemporaries were put off by what they considered his bizarre practice of taking women so seriously as to accept their conversion to Islam, let alone the conversions of slave women, a subject of ridicule by the powerful men of the time. But not only did the Prophet of God accept women, the Message of God revealed to him addressed women. Gradually, verses were revealed which spoke of women's status and rights in the family and society, and finally verses about the equal status and rights of women and men.

Women's Dignity in Islam

Women whose human status had gone unrecognized in the savage patriarchal society, arose during Muhammed's great revolution. The Quran declares that rights must be taken, and not given: "God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves..."³⁶ The Prophet, therefore, was preparing the ground for women to part take in their own liberation and fashion their destiny. The revolution which began by banning the burying of live children, subsequently recognized women's civil and economic independence, "... to men is allotted what they earn And to women what they earn..."³⁷ and opened new frontiers. Muhammed's revolution had to simultaneously move forward in the cultural realm, creating basic social institutions and contracts to safeguard women's human dignity and honor. In an era dominated by sexual exploitation and insecurity, strengthening familial relationships and the rights of the family was an important step forward. In the absence of such safeguards, sexual exploitation would undermine the realization of women's new bill of rights.

The Prophet steadily tightened the restrictions against exploitation of women. One of the most radical policies was to protect women from the charge of adultery, very prevalent at the time. If the slightest suspicions were aroused, women would be murdered outright. The Prophet accomplished this in a three-staged approach, where, finally, falsely accusing someone of adultery was recorded among the eight mortal sins.

The first step was to ban the hurling of the charge. On the eve of the Hijrat to Medina and the creation of the new society, the Prophet signed a number of agreements, known as the Aqabeh agreements, with those who had come from Yathreb (Medina). In these agreements, the Prophet focused more than anything else on the rights of women, specifying that the Muslims would "Refrain from adultery, not kill their girl children, not hurl accusations, not steal, and not commit improper deeds."

During the sixth year after the Hijrat, the campaign against violations of women's dignity entered a new phase. Previously, there was no specific punishment for accusing and defaming women, although owing to an unprecedented guarantee, that is four credible witnesses, the charges themselves were rejected. A woman's reputation and honor, nevertheless, were still at risk. Verses 23-25 of *Noor* (Light) rectified this problem: "Surely those who cast it upon women in wedlock that are heedless but believing shall be accursed in the present world and

the world to come; and there awaits them a mighty chastisement.” Verse four of the same chapter states: “And those who cast it up on women in wedlock, and then bring not four witnesses, scourge them with eighty stripes, and do not accept any testimony of theirs ever; those - they are ungodly,…”

The importance of this punishment can be better understood when compared with the punishment for adultery, which is specified in verse two of the same chapter: “The fornicatress and the fornicator - scourge each one of them a hundred stripes…” This punishment would, it should be recalled, only be administered after four witnesses had testified to the occurrence of the act, as previously mentioned in verse 15 of *Nisaa*. In this chapter, however, the punishment of the accuser had not yet been specified, nor had the punishment for the woman. Her life had been spared from revenge by her relatives, and she was banished and confined to the home, but there were no punishments for men who committed adultery.

Thus, from the time of the call to Islam and the pact on the eve of the Hijrat to refrain from adultery and accusing women, until the revelation of *Noor*, three other protective steps were taken: The arbitrary punishment of women by their relatives was banned, but since this was a matter of family honor, the falsely accused woman had no protection. Men who committed adultery were not held accountable. The second step was to make the punishment proportionate, and to equalize the punishment of convicted men and women. In the third stage, punishment for the accuser strengthened the ban on falsely accusing women of adultery, a prevalent practice aggravated by tribal vengeance.

There were many obstacles to the progress of the new legal institutions on women’s rights. Newly converted Muslims, who readily sacrificed their property and their lives in the path of the Prophet, adamantly resisted the change in age-old values and ruthless patriarchal traditions. An example is to be found in one of the Prophet’s disciples, named Sa’d ibn Ebadeh. He was the chief of the Bani Al-Khazraj tribe, one of the two great tribes in Yathreb, renamed Medina. Akrame ibn Abbas writes that after the prohibition and punishment for unsubstantiated charges of adultery were revealed, a furious Sa’d ibn Ebadeh went to the Prophet and protested: “If I were to find my wife while another man is on top of her, do I not have the right to set her free before I can find four witnesses? I swear to God that I cannot find four witnesses before the man has finished and left the scene. And if I reveal what I have seen, I will be lashed 80 times.” The Prophet turned

to the *Ansar* (residents of Yathreb who had converted to Islam) and said: "Did you hear what your leader was saying?" They replied: "Do not blame him. He is a possessive person." Then Sa'd told the Prophet: "I swear to God that the verses are God's words, but I am baffled."

A short while later Sa'd's cousin, Helal ibn Omayeh arrived. He had found his wife with a man who had been working in his garden. He rushed to the Prophet and said: "When I went to my wife at night, I found a man next to her. I saw this with my own two eyes and my own two ears." So appalled was the Prophet by these words that he became visibly angry. Helal went on: "I see the signs of anger on your face, but God knows I am telling the truth and I am hopeful that God will provide an opening." It was thought that the Prophet wanted to have Helal punished. The *Ansar* were saddened that Helal shared the same view as Sa'd, and they were wondering whether he would actually be punished. Then another verse was revealed: "And those who cast it up on their wives having no witness except themselves, the testimony of one of them shall be to testify by God four times that he is truthful, and a fifth time, that the curse of God shall be upon him, if he should be of liars. It shall avert her the chastisement if she testify by God four times that he is of the liars, and a fifth time, that the wrath of God shall be upon her, if he should be of the truthful. But for God's bounty to you and His mercy and that God turns, and is All-wise..."³⁸

This new form of irreversible divorce, which the Prophet implemented, became known as reciprocal damning. Women were given several concessions. First, the woman's life was spared. Second, the element of shame in the accusation was rejected, and the honor of the woman upheld. Third, in a question involving honor, of tremendous importance, a woman was given the right to challenge her husband, to save her life and honor, and to be free forever of the influence of a husband who had accused her of adultery.

This was only one aspect of the great revolution which the Prophet of Towhid embarked upon to establish a code of freedoms for women. Muhammed had not come to institutionalize the whip, execution and stoning; the Prophet of God had come to show human beings the unlimited prospects of mercy and compassion, and to remove the shackles of ignorance, oppression and tyranny from their minds and bodies. In Muhammed's religion, falsely accusing women of adultery was designated as one of the eight mortal sins, considered far more important than not performing prayers or other religious rituals. Islam put the punishment for false accusations of adultery on a par with the punishment for adultery. What is more, it made conviction conditional

upon the testimony of four witnesses. Was this approach, adopted by the Prophet, intended to expand the punishments, or to eliminate, once and for all, such complaints' referral to the courts?

After Islam instituted the charter for women's freedoms, it set about safeguarding these gains by preventing male tyranny in the family, prohibiting various unjust methods of divorce, and limiting polygamy with an eye toward monogamy.

Independence in Economic Affairs

Earlier in this chapter, we saw that after the death of the husband, the wife or wives were inherited. A deceased man's property was taken over by his tribe. The little that history has recorded suggests that the situation of women in Iran and the Byzantine Empire was no better, with the exception of concubines of the kings and nobility. A woman's right to inheritance, set down in the Quran, was unprecedented. It came about in the second half of the third year of the Hijrat, after the end of the difficult Battle of Ohod. When the verses concerning inheritance for daughters and women were revealed,³⁹ there was an uproar and men began to protest. Ibn Abbas, the renowned disciple of the Prophet, said: "When the verses about inheritance came, a number of people were upset about them, saying they give the wife one-fourth and one-eighth, and the daughter half, and the son his share, even though none of them fight with the enemy and capture war booty." Ibn Abbas adds: "In the Age of Jaheliat, inheritance was given to the fighting man only. They would give it to the eldest."

Writing about the events after the Battle of Ohod in his book *Almaghazi*, Vaghedi quotes Jaber ibn Abdollah as saying; "We were talking with the Prophet about the Battle of Ohod and remembering the Muslims who had been killed, including Sa'd ibn Rabi'. The Prophet told us to get up and leave. There were 20 of us when we arrived in the neighborhood where Sa'd ibn Rabi' lived and the Prophet spoke to us about him and asked God to give him peace. The wife of Sa'd got up and said 'O Prophet, Sa'd was killed in Ohod and his brother came and took his inheritance. Two of his daughters are left without any wealth. And you, as the Prophet, know that women are taken as wives on the basis of their dowries.' The Prophet prayed for them and said, 'Nothing has been revealed on this matter.'" Jaber adds: "When we returned, the Prophet went to his home. We saw him assume the position [he was known to take] when the message of revelation would come, and he was sweating on his forehead. Then he called for Sa'd's wife, and when she came, he asked her, 'Where is your daughters' cousin? Ask him to come.'"

The Prophet then sent some one to bring Sa'd's brother. When he arrived, the Prophet told him, 'Give two-thirds of your inheritance to the daughters of Sa'd, and one eighth to your brother's wife. You can do what you want with the remainder of the inheritance.'"

It is obvious how progressive it was to thus divide wealth among women and men in a male-dominated society where women had no economic standing. It should be recalled that this was an era of slavery. It is also evident that the loyalists to the former system would strongly oppose such radical reforms. The significance of this recognition of women's economic independence can hardly be over-stated, in light of the fact that today, 14 centuries after the advent of Islam, in some western countries, women are in certain respects still economically and legally dependent on their husbands, and do not have exclusive rights to their own property.

Furthermore, the dynamism of Islam's teachings leaves no room for doubt that hundreds of years after the emergence of the Prophet, Islam bears a message of comprehensive economic equality between women and men. It is on the basis of these teachings that the Mojahedin, a democratic Muslim movement, not only call for equality between women and men, but believe that for a certain period of time, affirmative action must be taken to compensate for the economic and social oppression of women.

Women in Social Struggle

Despite the general absence of women in history books, we come across the names of more than 150 women during the time of the Prophet. Previously we spoke about the right of women to take part in the leadership of a society, a right affirmed in the verses of the Quran. Nowhere in the Quran are women denied the opportunity to hold any position of responsibility in any area of the society. In the young society designed and built by the Prophet, it appears that women's entry into the turbulent social scene began with their inroads into the most "masculine" sphere of activity, namely battle.

Um Sanan, one of these women, says: "When the Prophet chose to go to the Battle of Khaibar, I went to him and told him, 'O Prophet of God, I will accompany you to your destination. I prefer to provide water and treat the ill and the wounded, if there are any, and I hope there will be none.' The Prophet replied: 'With God's blessings, you may come along. You will be accompanied by other women, from your own tribe and from others, who also sought permission to come. You can accompany them or us.' When he conquered Khaibar, the Prophet

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gave us a share of the war booty. I returned along with his wife, Um Salameh. When we entered Medina, I was riding on a camel that belonged to the Prophet. Um Salameh told me that the Prophet had given me the camel I was riding.”⁴⁰

In the same book, Vaqedi writes: “The Prophet left Medina for Khaibar. He was accompanied by 10 Jews, with whose help he fought at Khaibar and whom he gave war booty equivalent to that of the Muslim fighters. There were 20 women in his entourage which left for the battle scene, including Um Salameh and Safieh (the wife and aunt of the Prophet).” He quotes Umayeh Ghafari (bent Gheis) as saying, “Along with a group from the Bani Ghaffar tribe, we went to see the Prophet and told him, ‘We will accompany you in the direction you are going, and will treat the wounded and help as much as we can.’ The Prophet accepted and said, ‘With God’s blessings.’”

At the time, his decision was probably all the more unfathomable, because women who did not appear capable of accomplishing much were also allowed onto the field of battle. Omayeeh Ghaffari adds: “I was only a young girl and the Prophet put me on board a four-legged animal on top of some equipment.” In her old age, she also described this incident to another women, named Um Ali Bent Al Haakam. She referred to the particular difficulties that go along with adolescence, and said that the Prophet’s attention to her condition amid the fighting had been astounding. She said that after the end of the fighting, which lasted for a week, the Prophet gave her a necklace from the war booty which she kept until the last days of her life.

Khaibar, the wife of Abdollah ibn Enis, was also among the mojahedin women. She was pregnant and gave birth during the fighting. When the child’s father brought the news of this unusual and problematic birth to the Prophet, God’s Messenger gave him some instructions about his wife’s nutritional needs and care. The daughter of Assem ibn Odai was also born during a battle. They named her Sahleh (easy).

Obviously, the Prophet’s intention in encouraging these women, especially the young and pregnant, to go to the scene of battle was other than to advance the cause. He sought a higher goal, namely the struggle and victory of these women over the stereotype of being the weaker sex oppressed by a patriarchal society.

Khaibar may have been the high point of women’s active presence in their society, but not the beginning. The turning point had come with the Battle of Ohod, which occurred during the third year of Hijrat. During the battle, a lack of discipline by some men had turned a victory into a defeat, and many renowned men fled the field. More than 70 out

of a force of several hundred were killed. At the height of defeat and despair, a number of women rose to the occasion. Among them were 14 relatives of the Prophet, including his daughter Fatima, who was only 10 and carried water and food on her back for the combatants and treated the wounded. More importantly, the women took up arms and fought, especially to defend the Prophet's life.

On the eve of the Prophet's Hijrat to Medina, when the people of Medina secretly signed a pact with Muhammed, two women, Nosaibeh and Esmah, were among them and, like the men, pledged to defend him with their property and lives. Nosaibeh took part in the Battle of Ohod. She took charge of defending the Prophet, and killed two enemy soldiers with her own hands. She received 13 wounds in this battle, which took a year to heal.

Price for Women's Liberty

The attractions of the new religion had caught the eyes of many in Mecca, who kept their religion a secret. Others were so enthusiastic that at their first opportunity, they left Mecca and migrated to Medina. This threatened the sense of security among the leaders in Mecca, who were afraid of losing their relatives and especially their slaves. Thus, in the Hodaibieh peace treaty, in return for their promise not to attack the Muslims and their allies, they included the provision stipulating that the Prophet would return to them those who had escaped from Mecca. The Prophet accepted this condition, but the treaty had just been signed and the Prophet had not yet returned from Hodaibieh when a major incident put the whole treaty at risk.

As the Prophet's great disciple, Ibn Abbas, recorded it, Sa'bieh, the daughter of Hareth Eslemi, had joined with the Muslims. Her husband, from the Bani Mahzzom tribe, went to the Prophet and citing the agreement which had just been signed, demanded that his wife be returned. Giving refuge to this woman was a critical decision for the Prophet. Verse 10 of the chapter *Mumtahana* (The Woman Tested) settled the matter: "O believers, when believing women come to you as emigrants, test them. God knows very well their belief. Then if you know them to be believers, return them not to unbelievers. They are not permitted to unbelievers, nor are unbelievers permitted to them. Give the unbelievers what they have expended..." To take care of the matter of the agreement, Muhammed replied: "We have agreed to return all men, not women." In the agreement it says, "any man who came to you must be returned." In accordance with the verse, the woman's dowry was returned to her husband, but she stayed with the Prophet and was

not sent back.

For the next two years after Sa'bieh's migration, when the Meccans violated the pact and the Muslims conquered Mecca, other women left Mecca for Medina. They included Omayeh, daughter of Bashir; Um Kulthum, daughter of Aqabah; and Zeinab, the Prophet's eldest daughter from Khadijah. Except for Zeinab, whose husband later joined the Muslims and converted to Islam, the other Mohajerin women remarried in Medina.

Migrating despite great dangers, letting go of the old religion and traditions, leaving husbands and family, and remarrying within the new set of relations were truly giant strides undertaken by the women inspired by the message of Islam. It was a unique opportunity to make great progress toward women's emancipation. For his part, in accepting them and especially in sanctioning their unilateral divorces from former husbands, the Prophet took great risks and paid a heavy price for their liberation.

Oath of Allegiance with all Women

After the conquest of Mecca, in the eighth year of the Hijrat, the Prophet of Islam performed the oath of allegiance with all the women in Mecca. Many women were still enemies of Islam, but Muhammed nevertheless made a pact with them, the provisions of which are stated in verse 12 of the chapter *Mumtahana*: "O Prophet, when believing women come to thee, swearing fealty to thee upon the terms that they will not associate with God anything, and will not steal, neither commit adultery, nor slay their children, nor bring a calumny they forge between their hands and their feet, nor disobey thee in aught honourable,..."

According to the prevailing tribal system, Bei'at by the head of the tribe sufficed, and there was no need for each and every member to perform the oath of allegiance. Individual pledges by leading figures had political significance. Therefore, the Bei'at with the women of Mecca was meant to change these women, who were subordinate to the system, into independent, emancipated women. Independent of their husbands, fathers or their tribes, they individually made pledges and thus accepted responsibility. This opened their path to progress. The provisions of the pact also attest to the Prophet's attention to the liberation of these women. The Prophet himself, and not the Muslim society, were the reciprocal party to this oath. To encourage women to make commitments and become emancipated, the greatest moral capital of Islam and the new system, the Prophet himself, had entered into the fray.

A review of the history of Muhammed's movement leaves no

doubt the Prophet of Islam took the women's issue very seriously, an approach later emulated by his direct descendants.

Notes

1. *The Lion and Sun*, the Iranian Resistance's Journal, July 1995, p. 8. Maryam Rajavi, addressing live via satellite a 15,000-strong audience of Iranians in Dortmund and millions of Iranians inside the country on 16 June 1995.
2. Ruhollah Moussavi al-Khomeini, *Tahrir-ol Vasileh (Instrument of Writing)*, a collection of Khomeini's views and fatwas, (Iraq: 1963), vol. 2, p. 494.
3. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 492.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
5. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 237 - 238
6. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 151.
7. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 316.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 289, 313.
11. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, interview in *Ettela'at*, 7 June 1986.
12. Hashemi Rafsanjani, interview in *Kayhan*, 26 April 1984.
13. *Ibid.*, 3 May 1984.
14. Abbas Abbasi, parliament deputy, *Jomhouri Islami*, 8 October 1994.
15. Mohammad Yazdi, Head of the Judiciary, *Ressalat*, 15 December 1986.
16. The Quran, interpreted, by Arthur J. Arberry, (Qum: 1962, Centre of Islamic Studies), *Sura LXI, Saff (Ranks)*, Verse 8, p. 581.
17. *Jaheliat* is the Arabic word for ignorance, referring to era in the Arabian Peninsula before the rise of Muhammed in 611 A.D.
18. *Ibid.*, *Sura XIX: Hujurat (Apartments)*, Verse 13, p. 538.
19. *Ibid.*, *Sura LIII: Najm (Star)*, Verse 41, p. 552.
20. *Be'that* is a reference to Muhammed's designation as the Prophet of Islam in 611 A.D. He was 40 years old at the time.
21. *Hijrat* is the Arabic word for migration which Muhammed and his disciples undertook in 624 A.D. from Mecca to Medina after it became impossible to spread the word of Islam in Mecca and following an invitation by the Jewish tribes in Medina to the Prophet to set up base in that city.
22. In Arabic the expression "*Umm-e Abiha*" (the mother of her father) reflects the Prophet's respect for his daughter, Fatima and her stature in the eyes of Muhammed.
23. Yazdi, op. cit.

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24. Ibid.
25. Khomeini, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 13.
26. Ibid., p. 447.
27. The views of the *Marjas* (religious leaders) in Qom in February 1952, *Saheefeh Noor (The Book of Light)*, vol. 1., p. 31.
28. The Quran, op. cit., *Sura LVII: Hadid (Iron)*, Verse 25, p. 567.
29. The mandate of the Prophets is essentially an invitation to the religion and far beyond leading the society. But the Prophet of Islam had the mandate to establish an Islamic society.
30. *Saqifeh Bani Sa'edah* was a council formed after the Prophet's death to determine the leadership succeeding him.
31. The Quran, op. cit., *Sura IV: Nisaa (Women)*, Verse 32, p. 77.
32. Ibid., *Sura II: Baqara (Cow)*, Verse 229, p. 32.
33. Ibid., *Sura IV: Nisaa (Women)*, Verse 23, p. 75.
34. Ibid., *Sura XXIV: Noor (Light)*, Verse 32, p. 356.
35. Ibid., *Sura XVI: Nahl (Bee)*, Verse 58,59, p. 264.
36. Ibid., *Sura XI: Ra'ad (Thunder)*, Verse 11, p. 240.
37. Ibid., *Sura IV: Nisaa (Women)*, Verse 32, p. 77.
38. Ibid., *Sura XXIV: Noor (Light)*, Verse 6-10, pp. 352-353.
39. Ibid., *Sura IV: Nisaa (Women)*, Verse 11, p. 73.
40. Abridged from the Book *Al-Maghazi* by Muhammed ibn Umar ibn Vaqedi.

IV

Women in the Resistance

They are the only army in the region, perhaps in the world to field women in front line combat. In recent battles these women fought hand to hand along side the men. They showed no hesitation in fighting close up.

— NBC News, May 26, 1991¹

Iranian women's century-long movement for equality has perhaps entered its most brilliant phase in the post-shah period. True, the clerical regime's blatant dual oppression of women has been and continues to be a national disaster. Yet, for the first time in Iran's history, the women's movement has emerged as an integral part of the broader struggle for freedom and social justice, adding new depth and guarantees of success. Unlike previous eras, when the progress of the women's movement was the function of an individual woman's heroism, or dictated by the social and political environment at the time, the Resistance today against the clerical regime comprises within its ranks a generation of women who have overcome the obstacles which traditionally limited women's serious involvement in the struggle outside the family setting.

In this struggle, women have played a consistent, disciplined and equal role on two fronts: the quest for social justice and women's equality. They have focused on political issues, cultural matters, human rights, and even such basic questions as a woman's right to choose her own clothing. At no time during the reign of the mullahs have women succumbed to the pressures and persecution directed at them.

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In the early days, after the shah's fall in February 1979, veteran women political activists, many of whom had just been released from prison, led the way. Most prominent among them were women members of the People's Mojahedin, the main opposition during the shah's time, soon to emerge as the principal resistance force against Khomeini and his retinue. Women's prior participation in the anti-shah movement acted as a springboard for their defiance of Khomeini's attempts to roll back the clock. Soon, women from all walks of life, from blue-collar workers to highly trained professionals and housewives with different educational backgrounds, took to the streets to protest.

On March 7, 1979, less than a month after the overthrow of the monarchy, Khomeini ordered the observance of a dress code for women in offices and public places. Iranian women challenged the directive in a major demonstration in Tehran on March 8, International Women's Day. The protest did not stop Khomeini from pressing on. Soon, gangs of thugs and club-wielders roamed the streets, chanting "either the veil or a hit on the head," and assaulting women in public. On March 11, the Mojahedin issued a statement denouncing the decree. The statement said: "Any use of force to impose any sort of veil or dress code on the women of this country... is irrational and unacceptable. Our revolution cannot accept any second thoughts on or denial of Iranian women's complete judicial, legal, political and social rights."

These events marked the beginning of a difficult, non-violent political struggle that lasted two and half years, until June 1981. For women, of course, the price was much heavier than for men. They were not only insulted, beaten and attacked on the streets, but also had to tolerate pressures and scorn at home, where parents were not yet prepared to accept such activism by their daughters. During this period, scores of women were killed, seriously wounded or arrested by the mullahs' Revolutionary Guards and para-military groups.

A high school student in the southern city of Shiraz, Nasrin Rostami was attacked by guards as she was distributing Mojahedin literature in 1980. One eye was gouged out, and she died a few days later in the hospital. Similar incidents occurred all across the country, where women members and sympathizers of the Mojahedin were the prime targets of the government-organized hooligans and official repressive forces. The active presence in the social and political arenas of Mojahedin women and girls wearing headscarves was a major impediment to Khomeini's attempts to force women back into their homes under the pretext of Islam. On April 27, 1981, women supporters of the Mojahedin, many mothers among them, staged a 150,000-strong

demonstration to protest against the emerging dictatorship and brutalities. The protest was described by Iran watchers as the first mass expression of defiance against the new order.

On June 20, the Mojahedin organized another peaceful demonstration by half a million of their supporters in Tehran.. Aware of the implications of the march, Khomeini issued personal orders to stop the throngs of people marching toward the parliament at all costs. Using heavy machine guns, the Guards began shooting indiscriminately. Hundreds were killed or wounded, and thousands arrested. Women and young girls constituted a sizable portion of the victims. The reign of terror and mass executions began that same evening.

One of the first groups of victims were 12 teenage girls, arrested on June 20, 1981. Their identities had not even been established when they were sent before the firing squad. In a statement in the state-controlled daily, *Ettela'at*, on June 24, 1981, the "Public Relations Office" of the Prosecutor General published the pictures of the girls, taken just before their death, with a notice to their parents to go to Evin Prison to identify the bodies.

The elimination of all avenues of political activity led many people to join the underground Resistance that began subsequent to the June 20 massacre. The scope of women's involvement in the nationwide struggle is reflected in the fact that tens of thousands of women have been executed on political charges by the regime since June 20, 1981, notwithstanding the tens of thousands of women arrested and tortured in the same period. Their participation has steadily increased, both numerically and qualitatively, unlike previous eras, when harsh conditions and brutal clampdowns succeeded in pushing women to the fringes. As the Resistance against the clerics has advanced, women have continued to take on more of the movement's serious responsibilities, attaining leadership roles. Tens of thousands, from all walks of life, have joined the Resistance, investing their lives in the prospects it offers for a new, free life for Iranian women.

Besides their crucial role in the organized Resistance, women have become indispensable to most expressions of anti-government protest. On April 4, 1995, some 50,000 took to the streets of Islamshahr and four other south Tehran townships. Women have also been prominent in other protests in cities, factories, educational institutions, etc. Aware of the severe punishments, ordinary women nevertheless try to defy the mullahs' anti-women laws and regulations, including the mandatory dress code.

Women Lead the Way

The Resistance believes that it is not enough to provide legal safeguards for equality. Equality must be realized in all aspects of political, social, and family life in a realistic, non-formalistic manner. The rights of women should be observed not out of compassion, or in a purely theoretical sense, but on the basis of the reality of their equality with men.

The first step is to create the opportunity for women to choose freely; in other words build relationships that are unimpeded by distinctions and discrimination based on gender. The women in the Resistance movement began to move towards their own liberation only after such an opportunity to choose freely was presented, and only after believing in the truth of the equality of women and men and rejecting distinctions based on gender.

The Platform of Action for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women promotes the goal of 50-50 representation in all appointive and electoral nominating processes. One of its targets is to have at least 35 percent of managerial positions and a minimum of 15 percent of senior decision-making positions held by women by the year 2000.

As the movement continued to grow in size and quality, the Iranian Resistance surpassed these objectives in 1985. In diametric opposition to the Khomeini regime, women in the Resistance assumed the most sensitive political and military responsibilities. Four years after the beginning of all out Resistance, women took the lead when the Mojahedin elected Maryam Rajavi, the most capable member of the organization, as joint leader of the movement. In 1989, she was elected as the Secretary General of the Mojahedin. In 1993, the Mojahedin elected 24 women to the 24-member Leadership Council, the organization's highest decision-making body.

On the political front, women comprise half the members of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCR), the 235-member political coalition of democratic forces, which acts as the parliament in exile and will be the provisional government after the mullahs' ouster. Several of the most important committees of this parliament are chaired by women. These committees will serve as the bases for the ministries of the provisional government, and are currently drafting programs for Iran's reconstruction and administration after the ouster of the mullahs' dictatorship. In August 1995, Mrs. Mahvash Sepehri, 38, was chosen as the senior secretary of the NCR.

Freedoms & the Rights of Women

On April 17, 1987, the NCR ratified a 13-point plan entitled the Declaration of the National Council of Resistance of Iran on the Freedoms and Rights of Iranian Women, specifying the future provisional government's plan of action. According to this plan, women's equality will be recognized in all social, economic, political, personal, and familial spheres. It will also be recognized in regard to such legal matters as testimony, guardianship, custody, and inheritance. The plan specifies support for Iranian women's organizations and consideration of special facilities for their activities. The articles of the declaration are as follows:

1- The right to elect and be elected in all elections, and the right to suffrage in all referendums.

2- The right to employment and free selection of profession, and the right to hold any public or government position, office or profession, including the presidency or judgeship in all judicial institutions.

3- The right to free political and social activity, social intercourse and travel without permission of another person.

4- The right to choose clothing and covering.

5- The right to use without discrimination, all instructional, educational, athletic and artistic resources; and the right to participate in all athletic competitions and artistic activities.

6- Recognition of women's associations and support for their voluntary formation throughout the country; consideration of special privileges in various social, administrative, cultural and particularly educational fields in order to abolish inequality and the dual oppression of women.

7- Equal pay for equal work; prohibition of discrimination in hiring and during employment; equal access to various privileges such as vacations, retirement benefits, and disability compensation; enjoyment of child and marital benefits and unemployment insurance; the right to salary and special accommodations during pregnancy, childbirth, and care of infants.

8- Absolute freedom in choice of spouse and marriage, which can take place only with the consent of both parties and must be registered with a legal authority; marriage prior to the attainment of legal age is prohibited; in family life, any form of compulsion or coercion of the wife is prohibited.

9- Equal right to divorce; divorce must be processed by a qualified judicial court; women and men are equal in presenting grounds for divorce; child custody and support as well as financial settlements will be determined by the verdict for divorce.

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10- Support for widowed and divorced women and for children in their custody; care will be provided through the National Social Welfare System.

11- Elimination of legal inequalities with regard to testimony, guardianship, custody and inheritance.

12- Polygamy is prohibited; under special circumstances, the law would specify the appropriate arrangements.

13- Prohibition of all forms of sexual exploitation of women on any pretext, and abrogation of all customs, laws and provisions authorizing the father, mother, parent, guardian, or another to bestow a girl or a woman, on the pretext of marriage or other, for sexual gratification or exploitation.

The NCR program not only provides maximum safeguards for women, but also eradicates the social basis for this gender distinction.

Women in the Resistance's Army

Throughout the world, the military is traditionally regarded as a man's domain. Women in the military must overcome extreme difficulties, various barriers and many obstacles (including cultural) to prove their abilities. The debate on this issue is ongoing almost everywhere in the world, especially the Muslim world.

Iranian women have made remarkable achievements in this arena. The National Liberation Army, the military arm of the Iranian Resistance, was founded in June 1987 along the Iran-Iraq frontier. It is an all-volunteer, modern, mechanized, tank-equipped army. At first, women's primary role was behind the lines and in logistics, medical units and maintenance. By winter of 1987, women had been deployed in artillery units, and came under the direct fire of the enemy's artillery. Next came all-female units with male commanders. By 1988, women had entered front-line combat. They continued to train in all-female units, acquiring greater military capabilities.

Soon, there were all-female brigades with female commanders. In June 1988, when the NLA launched a major offensive to liberate the city of Mehran, an all-female brigade captured the city itself. In the following offensive, "Eternal Light," the NLA pushed 170 km into the regime's territory and engaged in four days of heavy fighting with 200,000 enemy forces. Women commanded a number of the divisions in the battlefield. By the end of 1988, seven women had been appointed to the 15-member NLA General Command, a solid 47 percent presence at the highest level of the army.

Women's ascension in the Resistance's military has continued

unhindered ever since. Presently, women comprise one-third of the rank and file of the National Liberation Army of Iran, and the majority of its commanders. The army's Deputy Commander in Chief, Chief of Staff, and many other members of the General Command are women. Women perform in various capacities, even the most physically challenging tasks like combat engineering and commanding tank units. The NLA has also trained women helicopter pilots. Most observers who have had first-hand experience with the NLA, including scores of reporters from international news organizations, were very impressed by the role of women, and acknowledge it is unprecedented.

NBC News, May 26, 1991: "They are the only army in the region, perhaps in the world to field women in front line combat. In recent battles these women fought hand to hand along side the men. They showed no hesitation in fighting close up."

Daily Telegraph, June 7, 1991: "To anyone used to the slovenly ways of Middle Eastern armies, the National Liberation Army of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran comes as something of a shock."

Reuters, June 2, 1991: "One woman commands the workshops where the army repairs its armor, another is in charge of combat engineering, one of the most strenuous jobs in the military."

The Finishing Touch

It goes without saying that Iranian women's extensive participation in the Resistance is the most essential guarantee for the realization of their strides toward the emancipation of women. The climax of this trend in the anti-fundamentalist Resistance came on August 22, 1993, when the National Council of Resistance elected a woman, Maryam Rajavi, as the President for the future Iran. The election of Mrs. Rajavi, as the symbol of national unity, inspired new hope among Iranians in and out of Iran. While she has evoked a new spirit of resistance among all Iranians, her impact has been tremendous among women, who see in her the end to the prevailing gender-apartheid. As a result, a multitude of women have since joined the Resistance in Iran and abroad.

On June 16, 1995, in a speech entitled "Freedom," Mrs. Rajavi announced her 16-point "Charter of Fundamental Freedoms" for future Iran. Her remarks were broadcast live via satellite to 15,000 Iranians in Germany, the biggest ever gathering of Iranians outside Iran since the overthrow of the shah, and millions of Iranians inside the country.

In this charter, Mrs. Rajavi reiterated the Resistance's emphasis on freedom of speech, opinion, the press, parties and political associations, adding that elections would be the only criterion for the legitimacy of

the government. The Charter deals extensively with the rights of women. It stipulates that women “will enjoy social, political and cultural rights absolutely equal to those of men,”² including:

*The right to elect and be elected in all elections, and the right to suffrage in all referendums.

*The right to employment and freedom of choice in profession, and the right to hold any public or government position, office, or profession, and judgeship in all judicial bodies.

*The right to free political and social activity, social intercourse and travel without the permission of another person.

*The right to freely choose the spouse, to marry, equal rights to divorce. Polygamy is banned.

*The right to freely choose clothing and covering.

*The right to use, without discrimination, all instructional, educational, athletic, and artistic resources, and the right to participate in all athletic competitions and artistic activities.

It appears that after more than a century of struggle for their legitimate rights, the women of Iran are at last on the verge of a historic achievement, denied them for so long by oppressive regimes, social barriers and cultural taboos: Equal rights with men in all spheres of life.

Notes

1. NBC News, Sunday Morning Program, 26 May, 1991.
2. *The Lion and Sun*, the Iranian Resistance's Journal, July 1995, p. 8. Maryam Rajavi, addressing live via satellite a 15,000-strong audience of Iranians in Dortmund and millions of Iranians inside the country on 16 June 1995.

V

Architect of Women's Liberation

In all of Iran they have pinned their hopes on this woman. She is the ayatollah regime's number-one enemy. A modern, Muslim Joan of Arc, brilliant and cheerful, who leads the struggle against the gloom and darkness of the rulers in Tehran. The focal point of hope for democratic change in Iran is Maryam Rajavi, the Paris-based President-elect of the Iranian Resistance.

— Gabi Gleichmann, ex-president, Swedish Pen Club, January 21, 1994¹

“Allow me as a woman to tell the wicked and misogynous mullahs: With all of your reactionary and medieval savagery, misogyny and oppression, you have done all you could do to Iranian women, but I warn you to beware of the day when this tremendous historic force is set free...

“You will see how you and your backwardness will be uprooted by these free women. You mullahs have chosen, with your unspeakable crimes against women, and you cannot avoid being swept away from Iran's history by these same liberated women.”²

These are one of the most recent remarks by a woman who has today become the focal point of hope for all Iranians, particularly women,

for a democratic and equitable future. A woman who for many years had strove unremittingly to pave the way for women's equal partnership to chart their lives and fate in the realm of politics and struggle.

Maryam Rajavi was born 43 years ago to a middle-class family in Tehran. She has a 13-year-old daughter and a degree in metallurgical engineering. She became acquainted with the anti-shah movement in 1970. After entering Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, she became a leader of the student movement and joined the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, a Muslim, democratic and nationalist movement that espouses the establishment of a secular government in Iran. The shah's regime executed one of her sisters and the Khomeini regime murdered another, pregnant at the time, along with the sister's husband.

The post-shah era

After the fall of the shah, the Mojahedin soon emerged as the principal opposition movement to the Khomeini regime. Mrs. Rajavi was active in the social department of the organization, and played an instrumental role in attracting and recruiting university and high school students. She was a candidate for the parliamentary elections in Tehran in 1980. Despite widespread rigging, she received more than a quarter of a million votes.

Mrs. Rajavi was among the key organizers of two major non-violent demonstrations in Tehran, in April and June of 1981, against the new dictatorship. On June 20, 1981, Khomeini unleashed his pervasive terror on Iranians. Tens of thousands were arbitrarily arrested or executed *en masse*. During this period, the *Pasdaran* (Guards Corps) raided her places of residence several times, but she managed to survive these life or death encounters.

In 1982, the organization asked her to move to Paris, where the political headquarters of the movement had been established. The most capable woman member in the Mojahedin. Mrs. Rajavi was elected as the Mojahedin's joint-leader in 1985, and four years later, in 1989, became the Secretary General of the organization.

Following the formation of the Resistance's military arm, the National Liberation Army (NLA), in 1987, she was appointed the army's Deputy Commander in Chief, and directed the NLA's transformation into a well-trained, modern and mechanized force.

Changing women's roles

Mrs. Rajavi's leadership in the Mojahedin and NLA had a dramatic

impact on the progress of women within the Resistance movement. Her approach to the issue of women's emancipation was unique, as was her offensive against the patriarchal culture. She says: "Iranian women must free themselves. Freedom does not come free, and no one will ever deliver it to us on a silver platter. The path to liberation begins the moment you believe that no one can prevent the liberation of a woman who has chosen to be free of all the fetters we all know too well."³

Under her leadership, women have played a tremendous role within the Resistance. In the NLA, women quickly advanced and in less than a year took part in front line combat, later becoming brigade and division commanders. These advancements were not limited to the military sphere. Women occupied decision-making positions in the Resistance's political, public relations, financial and management directorates. In Mrs. Rajavi's view, "First we must create an opportunity for women to choose freely; in other words, build relationships that are unimpeded by distinctions and discrimination based on gender. It is only in such a relationship that the issue of free choice can be meaningful for women... Rejecting distinctions based on gender requires us to reject the notion of a human being as condemned to a determined fate because of characteristics imposed on him or her about which she or he had no say, for example, nationality, gender, language, appearance, etc. The law of human evolution determines that an individual's humanity is determined by what she or he has created by choice and action."⁴

On the basis of this outlook, major advances in rejecting gender-based distinctions were made within the ranks of the Resistance, and all women, not just a few, were able to realize their human essence. Given the deep roots of the patriarchal mind-set, Mrs. Rajavi argued, women had to be given the opportunity to exercise hegemony over men, at least for a period of time, in order to consolidate them in their positions. Consistent with this rationale, all sections of the Resistance underwent profound changes. In 1985, women comprised 30% of the movement's rank-and-file, but none held senior positions. In 1988, seven of the 15 members of the NLA's General Command were women. By 1991, more than half (51%) of the Mojahedin's Executive Committee (the highest decision-making body) were women. A woman, Fahimeh Arvani, was elected as the Mojahedin's Deputy Secretary General and presided over the organization's 738-member Central Council. This tremendous growth led to the formation of the Leadership Council. All 12 members and 12 candidate members were women. Presently, women comprise half the members in the NCR, the Resistance's Parliament. They occupy the most senior positions in the political, international

and military sections of the Resistance.

Obviously, these achievements did not come about easily. Mrs. Rajavi had to eliminate obstacles to this full participation one by one. First of all, she tried to convince her woman compatriots to believe in their capabilities and potentials and to take their political destiny in their own hands. By the same token, she courageously made the male members of the resistance understand that without such participation of women, the overthrow of the Khomeini regime and the establishment of pluralism in Iran would be impossible. Thus, not only did women undertake remarkable responsibilities within the Iranian resistance movement, men too, blossomed in their work and surpassed new frontiers in assuming responsibilities.

The President-elect

In August 1993, the 235-member National Council of Resistance, the Iranian Resistance's Parliament, elected Mrs. Maryam Rajavi as Iran's future President for the transitional period following the mullahs' overthrow.

Subsequently she resigned her posts in the Mojahedin and NLA, in September 1993, to devote all her time and energy to her new responsibilities. In her new role as the President, she presents a formidable political, social, cultural and ideological challenge to the ruling clerics. "In this new capacity," she said, "my most important responsibility is to create and promote national solidarity. My first task is to give the Iranian people back their hope... I want to give them the hope that, united together, we can overcome the darkness, hopelessness and death that has enveloped our country."⁵

Her election dramatically changed the domestic political scene in Iran, where the helpless and demoralized citizenry, especially women, were given new hope for a better future. Her election proved equally inspiring and its impact profound among Iranians living abroad. Mrs. Rajavi's message of compassion, love and fraternity offered a remedy to heal the deep wounds and scars inflicted during the clerics' 16-years of vengeful reign on Iranians at home and abroad.

The misogynous mullahs immediately realized that the election of a Muslim woman as the President of Iran was undermining the cultural and ideological foundations of their regime. They reacted by unleashing their fury on France, where Mrs. Rajavi set up her headquarters in 1993. Government agents hurled grenades at the French embassy and other French institutions in Tehran.

Meanwhile, a multitude of delegations from the four-million-strong

Iranian exile community, consisting of the most educated and skilled sectors of the society, rushed to meet Mrs. Rajavi in Paris. Her message to them was simple and to the point: "I have devoted my life to bringing hope for a better future to the people of Iran... And also to proving to the world that Islam as a social and democratic religion is not belligerent and can be productive for women. This is the mandate that gives me inner satisfaction and a sense of true freedom... After the overthrow of the mullahs, we should, more than anything else, try to soothe the sense of revenge and hatred among our people. We should create unity and expand the sense of tolerance and patience in the society. It is our mandate to revive the identity and dignity of the Iranian people."⁶

New hope

On July 22, 1994, some 50,000 Iranians in 16 cities the world over participated in demonstrations against the Tehran regime and in support of the National Council of Resistance and its President-elect. The events marked the 42nd anniversary of the public uprising that brought the nationalistic Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, to power in Iran, thwarting efforts by the shah to oust him. In the fall of 1994, she urged Iranian students to celebrate *Mehregan*, a popular traditional celebration of autumn banned by the mullahs. The Resistance's sympathizers engaged in different activities in more than 50 Iranian cities.

Her calls to Iranians to defy the clerics gave impetus to the popular unrest. Eight major uprisings and many smaller protest actions, demonstrations and strikes have erupted throughout the country in 1995. The Mojahedin's Command Headquarters in Iran, which directs an extensive network inside the country, recruited scores of new activists in various cities. This network distributed millions of brochures and leaflets, as well as tens of thousands of video tapes containing Mrs. Rajavi's messages, among the populace. Despite the risks, Resistance cells also posted thousands of banners with pictures and messages of Mrs. Rajavi in major cross streets and public areas.

Reviving the arts

Mrs. Rajavi paid special attention to Iranian art and culture, two rich and deeply valuable features of Iranian life which the mullahs have adamantly tried to pervert. "Whereas Khomeini espouses the culture of sorrow, despair, and disappointment, in a word a culture of the cemetery and graveyard, the Iranian Resistance advocates the culture of love, jubilation, affection, life and happiness,"⁷ underscores

Mrs. Rajavi, adding that the Iranian Resistance's task at this juncture and in future Iran is "to prepare the ground for artists to develop their creativity in an open, free and healthy environment... We hope that our genuine culture and art can take the spirit of life and hope, light and brightness, prosperity and abundance throughout the country and deep into the heart of every Iranian, fueling the flames of hope for a better life and a brighter future,"⁸ she says.

Under her direction, Iranian artists and music stars, forced into exile, came forward and began performing to revive Iran's rich heritage in the arts and music. On July 21, 1994, Mrs. Rajavi attended a memorable concert at Paris's Palais des Congrès, where nine of Iran's most acclaimed music stars performed before an audience of 3,000.

In summer 1994, Marzieh, the *grande dame* of Iranian music for the last 50 years, left Iran after 15 years of silence in defiance to the mullahs, and came to meet Maryam Rajavi and join the ranks of the Resistance against the clerics. She became a member of the National Council of Resistance and was appointed as the Cultural Advisor to the President-elect. She performed her first concert at London's Royal Albert Hall in March 1995 and followed with two other successful performances before capacity crowds in Dusseldorf and Stockholm.

Charter of Freedoms

"Freedom is the most precious of all jewels... Freedom is the essence of progress... For us, freedom is an ideal and a belief. It is the spirit that guides our Resistance. Freedom is the *raison d'être* of our movement, it is the reason for its growth and development."⁹ These remarks, during a speech broadcast live via satellite to 15,000 Iranians in Dortmund's giant Westfalenhallen and to millions of Iranians at home, on June 16 1995, aptly reflect Mrs. Rajavi's profound understanding of and deep commitment to fundamental freedoms.

In the two-hour speech, Mrs. Rajavi presented her 16-point "Charter of Fundamental Freedoms" for future Iran after the mullahs' overthrow. The event, the largest gathering ever by Iranians abroad, commemorated June 20, designated as the Day of Martyrs and Political Prisoners and marking the start of the just Resistance against the mullahs' rule 14 years ago in Iran.

Mrs. Rajavi also provided a brief record of the mullahs' abysmal rule in Iran and said that love of freedom was the driving force of the Resistance movement. "Without it," she said, "we could not have stood firm against the ruling dictatorship. Our nation has paid the price of freedom with 100,000 martyrs."¹⁰

On the emancipation of women she said: “Iranian women must free themselves. Freedom does not come free and no one will ever deliver it to us in a silver platter. We must build relationships that are unimpeded by gender-based distinctions and discrimination. The path to liberation begins the moment you believe that no one can prevent the liberation of a woman who has chosen to be free of all fetters we all know too well...”

“Parallel to the liberation of women, men are also liberated and become even more responsible. This is because men who reject gender-based distinctions and discrimination and recognize women’s freedom of choice, first of all liberate themselves.”¹¹

In concluding her speech, Mrs. Rajavi highlighted the main platform of the Resistance for the future of Iran, listing 16 items. She reiterated the Resistance’s commitment to freedom of speech, opinion, the press, parties and political associations, and said that the ballot box will be the only criterion for the legitimacy of the government.

In this platform, she emphasized the absolute equality of women’s political, social, cultural and economic rights with men. She reiterated women’s right to elect and be elected, freedom to choose their occupations and obtain any government position, the right to be a judge, the freedom to choose their husbands, equal rights in divorce and the right to freely choose their form of dress.

She also stressed that in the future of Iran, a free market, private ownership, and investment to expand the national economy will be guaranteed. The foreign policy of a democratic Iran, Mrs. Rajavi affirmed, will advocate peace, coexistence, and regional and international cooperation.

Challenging Islamic Fundamentalism

The Islamic fundamentalism emanating from Tehran is the number one threat to world peace and stability, giving rise to a pressing need for a concerted international effort to tame this international menace. While the solution is indigenous, in the hands of the Resistance, the international community has more than a moral responsibility and should act in unison to completely boycott this medieval regime. The longer it is ignored, the graver the consequences.

Religious fanatics offer a distorted, dark portrait of Islam. Khomeini’s thinking and ideas do not represent the beliefs of one billion Muslims. Islam is not the religion of hatred and oppression. In Mrs. Rajavi’s words: “As a Muslim woman, I declare that the anti-religious mullahs ruling Iran, who suppress the people in the name of Islam and call for the

export of terrorism and fundamentalism, are the worst enemies of Islam and Muslims. The day will come when they will be forced to let go of the name of Islam.”¹²

It is imperative that we fight against religious fanaticism, because Khomeinism is a serious threat against world stability in general and Islamic countries in particular. But one cannot confront fundamentalism with an anti-Islamic culture; it requires a tolerant, modern Islam as the antidote. Maryam Rajavi’s message rejecting the mullahs’ savagery cloaked in religion has launched an international campaign against the mullahs. “Our Resistance against the ruling religious, terrorist dictatorship will not only bring freedom and prosperity to Iran, but will uproot Khomeini’s fanaticism in the Muslim World and the Tehran-inspired terrorism the world over,” she emphasized. From the onset, in her meetings with scores of international dignitaries, politicians, academicians, parliamentarians and journalists from Europe and the U.S., she underscored this reality, evoking a new international awareness of the issue.

International Support

Under such circumstances, many in the international community have begun to take note of this alternative approach. The statement by 425 members of the British Parliament on Iran on June 13 reaffirms this point: “Support for the NCR and its President-elect, who widely reflects the aspirations of the Iranian people, will expedite the establishment of democracy in Iran and contribute to the restoration of stability in the region.”

In announcing a statement of support for the Iranian Resistance by 202 U.S. congressmen at a Capitol Hill press conference (June 8, 1995), Robert Torricelli, a senior member of the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on International Relations, noted: “... Members of this institution have now spoken in support of the recognition of the National Council of Resistance and in particular, Mrs. Rajavi’s leadership.”

Many foreign dignitaries and journalists have come to visit Mrs. Rajavi. Without exception, they have been surprised. Georgie Anne Geyer, a veteran American journalist, wrote after meeting Mrs. Rajavi: “In my 30 years as a foreign correspondent, I have interviewed many ‘unusual’ leaders - but I do believe that I have finally found the most stunningly unusual one. Her name is Maryam Rajavi, she has been elected the ‘future president of Iran’ by the growing Iranian Resistance, and she is driving the women-hating mullahs of Iran crazy.

“As eloquent as she can be regarding freedom for Iranians - and

particularly freedom for women - it soon becomes clear that this cultured 41-year-old woman is a figure to be watched.... It is also Maryam Rajavi who is rapidly becoming the Rorschach blot of hope into which the long-suffering modern and liberal Iranians can read all kinds of hope... Meanwhile, she is becoming the symbol of something new - the modest but active Islamic woman."¹³

Gabi Gleichmann, then the President of the Swedish Pen Club, had the following to say: "In all of Iran they have pinned their hopes on this woman. She is the ayatollah regime's number-one enemy. A modern, Muslim Joan of Arc, brilliant and cheerful, who leads the struggle against the gloom and darkness of the rulers in Tehran. The focal point of hope for democratic change in Iran is Maryam Rajavi, the Paris-based President-elect of the Iranian Resistance."¹⁴

Notes

1. Gabi Gleichmann, "Iranian President-in-exile, Maryam Rajavi," *Expressen*, Stockholm, 21 January 1994.
2. *The Lion and Sun*, the Iranian Resistance's Journal, July 1995, p. 14.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Georgie Anne Geyer, Iranian resistance looks to a 'future President', *The Washington Times*, 26 August 1994.
6. Gleichmann, *op. cit.*
7. Maryam Rajavi, interview with *Iran Zamin* weekly, 29 June 1994.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *The Lion and Sun*, *op. cit.*, p. 4,7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
11. *The Lion and Sun*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
13. Geyer, *op. cit.*
14. Gleichmann, *op. cit.*

Women will enjoy social, political, and cultural rights absolutely equal to those of men, including those outlined below:

- ◆ The right to elect and be elected in all elections, and the right to suffrage in all referendums.
- ◆ The right to employment and freedom of choice in profession, and the right to hold any public or government position, office, or profession, and judgeship in all judicial bodies.
- ◆ The right to free political and social activity, social intercourse and travel without the permission of another person.
- ◆ The right to freely choose the spouse, to marry, equal rights to divorce. Polygamy is banned.
- ◆ The right to freely choose clothing and covering.
- ◆ The right to use, without discrimination, all instructional, educational, athletic, and artistic resources, and the right to participate in all athletic competitions and artistic activities.

*From Maryam Rajavi's Charter
of Fundamental Freedoms in future Iran*

The National Council of Resistance of Iran
Foreign Affairs Committee